

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND
IN REVIEW OF THE DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION REQUEST
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2021
AND THE FUTURE YEARS DEFENSE

Thursday, March 12, 2020

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9 U.S. Senate
10 Committee on Armed Services
11 Washington, D.C.
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13 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:00 a.m. in
14 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. James M.
15 Inhofe, chairman of the committee, presiding.

16 Committee Members Present: Senators Inhofe
17 [presiding], Fischer, Cotton, Ernst, Cramer, Scott,
18 Blackburn, Hawley, Reed, Shaheen, Blumenthal, Hirono, Kaine,
19 King, Peters, and Manchin.
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1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JAMES M. INHOFE, U.S.
2 SENATOR FROM OKLAHOMA

3 Chairman Inhofe: Our meeting will come to order.

4 The committee meets today to receive the testimony of
5 the United States Central Command. I would like to welcome
6 our witness, General Frank McKenzie, Commander of the United
7 States Central Command.

8 I want to add that immediately following this morning's
9 open hearing, we will move to SVC-217 in the Senate Visitors
10 Center for a closed session, which will be an opportunity
11 for General McKenzie to answer some of the questions. You
12 might make a note of questions that come along that are not
13 appropriately answered in this setting so that we can do it
14 later.

15 I would like to begin by recognizing two United States
16 marines, Gunner Sergeant Diego Pongo and Captain Moises
17 Navas, who were killed earlier this week during a mission
18 against the ISIS stronghold in Iraq. I also want to
19 recognize the two additional Americans who were killed
20 yesterday, whose names have not yet been released. That was
21 in a rocket attack in Taji. Their loss is a painful
22 reminder that even where we have been successful, such as in
23 destroying ISIS, the caliphate, we still have troops in
24 harm's way. And when Senator Rounds and I had the
25 opportunity to meet with some of our troops 2 weeks ago in

1 visiting Iraq, we had a chance to really talk over some of
2 the things like this with them.

3 General, later this month, you will be commemorating
4 your 1-year anniversary as CENTCOM Commander, and I sure you
5 agree it has been a tough ride. Since May of 2019, we have
6 seen Iran and its terrorist proxies escalate their
7 asymmetric aggression against the United States and our
8 partners throughout the region. In May, they hit our
9 partners' oil tankers. In June, they downed an American
10 drone. In September, they attacked Saudi oil facilities,
11 threatening the global energy supply. And throughout this
12 up-tick, President Trump announced new sanctions on Iran,
13 bolstering protection for our troops in the region, but he
14 sought to avoid a military escalation and even offered to
15 negotiate with Tehran.

16 Then in December, Iran's proxies killed a U.S. citizen
17 and attacked the U.S. embassy in Baghdad. These actions
18 crossed the President's redline, which we knew that by his
19 very nature, he is going to adhere to his own redlines,
20 unlike some others in the past. And the President responded
21 by ordering a strike that ended up killing Soleimani.

22 Iran countered by firing ballistic missiles that
23 thankfully missed our troops in Iraq, though over 100
24 soldiers sustained concussions.

25 Since then, the situation seems to have deescalated.

1 Iran countered by firing ballistic missiles and
2 thankfully missing our troops, though over 100 soldiers
3 sustained concussions. After that attack, however, the
4 situation appeared to deescalate.

5 Yet, despite the deployment of approximately 14,000 new
6 troops to the region to deter Iran, your written testimony
7 says -- and I am quoting from your written testimony,
8 General -- quote, ample intelligence exists indicating that
9 Iran's regime desired to continue malign operations that
10 threaten lives. And early media reports suggest that Iran-
11 backed groups were responsible for yesterday's attack at
12 Camp Taji.

13 So if the deployment of approximately 14,000 troops in
14 the region will not deter them, I am sure a good question
15 would be, what will deter them? We will have ample
16 opportunity to respond to that question.

17 So I ask because this committee's top priority is
18 effective implementation of the National Defense Strategy,
19 which says to focus on China and Russia as the central
20 challenge to the U.S. prosperity and security and, as you
21 highlight in your written statement, to accept greater risk
22 in the CENTCOM AOR.

23 Countering Iran is an important aspect of American
24 credibility in the Middle East, and bolstering American
25 credibility is vital to preventing our partners from looking

1 toward China and Russia for their security needs.

2 But every battalion that we send to the Middle East is
3 a battalion that is not being sent to support other
4 priorities in Europe and the Pacific. Moreover, this ramp-
5 up in the Middle East comes while other priorities such as
6 counterterrorism and security cooperation in Africa are
7 being under-sourced.

8 So I hope you will address how these new deployments to
9 the Middle East are changing Iran's behavior for the better.
10 Or, if conflict with Iran remains likely in your view, we
11 would like to know -- you explain to us -- what these new
12 deployments are achieving.

13 And with that, I will turn to Senator Reed.

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

3 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
4 Let me join you in welcoming General McKenzie back before
5 the committee, and we look forward to your testimony and our
6 discussion. Thank you, General.

7 Let me also join the chairman in expressing my
8 condolences for the loss of the three coalition personnel at
9 Camp Taji last evening and two of whom were reported to be
10 American personnel, and the death of the two marines
11 conducting operations against ISIS in Iraq earlier this
12 week. Our thoughts are with their families and those who
13 were injured in those two incidents.

14 The agreement between the United States and the
15 Taliban, announced on February 29th, was a notable step
16 toward bringing our nation's longest war to a close. It is
17 important to keep in mind, however, that it is only a first
18 step, and the path to long-term stability in Afghanistan
19 will only be found through a negotiated settlement between
20 the Taliban and the Afghan Government. With that in mind, I
21 am concerned that we are not appropriately leveraging U.S.
22 and coalition military presence to support a settlement that
23 protects U.S. security interests primarily and values,
24 including the hard-fought gains on issues in Afghanistan
25 like women's rights and education. By announcing a

1 timetable for the complete withdrawal of U.S. and
2 international forces before inter-Afghan negotiations have
3 even begun, I am concerned that we are in some respects
4 undermining the Afghan Government and validating the
5 Taliban's longstanding perception that they can wait us out.

6 Despite the specific timeline contained in the
7 agreement, some in the administration have said that the 14-
8 month timetable is aspirational and that we will have ample
9 time to assess the Taliban's intent and capability to uphold
10 their security commitments. General McKenzie, I hope you
11 will help us better understand how we intend to monitor and
12 verify Taliban compliance. In particular, do you believe it
13 will be possible for U.S. forces to conduct the rigorous
14 monitoring and evaluation necessary to ensure that terrorist
15 threats will not re-emerge in Afghanistan, while
16 simultaneously carrying out a full-scale withdrawal?

17 I would also like to hear more about the commitments we
18 have made to our Afghan partners and how our efforts to
19 build credible security forces and institutions will be
20 sustained. The Afghan Security Forces have been nearly
21 completely built and funded by U.S. and coalition funds.
22 Additionally, until the signing of the U.S.-Taliban
23 agreement, the Afghan Security Forces also received robust
24 advising and enabling support from U.S. and coalition forces
25 on the ground and in the air. Even with a peace agreement,

1 there is little to suggest that the Afghan economy will,
2 within a foreseeable time frame, provide enough revenue to
3 fully fund the country's security forces. Notably, the
4 administration's fiscal year 2021 budget request contains
5 funding for Afghan training and equipping programs that will
6 extend well beyond the date of the planned departure of the
7 last U.S. military personnel. It is important for this
8 committee to understand the plan to ensure those resources
9 are invested in sustainable and responsible ways, especially
10 given the likelihood of increased Taliban participation in
11 the Afghan Government.

12 Despite the focus of the National Defense Strategy on a
13 more resource sustainable approach to the national security
14 challenges in CENTCOM, we have deployed more than 14,000
15 troops to the region since May in response to malign Iranian
16 activity. While I understand the need to ensure U.S.
17 personnel, facilities, and key strategic interests are
18 protected, I question the extent to which we can deter
19 asymmetric attacks by Iran through the deployment of
20 additional conventional U.S. military forces to the region.
21 Indeed, the rocket attack on Camp Taji in Iraq last night,
22 reportedly carried out by Iranian-backed militia, would seem
23 to challenge the notion that we have reestablished
24 deterrence with respect to Iran. Overall, I believe that
25 the administration's so-called maximum pressure campaign has

1 isolated us from our allies, given Iran a pretext to violate
2 constraints placed on its nuclear program by the Joint
3 Comprehensive Plan of Action, and may in fact have increased
4 the likelihood of conflict.

5 The killing of the leaders of ISIS and al Qaeda in the
6 Arabian Peninsula were significant counterterrorism
7 operations, and the administration should be commended for
8 those operations. But the Turkish incursion into northern
9 Syria, fallout from the killing of General Soleimani, and
10 political unrest in Iraq, Lebanon, and elsewhere have
11 disrupted our efforts against ISIS. I remain concerned
12 about the long-term disposition of the more than 10,000 ISIS
13 fighters being held by the Syrian Democratic Forces, as well
14 as the unknown number of internally displaced people that
15 retain an allegiance to ISIS. General McKenzie, I look
16 forward to an update on CENTCOM's operations to ensure these
17 groups are not able to re-emerge.

