

Opening Statement on CENTCOM and AFRICOM Posture
Chairman John McCain
March 9, 2017

The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning to receive testimony on the posture of U.S. Central Command and Africa Command. We are pleased to welcome our witnesses: General Votel and General Waldhauser. We thank each of you for decades of distinguished service and for your leadership of our men and women in uniform.

More than a decade-and-a-half since the September 11th terrorist attacks, our nation is still at war with terrorists that seek to attack our homeland, our interests, our allies, and our partners. In this fight, our military service members are doing everything we ask of them—from North Africa to the Middle East to South Asia. Thanks to their tremendous talent and dedication, we have made important tactical and operational progress.

Our military has gradually eroded ISIS's territorial control and removed key personnel from the battlefield. ISIS has been expelled from its Libyan stronghold in Sirte, and I am confident that soon the same will be true in Mosul and Raqqa. Our military has kept up the pressure on terrorists operating in countries like Yemen and Somalia. And in Afghanistan, we've kept al-Qaeda on the run and helped our Afghan partners hold the line against renewed Taliban assaults.

But much to the frustration of the American people, this hard-won tactical progress has not led to enduring strategic gains. In fact, the sad reality is that America's strategic position in the Middle East is weaker today than it was eight years ago. And the positions of Vladimir Putin's Russia and the Iranian regime and its terrorist proxies have improved. This is not a military failure. Instead, it is a failure of strategy, a failure of policy, and most of all, a failure of leadership.

The fact is that for at least the last eight years, we have tried to isolate the fight against terrorism from its geopolitical context. Or as General Mattis put it two years ago, we've been living in a "strategy-free environment" for quite some time. The result is that we have failed to address, and at times exacerbated, the underlying conflict—the struggles for power and sectarian identity now raging across the Middle East. We have been unable or unwilling to either ask or answer basic questions about American policy in the region. We have been reluctant to act, and when compelled to do so, we have pursued only the most limited and incremental actions.

We are fighting ISIS in Syria, but ignoring the Syrian civil war that was its genesis and fuels it to this day. We are fighting ISIS in Iraq, but failing to address the growing influence of Iran. We are fighting al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, but pretending the Taliban is no longer our problem. We are fighting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen, but refraining from confronting the threat posed by Iran's Houthi proxies. In short, we are treating the symptoms, and ignoring the disease. And we should not be surprised at the results: a Middle East aflame, America's influence squandered, America's adversaries emboldened, America's friends disheartened, and America's policy options narrowed and worsened.

This is the unfortunate inheritance of the new administration. Yet as difficult and complex as our challenges are in the Middle East, we have an opportunity to chart a new and different course. Seizing this opportunity will require more than just a plan for the accelerated defeat of ISIS. We have to raise our sights, look beyond the tactical and operational fight, and start answering some basic, but difficult strategic questions. What enduring objectives do we hope to achieve across the Middle East? How will we achieve those goals, on what timeline, and at what cost?

In Iraq, Mosul will be retaken eventually, but that will only likely reignite the battle for the future of Iraq—a battle in which we have an important stake. What is America's policy and strategy to deal with the problems that lie ahead: combatting the malign influence of Iran and its militias, addressing the future of the Kurds and their place in Iraq, and attenuating the disenfranchisement of Sunni Iraqis that gave rise to ISIS in the first place?

Likewise, in Syria, I believe Raqqa will eventually be liberated. But the closer we come to that day, the more it becomes clear that we cannot avoid difficult questions about Syria any longer. What is America's policy and strategy concerning a political transition in Syria, the future of Assad and his regime, the fate of the Kurds in Syria, and the influence of extremist forces from Sunni terrorists to Iranian-backed militias? In short, what is America's vision of an end-state in Syria?

In Libya, the ISIS stronghold in Sirte has been degraded. But what remains is a divided nation littered with independent militias, flooded with arms, and searching in vain for legitimate governance and political unity. What is America's policy and strategy for addressing these conditions, which unless confronted will make Libya fertile ground for extremism and anti-Western terrorism?

In Afghanistan, we have settled for a strategy of "don't lose." And the result is that last month, General Nicholson testified before this committee that this war is now in a stalemate after more than 15 years of fighting