18 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, very much.

19 Chairman Inhofe: Thank you, Senator Reed.

20 General McKenzie, we will recognize you for your
21 opening statement. As you know, your entire statement will
22 be made a part of the record.

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1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL KENNETH F. MCKENZIE, JR., USMC,
2 COMMANDER, UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND

3 General McKenzie: Chairman Inhofe, Ranking Member
4 Reed, distinguished members of the Senate Armed Services
5 Committee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before
6 you to provide an operational update and testimony in
7 support of the fiscal year 2021 budget request pertaining to
8 CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

9 My senior enlisted leader, Fleet Master Chief Jamie
10 Erdell of the Navy, is also with me here today, seated
11 immediately behind me.

12 I appreciate very much your remarks about the
13 sacrifices of Captain Navas and Gunnery Sergeant Pongo, as
14 well as Corporal Zavala, a marine who was killed in a
15 vehicle rollover during an exercise in UAE just a couple of
16 days ago. Additionally, the two U.S. service members and
17 the United Kingdom service member who died in the attack at
18 Taji yesterday in Iraq -- they will be remembered.

19 Today there are nearly 90,000 men and women serving
20 throughout the 20 nations comprising United States Central
21 Command, as well as our headquarters in Tampa. I am proud
22 of their remarkable dedication and humbled by their personal
23 sacrifice, and it is my honor to serve with them. They are
24 young Americans in the line of fire, working to prevent
25 attacks on the homeland, counter destabilizing regional

1 influence, prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass
2 destruction, and ensure the freedom of navigation through
3 international waterways. Your annual and timely passage of
4 both the National Defense Authorization Act and the Defense
5 appropriations bills honors their courage and sacrifice, and
6 I encourage you to maintain this tradition.

7 Keeping a pledge from my confirmation hearing before
8 you here in December 2018, I appear now and offer you my
9 best military advice. While my written statement highlights
10 several nations and areas of interest within the Central
11 Command area of responsibility, my opening statement today
12 will focus on Iran.

13 The National Defense Strategy directs us to work with
14 partners to deny the Iranian regime all paths to a nuclear
15 weapon and to neutralize Iranian malign influence. This is
16 no easy task. Iran's regime is persistent and resilient,
17 growing its arsenal of ballistic missiles despite
18 international condemnation. And Iran remains the world's
19 largest state sponsor of terrorism. Since May 2019, Iranian
20 proxies and Shia militia groups in Iraq have increased
21 attacks on U.S. interests and conducted scores of aerial
22 unmanned system reconnaissance flights near U.S. and Iraqi
23 security force bases. The Iranian regime has attacked or
24 seized foreign vessels in the Gulf, sponsored attacks by
25 Houthi forces from Yemen into Saudi Arabia, continued the

1 export of lethal aid to destabilizing groups throughout the
2 region, and in September 2019, carried out an unprecedented
3 cruise missile and UAS attack against oil facilities in
4 Saudi Arabia.

5 In early January, Iran launched more than a dozen
6 ballistic missiles in a deliberate attack against U.S. and
7 coalition forces at two bases in Iraq. This state-sponsored
8 missile strike crossed the threshold compared to previous
9 attacks and has probably set a lower bar for future actions
10 by the regime.

11 Yesterday, hostile forces, most likely Shia militia
12 groups, launched more than a dozen rockets at U.S. and
13 coalition forces at Camp Taji in Iraq, killing two U.S. and
14 one British service member, as well as wounding several
15 more. While we are still investigating the attack, I will
16 note that the Iranian proxy group Kata'ib Hezbollah is the
17 only group known to have previously conducted an indirect
18 fire attack of this scale against U.S. and coalition forces
19 in Iraq.

20 While periods of decreased tension may provide the
21 illusion of a return to normalcy, ample intelligence and
22 indeed yesterday's actions indicate the Iranian regime's
23 desire to continue malign activities that threaten lives,
24 destabilize sovereign nations, threaten freedom of
25 navigation, regional commerce, global energy supplies, and

1 the global economy itself.

2 At CENTCOM, we recognize that so long as the U.S.
3 applies diplomatic and economic pressure, the joint force
4 must be postured to deter Iran from employing the military
5 element of power to counter our actions. Our presence sends
6 a clear message about our capabilities and our will to
7 defend partners and U.S. national interests. Going forward,
8 it is CENTCOM's objective to posture forces in the region
9 with the operational depth to achieve a consistent state of
10 deterrence against Iran and to be adaptable to future
11 Iranian threats.

12 The Department's fiscal year 2021 budget supports
13 CENTCOM's ability to keep our forces agile, lethal, and
14 adaptable.

15 As we work with our partners to safeguard our mutual
16 interests, we do so with the knowledge that we are stronger
17 together. Key to building and maintaining partnerships is
18 the authorization, funding, and employment of security
19 assistance programs. Additionally, the National Guard State
20 Partnership Program cultivates relationships and improves
21 interoperability with six nations across the CENTCOM AOR,
22 with more applying for entry this year. Again, the 2021
23 budget supports building new partnerships and enabling the
24 formation of an enduring Middle East coalition.

25 As CENTCOM continues ongoing operations, we appreciate

1 the efforts of our DOD civilian leadership. We acknowledge
2 the teamwork of the interagency, and we thank the Members of
3 Congress and your staffs, without whose consistent backing
4 we would be unable to accomplish our mission. In order for
5 America's armed forces to sustain all-domain dominance, the
6 Department requires your support, as well as predictable,
7 adequate, and timely funding.

8 Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and committee members,
9 thank you again for all you do for our troops and families,
10 and I look forward to your questions.

11 [The prepared statement of General McKenzie follows:]

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

2 And for any of the members who came in a little bit
3 late, we announced that we are going to have a closed
4 session immediately following this down in SVC-217.

5 General McKenzie, in the past year, in response to the
6 Iranian provocations, we have deployed some 14,000
7 additional troops to the region. And you have indicated in
8 your statement that more attacks from Iran are likely. And
9 if so, in what sense are these new deployments to the Middle
10 East deterring -- what level of deterrence do they provide?
11 And is there another form of deterrence that might work?

12 General McKenzie: Chairman, I believe that deterrence
13 is borne of an appreciation in the mind of the adversary of
14 both capability and will. And we, over the last few months,
15 have demonstrated both of that. As a result of that, I
16 believe we have reestablished a rough form of deterrence,
17 what I would call contested deterrence, with Iran at the
18 level of state-on-state attacks. By that, I am referring to
19 things like, obviously, attributable ballistic missile
20 attacks from Iran launched against U.S. forces. They have
21 stood their missiles down. They are no longer -- I do not
22 think that is an imminent threat.

23 What has not been changed is their continuing desire to
24 operate through their proxies indirectly against us, and
25 that is a far more difficult area to deter because they

1 believe they can generate a measure of non-attribution with
2 those attacks. We would not agree because we believe
3 eventually we will be able to distill who is behind these
4 attacks going forward. So we are in a period where state-
5 on-state I believe we have achieved deterrence, but with
6 their proxy activities -- and while they are principally in
7 Iraq, they are not limited to Iraq, and there are other
8 areas where they are active as well. That is the period
9 that we are in now with Iran, Mr. Chairman.

10 Chairman Inhofe: I appreciate that.

11 As it is right now, we have kind of a deal with the
12 Taliban. We are bringing our troop level down from 12,000
13 to 8,600, and they, in turn, have commitments to us. I
14 would have two questions. Are they keeping their
15 commitments? Does it appear that they are keeping their
16 commitments to us, and if not, what would be the next step
17 after our withdrawal down to 8.6?

18 General McKenzie: So, Chairman, obviously my answer
19 will concentrate on the military equities because that is
20 what I am knowledgeable about. But I would tell you in
21 terms of what we see the Taliban doing militarily, they are
22 honoring some, not all of their commitments.

23 Let me give you an example. Attacks continue. Attacks
24 continue at an unacceptably high rate across the country.
25 Those attacks, although at a high rate, are not delivered

1 into city centers, urban areas, or against coalition forces.
2 Instead, the attacks are largely generated against
3 Afghanistan outposts, checkpoints, and isolated combat
4 units. So those attacks continue. And I would say that
5 that level of attack by the Taliban is not consistent with
6 an organization that intends to keep its word going forward.
7 However, in other areas they have not attacked into the
8 urban areas. They have not attacked coalition forces. So
9 we have a pretty good picture of what the Taliban is doing
10 and is not doing. We have very good ways --

11 Chairman Inhofe: Well, we have a picture right now,
12 but anticipating -- let us say they do not keep them and
13 they start going the other direction. What would be our
14 action at that time?

15 General McKenzie: Sir, so we are on a glide slope to
16 go to 8,600 U.S. forces with our NATO partners in the
17 country by the middle of the summer. At that level, we will
18 still be able to pursue all of our objectives in
19 Afghanistan.

20 Chairman Inhofe: So if they do not and it becomes
21 obvious they are not keeping their commitments, we would
22 maintain the 8.6 as opposed to going any lower.

23 General McKenzie: Chairman, that would be not a
24 military decision but a policy decision.

25 Chairman Inhofe: Well, yes.

1 General McKenzie: But we believe that we are going to
2 have ample opportunity to see if they are going to keep
3 their word. In some areas they are; in some areas they are
4 not. I am troubled by these attacks that continue to occur.
5 And there are obviously some political things that have to
6 go forward that I am not the best person to talk about in
7 terms of the Afghan Government, prisoner releases, and
8 things like that. All of those things have to occur in
9 order to find a path forward.

10 Chairman Inhofe: Let us go into Barzani. We had the
11 opportunity -- Senator Rounds and I had the opportunity to
12 go through not just Iraq but Erbil and go up and spend time
13 with him. Of course, there are kind of two groups they deal
14 with -- the Kurds are dealing with there. And one of
15 them -- a lot of people were upset and maybe I think
16 misunderstood what the President was doing when he was
17 talking about the Turks coming down into that area.

18 But as far as the senior -- that would be Masoud
19 Barzani -- he is one that a lot of people are saying or
20 trying to project that he has passed a lot of things to his
21 son and to, I guess, his nephew. It has been my opinion
22 that he is still in charge. And I am not going to ask you
23 whether you agree or disagree with that. But I got a very
24 clear message when we spent most of a day with him up in
25 Erbil, and he is very satisfied that we are keeping our

1 commitments now.

2 And I really believe he is -- I think we need to keep
3 reminding people how many Kurds have lost their lives
4 working with us.

5 So would you agree that he is now in pretty good shape
6 with the United States in terms of our keeping our
7 commitments to him?

8 General McKenzie: Sir, I could not agree with you
9 more. I believe that is the case. As you know, we have a
10 vision of a unified, single Iraq going forward and support
11 that, and we believe he is a key element in that equation
12 going forward.

13 Chairman Inhofe: We are talking about the senior
14 Barzani.

15 General McKenzie: Sir, we are.

16 Chairman Inhofe: I agree with you. Thank you.

17 Senator Reed?

18 Senator Reed: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman.

19 Just to clarify a point that the chairman has raised,
20 the number that publicly has been released about the
21 increase in forces in CENTCOM since approximately last May
22 is about 14,000. Is that accurate?

23 General McKenzie: Sir, it is a little less than that,
24 and it varies as carriers come in. You know, when a carrier
25 comes in, you are bringing 5,000 people in. Today I have

1 actually two aircraft carriers in the theater. So the
2 number is artificially a little higher. The number goes up
3 and down.

4 Senator Reed: But within a range of, say, 1,000
5 personnel?

6 General McKenzie: I would say it is over 10,000.

7 Senator Reed: I know you are working on attribution of
8 the attack last evening at Camp Taji. Have you finished
9 that attribution?

10 General McKenzie: We are working it very hard right
11 now in my headquarters as we speak now.

12 Senator Reed: Thank you.

13 With respect to the agreement between the Taliban and
14 the United States, looking at the public documents that are
15 available, there is no reference to a prohibition of
16 violence by the Taliban against the Afghan Government. And
17 there is at least an interpretation that what they are doing
18 now, attacks against Afghan personnel in or outside cities,
19 is within the scope of the agreement, that we would continue
20 to go forward. Is that accurate?

21 General McKenzie: So when I have an opportunity to
22 give advice on this subject -- and I do have an opportunity
23 to advise on this -- I would not consider what the Taliban
24 is doing as consistent with any path to going forward to
25 come to a final end state agreement with the current

1 Government of Afghanistan. Those attacks are going to have
2 to come off considerably.

3 But we are never going to be a bloodless state in
4 Afghanistan. As you know, there are pockets in Afghanistan
5 that probably still think the Russians are there. So it is
6 never going to be perfect, but we need to get way below
7 where we are now.

8 Senator Reed: There is, though, a possibility that
9 they could, at least until we withdraw, maintain their CT
10 commitments but continue active operations against the
11 Afghan Government. In fact, it could escalate to what would
12 be either a major or a significant civil war in the country.
13 Would we still be in the position or still be predisposed to
14 depart?

15 General McKenzie: Sir, just speaking looking at the
16 military equity, it is difficult to see how if the Taliban
17 is still pursuing large-scale operations against the Afghan
18 Government, against Afghan Government forces, it would be
19 possible for us to maintain a CT platform there without a
20 significant presence. It is just hard to see how you would
21 get to that level.

22 Going smaller requires integration, requires intra-
23 Afghan dialogue and some way forward involving both parties.

24 Senator Reed: And implicit in what has been discussed
25 by the administration about the arrangement is that the

1 final departure will be conditions-based. But those
2 conditions have not yet been specified. Would you decide
3 the conditions, or how will those conditions be established?

4 General McKenzie: So what would happen is General
5 Miller through me -- we would report the military conditions
6 on the ground, and that would be an input into the larger
7 element of that. But for military conditions, I think again
8 we have got a very clear vision of what is happening there.
9 Taliban attacks against the government would have to go down
10 to a far lower level than they are now. That would be
11 probably the principal thing. Intra-Afghan dialogue should
12 ideally lead to some condition where the Taliban can never
13 be part of some future Afghan military. That would be a
14 matter for the Afghans, not for us. But it is hard to see
15 how you can go forward without some intra-Afghan dialogue
16 that takes you to that.

17 Senator Reed: Well, just one point is it takes two
18 sides to have a dialogue, and the current Government of
19 Afghanistan is in some disarray. You have two individuals
20 claiming that they are president. You have dual
21 inaugurations. It is slightly outside your lane, but that
22 is a complicating factor I think.

23 General McKenzie: Sir, it is.

24 Senator Reed: And with respect to our involvement,
25 even with an intra-Afghan dialogue and even on a sort of an

1 optimistic thing, you would assume that if there is that
2 dialogue, there will be some jointness in the government.
3 Taliban elements coming into the government.

4 It comes down to sustainability over the long run, and
5 as you well know, their defense budget is about \$6 billion a
6 year. We and our coalition partners provide \$4.5 billion a
7 year. If we were to pull that money or decrease it
8 significantly, their ability just to function as a military
9 and police force in the nation would probably be gutted. Is
10 that fair?

11 General McKenzie: Sir, I would agree with that
12 assessment.

13 Senator Reed: And so we are going to be faced -- this
14 is the best scenario -- with a government that might be
15 Taliban, et cetera not fully consistent with all of our
16 values and views, and we would still be asked and need to
17 provide billions of dollars. Is that fair?

18 General McKenzie: Sir, it would. But my advice -- and
19 obviously, many of those things are outside of my
20 competence. My advice would be are we able to do the thing
21 we are there to do, which is to prevent the generation of
22 attacks against the United States and our homeland and those
23 of our allies from ISIS and al Qaeda, typically in eastern
24 Afghanistan. Is what you have described going to yield that
25 result? And that would be the basis for any advice that I

1 would give.

2 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, General. Thank you
3 for your service.

4 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Cotton?

5 Senator Cotton: General, thanks for coming back. This
6 is the first appearance since your troops killed Qassem
7 Soleimani. I want to commend you for your role and their
8 role in removing the world's worst terrorist mastermind from
9 the face of the earth.

10 Is it fair to say that Iran's leaders were somewhat
11 chastened by the killing of Qassem Soleimani?

12 General McKenzie: I think it is. Just a little
13 earlier, we talked about capability and will. They have
14 never doubted our capability. They often doubted our will,
15 and I think that gave them something to think about.

16 Senator Cotton: Back in the day in the 2000s, Qassem
17 Soleimani traveled with extreme operational security. Is
18 that correct?

19 General McKenzie: That is correct.

20 Senator Cotton: During much of the 20 teens, did he
21 shed that operational security and travel more openly to the
22 point of posting pictures of himself on social media?

23 General McKenzie: Well, I think he communicated a lot
24 to a lot of different people. I would just leave it at
25 that.

1 Senator Cotton: Suggesting that he felt a degree of
2 impunity to travel around and wreck havoc against the United
3 States, impunity that he did not have after all.

4 Let us stay on Iran, and let us talk about coronavirus
5 in particular. We obviously know that it has impacted some
6 of the senior leaders in their regime. We have seen it on
7 television news. Do you have an assessment of just how
8 extensive it is among Iran's leadership?

9 General McKenzie: Certainly. You know, we have seen
10 public admissions of various senior leaders that are ill and
11 a couple that have actually died. I think it is having an
12 affect on how they make decisions, and I think it slows them
13 down.

14 There are a couple pressures on Iranian leadership
15 right now. One is the outrage after the shoot-down of the
16 aircraft after their attack on Al-Asad. That coupled with
17 their inability to effectively respond to the coronavirus
18 is, I think, inducing pressure on and inside the leadership.
19 Of course, we watch that very closely. It is a very opaque
20 state, very hard for us to see in there. But I believe the
21 numbers are probably significantly under-reported in terms
22 of coronavirus victims in Iran. So we look at that pretty
23 hard going forward. Because the permeability and porousness
24 of the borders, Iran sits in the middle of a theater. So
25 their ability to pass that infection to other states is very

1 worrisome.

2 Senator Cotton: I suspect it actually may be the worst
3 outbreak anywhere in the world, contrary to what Iranian
4 media would say. Does that presumably apply to Iran's
5 troops as well, both their regular military and IRGC troops,
6 if their society is facing this wide-scale outbreak? Do you
7 assess that their troops are as well?

8 General McKenzie: I would say it is going to have some
9 affect on the military instrument. We look at it as hard --
10 we can talk a little bit more about this in closed session,
11 sir, and I would like to do that. But we watch that very
12 closely.

13 Senator Cotton: What do you assess to be the impact of
14 the oil price collapse over the last 4 days on Iran's
15 Government and its military capabilities?

16 General McKenzie: Sir, I think it probably hurts them.
17 They are under grave pressure right now through a variety of
18 economic instruments, you know, the sanctions that are
19 applied against them. I do not think this particularly
20 helps in any way. I think they have an active policy of
21 trying to find ways to swap tankers around the do that,
22 which is marginally successful. So I do not think it means
23 anything good for them. Aside from that, I would just like
24 a little more time to take a look at it. But I do not think
25 it is a good thing for Iran.

1 Senator Cotton: There has been some talk around the
2 world about providing more humanitarian aid to Iran.
3 Secretary Pompeo recently called for Iran to release all
4 foreign national prisoners before our nation provides them
5 humanitarian aid. Do you think that is a reasonable step?

6 General McKenzie: I defer to the Secretary of State on
7 that one.

8 Senator Cotton: What about coronavirus among our
9 troops? What steps are we taking there?

10 General McKenzie: In the theater right now, we have
11 one contractor with symptoms. We have another person who
12 actually picked it up at the airport after he returned from
13 a trip outside the theater who is in quarantine as well. So
14 we watch that very, very closely.

15 Right now, we believe we have good precautions in
16 place. We have cut back significantly on intra-theater
17 travel. For example, someone in -- pick a place -- Kuwait
18 who wanted to go to UAE maybe for a weekend of elective
19 liberty -- we do not do that anymore. So that travel is
20 mission-essential only. Just yesterday, we put some
21 restrictions in going into Bahrain as well from outside the
22 theater.

23 So what we are trying to do is maintain isolation so
24 that we protect the critical functions that we have to do.
25 There are some things where we just cannot accept the risk

1 of an infection. So we look very hard at those things and
2 try to maintain good physical separation.

3 Senator Cotton: One final question. You say on page 9
4 of your written testimony that unmanned aircraft systems
5 are, quote, the most concerning tactical development in the
6 CENTCOM area of operations since the rise of the improvised
7 explosive device. Anyone who knows what those improvised
8 explosive devices did to our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan
9 would find that a very troubling statement.

10 We have spent billions of dollars in the Department of
11 Defense on counter-drone systems. I am concerned that we
12 are still under grave threat to them. But I am also
13 encouraged to see that your command has been experimenting
14 with so many new and more effective counter-drone systems.
15 I am worried that they are not widely fielded yet. So I am
16 just wondering if you could talk to us a little bit about
17 whether your needs are being met and what this committee
18 could do to be more effective on counter-drone systems.

19 General McKenzie: Sir, the Department is working very
20 hard. As you know, executive sponsorship for this program
21 has gone to the Army, which I think is good. It will focus
22 it and be even more responsive to our requirements.

23 I think the key thing is right now, we are simply at a
24 stage in the development of these systems, and you see it in
25 the back and forth of warfare where the advantage is with

1 the operator and with the offense. We will catch up. It is
2 going to take us a little time to do that. And really, it
3 is what we would call the group 1 and group 2's that concern
4 me the most, the small ones that you can go and buy at
5 Costco, you know, duck tape a grenade or mortar bomb to and
6 fly it into an objective. The larger ones -- we have ways
7 to deal with them because they are more like aircraft in a
8 traditional way, although they are still very concerning.

9 So we have not yet integrated a solution to this. The
10 Army has a lot of great ideas, and there are a variety of
11 other good things out there that are working. We just have
12 not yet managed to bring it all together. We work this
13 every day. And I believe the energy is there, but we are
14 still solving the dynamic.

15 Senator Cotton: Thank you.

16 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Blumenthal?

17 Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

18 Thank you for being here, General, and thank you for
19 your service over many, many years.

20 You have not been here, as has been remarked, since the
21 hearing on December 4th, 2018. So we are very glad to have
22 you back. A lot has happened.

23 And unfortunately, a lot of the information that this
24 committee receives is behind closed doors in a classified
25 setting. Reference was just made to it by the chairman to

1 follow this meeting. I am very concerned that the American
2 people, as well as service members and military families,
3 are lacking the kind of transparency and accountability that
4 they really deserve and that is necessary for the American
5 people to assess how we are doing in CENTCOM and other
6 places around the world. And I do not know whether you have
7 any comments on that. But the over-classification, the
8 excessive secrecy denies the American people the opportunity
9 to know about the brave and dedicated service of the troops
10 in your command and what they have accomplished, as well as
11 the challenges going forward.

12 I might just also say that your testimony today at 15
13 pages is considerably shorter than the more than 40 pages of
14 written testimony that your predecessor, General Votel,
15 provided. I am not judging the quality by the quantity of
16 pages, but I wonder whether you have any plans to submit
17 additional comments or background that would elaborate on
18 some of the conclusions, particularly as to the issue that
19 Senator Cotton just raised which I think is very important,
20 unmanned aerial aircraft, and the threat they pose,
21 analogous to the IEDs which were easy to make, proliferated
22 in the region, caused more than 50 percent of the deaths and
23 a major part of our casualties. And I can see the same
24 happening with these off-the-shelf kind of items that
25 similarly pose a threat of many repeated small-scale attacks

1 on our troops or Afghanistan's.

2 Let me just ask you on the issue of transparency, I am
3 at a loss to know why the annexes to our agreement have not
4 been made public. Obviously, they are known to the Taliban.
5 Is there any reason why we cannot make them public so the
6 American people can see them?

7 General McKenzie: Sir, I am going to defer that to the
8 Department of State. They are actually the classifying
9 authority in this case. So I would defer to them.

10 Senator Blumenthal: In your military opinion, just
11 from a military standpoint -- I realize there may be other
12 factors -- do you see any obstacle to making them public?

13 General McKenzie: So obviously as I work the military
14 side of the problem, I have visibility with the annexes.
15 They are useful for me to have. But I would defer the
16 question to wider publication to the Secretary of State.

17 Senator Blumenthal: I know you are deferring the
18 ultimate decision, and I apologize for belaboring this
19 point. But strictly from the readiness, the preparedness,
20 the effectiveness, and the ability to accomplish missions in
21 the field, I am at a loss to see any reason why they cannot
22 be made public.

23 General McKenzie: So from a purely military
24 perspective, that is correct. But there are other issues
25 beyond the military that need to be considered, and I would

1 not be competent to pass judgment on that.

2 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you.

3 Let me ask you in terms of COVID-19 and its impact on
4 Iran, is it likely that the crippling effect of this disease
5 on certainly the political structure, the economy, and
6 possibly the military are delaying any reprisals for the
7 killing of Soleimani?

8 General McKenzie: Sir, we spent a lot of time talking
9 about that very point, and the short answer is I just do not
10 know. I would tell you that totalitarian, authoritarian
11 regimes, when they are under extreme pressure, typically
12 react by looking to an external threat. There is very
13 little evidence in the history of warfare of a regime that
14 has a crippling internal problem that decides to focus on
15 solving the crippling internal problem that is the source of
16 all their problems rather than looking for something to
17 unify the masses of its people against an external target.
18 So I am informed by that view, and that I think is a
19 possibility.

20 They are fractured now, and they are having difficulty
21 dealing with a number of things. So I think it probably
22 makes them, in terms of decision-making, more dangerous
23 rather than less dangerous. But that is just my assessment.
24 There are competing views from smarter people than me on
25 Iran.

1 Senator Blumenthal: Well, I thank you for that very
2 well informed assessment and appreciate your being here.
3 Thank you, General.

4 Thanks, Mr. Chairman.

5 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Hawley?

6 Senator Hawley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 General, thank you for being. Thank you for your
8 service.

9 I want to take this opportunity at the outset to extend
10 again my sincerest condolences to the families of those four
11 American heroes and I think a British ally who have given
12 their lives in Iraq since last Sunday. And thank you for
13 all that you are doing.

14 Can I come back to this question of deterrence that the
15 chairman and Senator Reed both raised with you? You
16 mentioned that we are having some issue with establishing
17 deterrence against asymmetric aggression. So can I just ask
18 you about the strategy for deterring Iranian asymmetric
19 aggression? What is your thinking on that to date and where
20 are we with it strategically?

21 General McKenzie: So ultimately you want to convince
22 the ultimate source of the aggression that the object they
23 pursue is too costly to pursue. So when you think about
24 that, you think about going to the source. So you really
25 look to Iran. Iran needs to understand that we hold them

1 ultimately responsible for SMG attacks in Iraq. There is a
2 relationship. The Shia militia groups in Iraq and other
3 proxies across the region -- and there are other places
4 across the region where they are active -- they are not
5 entities unto themselves. They all have some form of causal
6 relationship with Iran. And so I think the best way to
7 convince Iran to cease giving orders to those activities is
8 to convey to them it is not going to get them what they want
9 and may, in fact, have significant consequences for them.

10 There is one element that the command and control
11 between Iran and their Shia militias groups in Iraq in
12 particular but others as well -- it is not perfect. It is
13 not 1.0. It is not like our chain of command where I am
14 pretty confident if I give an order, it is going to be
15 followed. That is not the way it works, as you know, with
16 those groups. There is a gap there between intent and
17 execution. So it is not perfect control. But I think the
18 key thing is if you want to stop attacks in the gray zone,
19 you need to convince the ultimate person behind those
20 attacks that it is not in their long-term interest to
21 continue them.

22 Senator Hawley: Let me come back to this question
23 about the pretty sizable conventional force buildup that we
24 have had in CENTCOM since last May. If that has so far not
25 succeeded in deterring these asymmetrical attacks, what in

1 your judgment is it going to take? Do we need additional,
2 in your judgment, conventional forces? I mean, how do we go
3 about practically reaching this asymmetrical deterrence
4 question?

5 General McKenzie: So you may ultimately live with a
6 low level of proxy attacks in the region. You may not be
7 able to completely do away with that. I would tell you
8 certainly I would believe a redline for the United States is
9 going to be the death of U.S. service members or those of
10 our partners and allies. So that is a redline.

11 As you know, there have been a variety of attacks over
12 the last month where we had no casualties, small, low level
13 attacks. Of course, the attack yesterday is a tragedy.

14 But, again, I believe that the way to actually deter
15 those in the long term is to convince the source of those
16 attacks that they are not going to reach their object
17 through those attacks. Let me give you an example.

18 In Iraq, I think an Iranian goal is to eject the United
19 States from Iraq as part of a larger view that they want us
20 to leave the theater. Iraq is a good place to start because
21 there are certain political constructs in place there that
22 would aid them. So they were fairly quiet for a while as
23 they pursued the political track.

24 Now, I only can talk about the military side of it, but
25 I believe ultimately we are going to be able to reach a

1 situation with the Government of Iraq where we remain and
2 will not leave. That is my judgment. I could be wrong.
3 And again, it is ultimately not a military decision. So I
4 think when Iran realizes that -- and I think maybe they have
5 -- then their attacks will begin to -- they have sort of
6 laid their attacks low. Now they will begin to pick up a
7 little bit.

8 Senator Hawley: If we are going to have to live with
9 some continuing asymmetrical threat -- that is just part of
10 what it means to be in the theater. Let us talk about the
11 14,000 troops or so. You said maybe it was closer to 10,000
12 who have been sent to theater since May. In your judgment,
13 how long should we expect that troop buildup to need to last
14 in theater? Is this something you think is going to need to
15 continue on a relatively permanent basis? Give me your
16 assessment about that.

17 General McKenzie: Senator, I think so long as we
18 continue a maximum pressure campaign against Iran that
19 places diplomatic and economic pressure against them, it is
20 in our best interest to convince Iran that activities they
21 carry out in the military domain -- because that is really
22 the only way they have to operate. They have no really
23 effective way to operate against us diplomatically or
24 economically. Therefore, there response almost by
25 definition has to be in the military domain. What these

1 forces do and what CENTCOM's objective is is to convince
2 Iran it is not in their best interest to act out either
3 directly or indirectly through proxies or by state actions
4 against us to try to reset the balance of the maximum
5 pressure campaign.

6 So that gets to your question of how long. My answer
7 would be so long as the maximum pressure campaign continues.

8 Senator Hawley: Talk to us about the tradeoffs
9 involved here from a National Defense Strategy perspective
10 where we think, again as the chairman mentioned, about the
11 shift to INDOPACOM as the pacing theater. We have this
12 threat in CENTCOM. I mean, what is this going to mean? If
13 we have to sustain the conventional troop buildup in
14 CENTCOM, what will this mean for other NDS priorities?

15 General McKenzie: Sir, actually the conventional troop
16 buildup in CENTCOM, to include the ships and airplanes, is a
17 fairly small fraction of the total United States military.
18 In my last job, I was the Director of the Joint Staff, and
19 before that, I was the Director of Strategic Plans and
20 Policy. So I am intimately familiar with the NDS, and I am
21 a believer in the NDS. I recognize that in the long term,
22 we need to be postured against China and we need to be
23 postured against Russia. However, being a global power
24 requires you to be able to do several things at once, and
25 these are not binary choices.

1 So again, we have chosen to execute a maximum pressure
2 campaign against Iran that was not in the NDS. That came
3 along after the NDS was written. The NDS actually I believe
4 is analytically broad enough to accommodate what we are
5 doing against Iran while maintaining pressure against the
6 real existential threats that we face.

7 Senator Hawley: Thank you, General.

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Kaine?

10 Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

11 Thanks, General McKenzie.

12 Just to follow up on a point with Senator Hawley, did I
13 understand your point to be that Iran really does not
14 believe it has a response to the maximum pressure campaign
15 other than a military response? They do not really have
16 diplomatic pressure levers, and they do not have an economic
17 pressure level of any kind.

18 General McKenzie: Senator, from where I sit, that is
19 my judgment.

20 Senator Kaine: So the Iranian activities that are
21 military in nature are directly connected to the maximum
22 pressure campaign. I would agree with you on that.

23 One of the activities that interested me was the joint
24 naval drill by Iran, Russia, and China in the Gulf of Oman
25 recently. Had Iran, Russia, and China done joint exercises

1 of that kind together in the past, as far as you know?

2 General McKenzie: They have done bilateral exercises.
3 I think it is the first time they have done an exercise of
4 that nature, although, Senator, it would tell you it is not
5 an exercise in the way that we would do an exercise with
6 NATO or we would do an exercise in the theater.

7 Senator Kaine: Not as full scale.

8 General McKenzie: Yes, sir. That would be an
9 understatement actually.

10 Senator Kaine: But in CENTCOM and more generally, we
11 should be very, very attentive to instances where our
12 adversaries are doing anything in combination.

13 General McKenzie: Senator, you are absolutely right.

14 Senator Kaine: Many of us on the committee are about
15 the ability to handle the mining of the Straits of Hormuz.
16 A couple years ago in the NDAA, we had an amendment that
17 required the Navy to halt decommissioning of older Avenger
18 class minesweepers because we were worried about this. What
19 is your view of our current capacity to handle the mining of
20 the straits or to stop scuttling of ships that would block
21 freedom of navigation through the straits?

22 General McKenzie: Senator, today we have four
23 minesweepers in the AOR. The British, our coalition
24 partners, have four minesweepers in the AOR, and I have four
25 minesweeping helicopters. And there are a variety of other

1 things that we can employ as well.

2 Should the straits be mined, it would take us a while
3 to clear that channel. It would depend on were we clearing
4 them under conditions of drifting mines that were placed out
5 there, which is the least attributable and probably the most
6 likely way Iran might choose to act in that waterway, or
7 would it be as a condition of a larger war, in which case we
8 would not begin to do that clearing until we could guarantee
9 the safety of these vessels, which are not really capable of
10 defending themselves? So we have the capability to clear
11 the strait. The time it would take would be dependent on
12 the Iranian action that was the precursor for it.

13 Senator Kaine: I see.

14 One more question about Iran. I have not seen the
15 answer to this. Is there an assessment that the coronavirus
16 spike in Iran is driven by like a lot of back and forth
17 travel between Iran and China, or what is the assessment
18 about why Iran has become an epicenter, say, along with
19 Italy outside of China?

20 General McKenzie: There is a lot of travel between
21 Iran and China. But I would not go beyond that. I am just
22 not enough of an expert to tell you.

23 Senator Kaine: Got it. Okay.

24 A question on Afghanistan. What is your current
25 assessment of kind of in the mil-to-mil space the

1 helpfulness of Pakistan and us doing the work we need to do
2 in Afghanistan?

3 General McKenzie: Sure. So I maintain a close
4 relationship with General Bajwa, the Chief of Army Staff.
5 We talk frequently. I have been to visit him a couple of
6 times in Pakistan. Their support has been very important in
7 directing the Taliban to come to negotiations, and their
8 continued support is going to be very important as we go
9 through this difficult period of deciding if the Taliban
10 actually serious about this and are they going to live up to
11 their commitments.

12 Senator Kaine: Do you see that level of U.S. and
13 Pakistan cooperation on the mil-to-mil side with the
14 Afghanistan mission sort of getting better? It has always
15 been good? I mean, how would you assess it kind of
16 historically?

17 General McKenzie: So we have always had at U.S.
18 Central Command -- and I have about 10 years of experience
19 in this organization. We have always seen a relationship
20 with Pakistan as critical. Whether at the political level,
21 there is turmoil, up and down, we always try to keep the
22 military channel open. There are good reasons to do that,
23 to prevent fratricide, to prevent miscalculation, and things
24 like that. So we work very hard to keep that channel open.

25 Senator Kaine: Let me ask one last question, and it

1 seems like it is kind of outside of your area of authority.
2 It is about Venezuela, but it deals with a partner in
3 CENTCOM, the UAE. We do a lot of work together with UAE.
4 But the UAE together with India, Turkey, Russia have
5 assisted the Maduro regime in avoiding U.S. sanctions. Have
6 you ever interacted with UAE about their interaction with
7 the Maduro regime in Venezuela?

8 General McKenzie: Senator, I have not.

9 Senator Kaine: All right. I appreciate it. Thank
10 you.

11 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Ernst?

12 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

13 And, General McKenzie, thank you so much for your
14 service to our nation. And I echo the thoughts and prayers
15 from the rest of my colleagues on the losses that we have
16 had in the recent week. So please extend that to those
17 families, if you would, sir.

18 I do take very seriously Congress' role in authorizing
19 the use of military force. And we have to ensure that our
20 troops have the correct authorities to do the missions that
21 we ask them to do. Now, there has been a lot of debate, not
22 just within this committee, but with a number of our
23 colleagues outside of this committee about repealing an AUMF
24 and maybe putting a new one in place.

25 Can you tell us what the operational impact would be of

1 repealing either the 2001 or 2002 AUMF? And in your view,
2 do you believe a new authorization for the use of military
3 force is necessary to adequately cover down and conduct
4 operations in your AO?

5 General McKenzie: Ma'am, many of those questions are
6 above my level of competence. But I would tell you I
7 believe I have the authorities I need now to execute
8 operations in CENTCOM.

9 Senator Ernst: So utilizing the current AUMF --

10 General McKenzie: Yes, ma'am.

11 Senator Ernst: -- you are able to operate.

12 General McKenzie: That is correct.

13 Senator Ernst: Well, I appreciate that. Again, the
14 debate that we have has been pretty extensive on what we
15 could do with or without that AUMF. So thank you for that
16 feedback. That is a debate for us, but we do need that
17 input to know whether you are able to adequately operate.

18 Moving on to a different topic with our special
19 operators, the "Washington Post" had an article on the 5th
20 of March that stated, quote, a new network of special
21 operations forces will serve as the backbone of a smaller
22 U.S. military mission in Afghanistan. End quote. Of
23 course, the purpose of our special operations network is to
24 continue rooting out ISIS in that area and apply pressure to
25 the Taliban if they fail to live up to their end of the

1 peace agreement.

2 So what can you tell us about this new special
3 operations network?

4 General McKenzie: Ma'am, I begin by saying I do not
5 think it is actually new. I think it is the way we have
6 done business for quite a while in Afghanistan. We have
7 embedded CT forces that operate against that specific
8 mission, have done it for many years, and it would be the
9 way that we would go forward.

10 It is important to understand that for special
11 operations forces to be most effective, they need to operate
12 within a conventional force structure. And that provides
13 the ecosystem that they use to move around. If they get in
14 trouble, there is someone that can come to help them. So we
15 always tend to think in that way, not only there but in
16 other places across the theater as well. Special operations
17 forces are vitally important to us, but they exist best when
18 they are flourished within a network of, A, U.S.
19 conventional forces and then a host nation force as well.

20 Senator Ernst: Which, yes, was going to be my next
21 question about the conventional forces. So I was just
22 trying to understand within this article what was new about
23 what they were being required to do.

24 General McKenzie: Ma'am, I often take up with
25 "Washington Post" articles to understand exactly what it is

1 they are saying. In this case, I do not see anything
2 particularly new.

3 Senator Ernst: Okay, outstanding.

4 And of course, then our special operators -- will they
5 need to maintain different strategic locations than where
6 they are now, or will they largely remain in place?

7 General McKenzie: So it will depend on if we go to the
8 force level that I have been told to go to, 8,600. We have
9 a good lay-down for that. Going below that level would
10 require guidance to me and it would depend on the
11 permissiveness of the environment. If you go lower and go
12 to fewer bases, typically you are going to do it because the
13 security situation is permissive. You do not have to defend
14 yourself against Taliban attacks even as you are executing
15 operations against ISIS and al Qaeda. So it would be
16 strictly dependent on the overall permissiveness of the
17 situation, and those days are still ahead of us. And we
18 have a variety of ways for looking at that, and we will look
19 at that very closely as we go ahead.

20 Senator Ernst: Wonderful. A number of us did travel
21 to Afghanistan prior to Thanksgiving, and we were able to
22 visit some of the commando training with the Afghan forces.
23 Do you feel that they are now getting to a point where they
24 will be able to nest with great capability with our special
25 operators on the ground?

1 General McKenzie: We have made great strides with the
2 commando forces in Afghanistan. Your sense is exactly
3 right.

4 Senator Ernst: Thank you very much, sir. I appreciate
5 it.

6 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

7 Chairman Inhofe: Senator King?

8 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

9 I have realized that the questions I am about to embark
10 upon are more policy and that your job is executing policy,
11 but I just want to get some of your thoughts.

12 In your testimony on page 4, you said, since May 2019,
13 Iran supported groups in Iraq, have attacked U.S. interests
14 dozens of times, conducted scores of unmanned aerial system
15 reconnaissance flights. They have attacked and seized
16 foreign vessel in the Gulf. You go on to list all the
17 things Iran is doing. And I think you testified in response
18 to Senator Hawley's question that they are not being
19 deterred in the asymmetric area, in the proxy area. It has
20 always been a proxy war. I mean, that is what it has always
21 been.

22 Here is my problem. In 2017, we left the JCPOA, which
23 they were abiding by. All intelligence unequivocally said
24 that Iran was in compliance with all the provisions of the
25 JCPOA. We put on the maximum pressure campaign, but as you

1 have testified, it does not seem to be working because they
2 are still doing what they were doing before.

3 The major difference today is -- and I do not want to
4 get into classified material, but Iran is significantly
5 closer to break-out to a bomb than they were when we left
6 the agreement in -- I think it was 2018. I do not get it.
7 It is exactly what many of us were worried before the JCPOA.
8 You have got a malign Iran acting irresponsibly throughout
9 the region getting close to a nuclear weapon. Help me out
10 here. I do not really understand it. They are still doing
11 it, and we probably will find out that the attack last night
12 was a Shia militia supported by Iran. I mean, I think that
13 is probably where the evidence is going to head. I do not
14 have any intelligence on that, but I am speculating. Give
15 me some thoughts.

16 General McKenzie: Senator, so the maximum pressure
17 campaign, in terms of its effect on the Iranian economy,
18 there are other people --

19 Senator King: Well, there is no question it has had an
20 effect on the Iranian economy, but it has not had any effect
21 on the activity we were hoping to deter. You have testified
22 to that.

23 General McKenzie: So I would argue actually, as a
24 result of the buildup in Iranian activity over the course of
25 the summer, the establishment of the International Maritime

1 Security construct actually shifts -- the Straits of Hormuz
2 are no longer harassed. They are passing without any
3 problem at all back and forth not because we are taking
4 actions aimed directly at Iran, but rather because we and an
5 international coalition are shining a spotlight when that
6 activity occurs. So the activity is not occurring.

7 Senator King: Interesting you mentioned the
8 international coalition. I completely agree with you, which
9 we blew up when we left the JCPOA. The international
10 coalition that put that agreement in place did not agree
11 with our decision. We took it unilaterally, but that is
12 another discussion.

13 But, again, do you believe that they are being deterred
14 from their proxy attacks throughout the region?

15 General McKenzie: I believe that we are deterring them
16 from state-on-state attacks.

17 Senator King: But that is not the issue. It has not
18 been a state-on-state situation. The attacks have always
19 been through proxies.

20 General McKenzie: Sir, actually on January the 7th, we
21 had a clear state-on-state attack.

22 Senator King: After we killed Soleimani. Correct?
23 That was the missile attack.

24 General McKenzie: That is the missile attack.

25 Senator King: Yes, okay. But we killed Soleimani and

1 then they responded. But historically the attacks have
2 always been through proxies. And my point is they are still
3 doing it. The only difference is they are also headed
4 toward a nuclear weapon. And I do not get how that is in
5 the best interest of the United States or the region.

6 Senator King: Sir, I understand your argument. Many
7 of those issues are not CENTCOM issues.

8 I would tell you that I come back to what I think my
9 military task is. As the maximum pressure campaign
10 continues, my military task is to prevent Iran from taking
11 actions directly or indirectly that would challenge the
12 activities that are ongoing.

13 Senator King: I appreciate that. And you are doing an
14 excellent job. And it is a tragedy what happened yesterday
15 and the last week to our troops. I think everyone here
16 recognizes that.

17 Just in a few seconds left, is there a plan B if the
18 Taliban does not abide by this agreement in Afghanistan? In
19 other words, do they believe that we are going to leave come
20 hell or high water, or do they still have some worry that we
21 are going to stay there if they do not act right? Because
22 as you testified, they are doing plenty of attacks right
23 now. I worry that after 17, 18, 19 years, we are going to
24 end up exactly where we were in 2001 with the Taliban in
25 charge of the country and open season for terrorists.

1 General McKenzie: Senator, I had the opportunity to
2 give advice on the plan that we are executing now, and my
3 advice was to proceed with it. And the principal reason
4 that I supported it was the conditionality that is inherent
5 in it. So we are going to have an opportunity to see what
6 the Taliban do.

7 Senator King: Do we know what the conditions are?

8 General McKenzie: Sir, on the military side, I know
9 very clearly what the conditions --

10 Senator King: Do we? Does the American public know?

11 General McKenzie: Sir, I am not sure that I would be
12 the one to answer that.

13 Senator King: Well, thank you for your testimony. I
14 appreciate it. And again, I understand your job is to
15 execute policy, but you are the nearest thing we have to a
16 policymaker on this issue here this morning. And I
17 appreciate your candid answers to my questions.

18 General McKenzie: Thank you, sir.

19 Senator King: Thank you.

20 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Cramer?

21 Senator Cramer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

22 Thank you, General, for your service and for being
23 here. And I too express my condolences to you and to the
24 families for the loss of your/our two soldiers and, of
25 course, our friend from the United Kingdom.

1 General, this year, of course, the Air Force is asking
2 us in their budget proposal to divest in critical ISR assets
3 and a way to allow for more room to invest in new
4 technologies and future ISR assets. And I am very aware of
5 the critical role that these ISR assets, some of these
6 legacy assets have played in CENTCOM, including some from my
7 home State of North Dakota. And I would like your take on,
8 first of all, what the Department of Defense and/or the Air
9 Force have told you to expect with regard to meeting your
10 ISR obligations or requirements if this fiscal year 2021
11 budget is enacted.

12 General McKenzie: Thank you, sir. I actually possess
13 most of the ISR assets the Department has, and I am
14 cognizant of that. At the same time, as we were talking
15 just a few minutes ago, as for the former Director of the
16 Joint Staff and the J-5, I am very much aware of the need to
17 prepare and turn to face the threat from China and the
18 threat from Russia. Those are existential threats and we
19 need to capitalize. We need to invest. We need to move in
20 that direction.

21 For me, it actually comes down to a platform, and that
22 platform is the MQ-9. That is the platform of choice in the
23 CENTCOM AOR. It is a platform that can gather intelligence.
24 It can strike. It can do all kinds of things. It is a jack
25 of all trades. And I would prefer that the Air Force not

1 divest of that resource right now to the degree that they
2 are doing. I acknowledge that the Air Force has some tough
3 decisions to make as they take a look at the future of the
4 China threat. And the MQ-9 is not necessarily a platform
5 that is useful in a dense air defense environment. I
6 recognize that. But for right now and for the threats that
7 to me are much closer actually than the longer-term threats
8 of China that are deeper and graver, I favor retaining those
9 assets as long as possible.

10 Senator Cramer: I appreciate your answer, and I agree.
11 The MQ-9 is really quite a remarkable asset. We are just
12 trying to assess the risk and whether the risk is worth it
13 and how we transition because I also agree that we need to
14 get to another place.

15 With that in mind, I want to transition then in the
16 discussion to the Space Force. And of course, we understand
17 that many of the new technologies we are talking about would
18 be space assets. And I am just wondering, first of all, are
19 you expecting to get some benefit in CENTCOM from space, ISR
20 assets? I would expect the answer would be yes. But then
21 the question becomes the gap between here and there and the
22 risk in the middle of it. Are we preparing to adequately
23 mitigate that risk?

24 General McKenzie: Senator, I use space assets every
25 day, every hour in U.S. Central Command. And they provide

1 unique capabilities. The total ISR picture is best built
2 when it is complemented by air-breathing platforms as well.
3 But for all of my life and particularly in U.S. Central
4 Command, we cannot survive without space assets.

5 Senator Cramer: I think you have answered my
6 questions, including a couple that I have not asked yet. So
7 I appreciate that and appreciate the time and am happy to
8 yield back some time.

9 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Hirono?

10 Senator Hirono: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11 General, as long as we are on the subject of ISR, are
12 your general ISR requirements being met?

13 General McKenzie: Yes, they are.

14 Senator Hirono: Are you able to leverage the ISR
15 capacity of partners and allies in the region?

16 General McKenzie: I am able to leverage both partners
17 in the region and partners and allies out of the region that
18 deploy into the region.

19 Senator Hirono: So regarding the peace agreement with
20 the Taliban, you had testified on March 10th, not too long
21 ago, before the House Armed Services Committee that the U.S.
22 had not developed military plans for the full withdrawal.
23 And based on what you testified today and also how you
24 testified before that you did not have much confidence that
25 the Taliban would honor its commitments, so at this rate are

1 we ever going to meet the timeline of complete withdrawal by
2 the end of the year?

3 General McKenzie: Senator, that will be a condition --

4 Senator Hirono: By the end of the year or pretty much
5 in any foreseeable future.

6 General McKenzie: So I am confident we are going to go
7 to 8,600 by the middle of the summer. I think a decision to
8 go below that level is a political not a military decision.
9 I will have an opportunity to give a recommendation on that
10 and then will be directed what to do.

11 Senator Hirono: There are not very many indications
12 that the Taliban is going to stop pursuing its attacks. So
13 as you say, they would have to decrease those attacks
14 against Afghan forces substantially before we would go much
15 below the 8,600 troops. So it seems to me that we are going
16 to be in Afghanistan a long, long time. We certainly cannot
17 predict when we are going to be out of there, and this war
18 has already cost us \$2 trillion, killed more than 3,500
19 Americans and coalition troops. So this is a really
20 troubling area of the world. The entire Middle East is.

21 So you would agree the stability, such as it can be, in
22 the Middle East is a good thing for the United States.

23 General McKenzie: Senator, I would agree.

24 Senator Hirono: Yes. And so meanwhile, Senator King
25 had pointed out that Iran is pursuing its nuclear ambitions

1 and that they could very well have a nuclear weapon. Would
2 Iran having a nuclear weapon not add to the instability of
3 the region? Would it not encourage other countries in the
4 region to also develop nuclear weapons that would end up
5 being an even more unstable region than we currently have?

6 General McKenzie: Senator, my understanding of the
7 object of our policy is to prevent Iran from developing a
8 nuclear weapon.

9 Senator Hirono: Well, they are going ahead with it
10 from what we can see. And our departure from JCPOA has only
11 hastened that situation. I think all around, the impact of
12 our withdrawal from the JCPOA is certainly being manifested.

13 I have a question about China and Russia. As they
14 continue to make significant investments in the area of your
15 responsibility, so they are cultivating relationships and
16 providing financial support. And in particular, China has
17 invested an estimated \$200 billion -- \$200 billion -- in the
18 Middle East in the past 15 years, and both Russia and China
19 continue to develop relationships with leaders in the region
20 such as Syrian President Bashar Assad.

21 What risk does the United States face as Russia and
22 China increase investments and influence in your area of
23 responsibility, knowing full well that Russia and China are
24 our near-peer competitors?

25 General McKenzie: Senator, I think the greatest risk,

1 although it is in the future, is from China. And you noted
2 very correctly they are leading with their economics.
3 Although they have established a significant military
4 presence in Djibouti, their military presence throughout the
5 rest of the theater is actually quite small. But I think we
6 are seeing the leading edge of economic in-roads.

7 I think Russia is a little more complicated. They are
8 not spending as much money. We see more Russian military
9 deployments, but I think it is harder for them to sustain,
10 with the exception of Syria.

11 Senator Hirono: So what can we do? What are we doing?
12 Because China really employs a whole-of-government approach
13 to what they are doing not only in this area of the world,
14 but clearly in the Indo-Pacific area. So what are we doing?
15 Are we pursuing a whole-of-government approach to counter
16 particularly China's activities in both regions?

17 General McKenzie: So, Senator, again, this is not an
18 area of my particular expertise. But I believe we are
19 looking at whole-of-government responses to China in the AOR
20 and in the bridge really between CENTCOM and USAFRICOM,
21 which is where their road actually takes them as well.

22 Senator Hirono: That may sound reassuring, but you
23 know, I really question whether or not we are pursuing the
24 kind of whole-of-government approach that China is.

25 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Peters?

2 Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 And, General, thank you for being here and your
4 testimony here today. I would also like to join my
5 colleagues in offering my sincere condolences to the loved
6 ones and families of those members who we lost recently.

7 You have command in a very dangerous region. Over the
8 past several months, our service members and installations
9 have suffered several rocket attacks. I am concerned about
10 the serious miscommunication to the American people and,
11 quite frankly, to the men in uniform and their families
12 about the damage assessment following an attack in January
13 that we had against our facilities. We were initially told
14 that there were no injuries. Then we were told about a
15 dozen soldiers suffered traumatic brain injuries. Then
16 several dozen -- the latest reports show that more than 100
17 troops have been diagnosed with a brain injury from this
18 attack, many of whom were transferred out of country for
19 treatment.

20 So my question to you, sir, is how did this
21 miscommunication occur? Was CENTCOM forced to give a rushed
22 assessment, or did the White House make an announcement
23 without having any facts?

24 General McKenzie: Senator, thank you for the question.
25 I actually would like to talk about that.

1 I am solely and completely responsible for the first
2 notification that there were no casualties. I am the
3 officer who gave that report based on my assessment of what
4 happened at Al-Asad. There was no pressure on me to give
5 that report. That was we thought in the immediate hours
6 after the attack because it was not evident to us that there
7 had been concussion injuries. Maybe if we were smarter, we
8 would have picked up on that, but there were no kinetic
9 injuries. No one was bleeding. No bones were broken. So
10 it was out assessment and the assessment of my commanders on
11 the ground. But I am the single person who passed that
12 report. So I bear total responsibility for that with no one
13 else.

14 So, therefore, after that, concussions presented
15 themselves. TBI presented itself. And as you know,
16 Senator, that is not an injury like a broken arm or a broken
17 leg that can be immediately diagnosed on the spot. These
18 injuries come back and forth. Sometimes they manifest
19 themselves over time. Sometimes it takes months to do that.

20 Two things I can tell you. I was never under any
21 pressure from anyone at any time to shade this reporting.
22 The Secretary of Defense never said anything to me about it.
23 The Chairman never said anything to me about it. The
24 President never said anything to me about it. We were
25 driven solely by medical diagnosis on scene. So that is one

1 point.

2 The second point is I am completely confident that
3 every American service man or woman that was at Al-Asad got
4 the very best medical treatment that really our system can
5 provide. And so the numbers changed. So they did as people
6 were presented, as people were evaluated, I took the trouble
7 to actually dig into what is called the MACE-2, which is the
8 clinical tool that is given on site to develop some of the
9 initial indications of are you concussed and what is it. It
10 is a pretty good tool. So I wanted to make sure I
11 understood it fully and the difficulty of administering it.

12 And you are right. 110 people were diagnosed. We
13 evacuated 35 of them out of the theater to Landstuhl. A
14 further 28 have come back to the United States. Some people
15 have gone back to duty. We continue to take a look at that.

16 I would never minimize the significance of traumatic
17 brain injury. I mean, just the description of the injury
18 itself is concerning. And we still have a lot to learn
19 about it, but I believe that people that were injured and
20 received injuries of that nature at Al-Asad have gotten very
21 good medical treatment as a result of it.

22 Senator Peters: Well, thank you for that answer.

23 And you have answered some of my next question. The
24 President said -- I think he said, quote, they had
25 headaches, a couple of other things, but I would say and I

1 can report it is not very serious. End of quote. That is
2 what we heard from the President that they had headaches.

3 The question to you. There are hundreds of thousands
4 of U.S. military veterans that are suffering from TBI, as
5 you are well aware. Do you agree that those injuries are
6 serious and not merely headaches?

7 General McKenzie: I believe any injury to the brain is
8 a serious injury.

9 Senator Peters: Thank you.

10 General, in your written statement, you assert despite
11 the death of Baghdadi in October, ISIS remains a threat in
12 Syria and most of its activities focused on reestablishing
13 networks, assassinating and intimidating local leaders and
14 security forces and extending its influence in rural areas
15 throughout Syria and Iraq. You state, similar to
16 Afghanistan, most of the U.S. intelligence community
17 predicts that without sustained pressure, ISIS has the
18 potential to reconstitute itself in both Iraq and Syria.

19 The President seems to have a different view and says
20 that basically -- well, he takes credit for 100 percent
21 defeat of ISIS and used that as justification to withdraw
22 troops from Syria back in October of 2019.

23 So my question to you as commander, because there is
24 inconsistency in what we are hearing from the President and
25 from you, how do you navigate between the Department of

1 Defense and the IC's very ominous assessment of the ISIS
2 threat with the President's more optimistic assessment?

3 General McKenzie: So I will tell you based on guidance
4 that I have been given, which came from the Secretary of
5 Defense, we have repositioned ourselves in eastern Syria,
6 what we call the Eastern Syria Security Area, where we are
7 carrying on operations against ISIS with our SDF partners.
8 And those operations are actually very effective. And I
9 think as long as we maintain pressure on them, we will be at
10 a place where it is going to be difficult for them to
11 generate and deliver external attack plotting, external
12 attack plotting meaning attacks against the United States or
13 Europe. As long as we have the ability to do that -- and we
14 do have the ability to do that now both with the forces that
15 are there and the positions that we are in -- we are going
16 to be able to keep that pressure on.

17 Senator Peters: Thank you.

18 Chairman Inhofe: Senator Blackburn?

19 Senator Blackburn: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

20 And, General, thank you for being here. And I join
21 with others in expressing our condolences to those last
22 night, the two Americans and the Brit that we lost in the
23 attacks.

24 Just to be sure that we have got our notes right, it is
25 not 14,000 troops that were added. It was 10,000?

1 General McKenzie: The number goes up and down based on
2 -- forces flow in and out of the theater all the time. I
3 would say the number is closer to 10,000. But it is
4 difficult to put a single figure on it. When a carrier
5 comes in, 5,000 people come in. That is roughly correct. I
6 would not want to give you a single number.

7 Senator Blackburn: All right. That is fair.

8 Let us talk a little bit about what you are doing to
9 deter gray zone attacks. I think that we need to hear a
10 little bit from you on that, if you will.

11 General McKenzie: Sure. So as the maximum pressure
12 campaign against Iran continues, they are unable to really
13 respond economically or diplomatically, the two channels
14 that we are using to place pressure on them. As they seek
15 to find a way to respond, the only way that is left is the
16 military component. And the military component -- they can
17 do it one of two ways. They can do it directly, a state
18 attack, and they have done that with the attack on Al-Asad,
19 or they can do it indirectly, which the proxy attacks, gray
20 zone attacks, as you indicate there.

21 There is evidence over the course of the summer and the
22 fall that Iran wanted to pursue those gray zone activities
23 in order to force us to reconsider the maximum pressure
24 campaign, in order to make us back off from that. And so
25 where we are right now is we believe as a result of the

1 ballistic missile attack on Al-Asad, in the wake of that,
2 rough state-on-state deterrence has been reestablished and
3 that Iran does not seem to want to engage in another
4 exchange of that nature because that would ultimately be a
5 very bad outcome for them. And I think they recognize that.

6 However, they are still of the opinion that they can
7 pursue their objectives through attacks that they would hope
8 would either be unattributable or be below the level where
9 we will respond. And that poses a very grave danger for
10 them because I am not certain they do have an exact
11 understanding of what our redlines are and where we are not
12 going to be pushed. So we see that in Iraq. We also see it
13 in other places in the theater. But we see it principally
14 in Iraq because Iran is pursuing a dream of American
15 ejection from the theater, and they would like for that to
16 begin in Iraq. So that is where we see it most readily.

17 Senator Blackburn: Then let me ask you this. When we
18 are talking about Iran, do you think they are more bold or
19 less bold than they were a year ago?

20 General McKenzie: So they were very bold in the late
21 spring/early summer of 2019, and they were bold because they
22 have never doubted our capability, but they doubt our will.
23 So additionally in the spring and summer of 2019, the
24 theater had been significantly drawn down in terms of
25 capability. So they could observe that CENTCOM did not

1 possess the forces that it had in the past. So a confluence
2 of a judgment about our will and a judgment about our
3 capability led them, to answer your question, to be pretty
4 bold.

5 I believe they are less bold now probably most
6 significantly impacted by the death of Qassem Soleimani.

7 Senator Blackburn: So then as we talk about their
8 presence in Iraq and their goal of ejecting us from that
9 theater, then outside of adding personnel, which I think it
10 is fair to say you do not have the personnel to add, then
11 what can we do in Iraq that is going to end up enhancing our
12 force protection? How do we do that so that we keep Iran in
13 a diminishing posture instead of a bolder posture?

14 General McKenzie: So, first of all, you look to the
15 source. If the source is Iran, to reestablish deterrence,
16 you want to establish the idea in the mind of the opponent
17 that the object they seek will be more painful than its
18 attainment. So it is more painful to get there than it is
19 to actually hold it. And so you do that by being very clear
20 to them about things that we are going to tolerate and
21 things that we are going to not tolerate. So that is one
22 path.

23 The other path at the same time --

24 Senator Blackburn: So in other words, they have to see
25 our will, or as my kids would say, put the hurt on them.

1 General McKenzie: That is a very good way to state it,
2 ma'am.

3 Senator Blackburn: Yes, okay.

4 General McKenzie: So meanwhile in Iraq, we are in Iraq
5 at the invitation of the Iraqi Government. The Iraqi
6 Government has responsibilities to provide protection for
7 us. And actually practically the best way to get at this
8 problem is to continue to work with our Iraqi hosts and
9 partners to get after the SMG threat because it threatens
10 them as well.

11 Senator Blackburn: I yield back.

12 Chairman Inhofe: General McKenzie, excellent
13 testimony. We appreciate it very much. As we stated at the
14 beginning of this hearing, we are going to go now down to
15 SVC-217 for a closed session. We will see who shows up.

16 We are adjourned.

17 [Whereupon, at 10:20 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

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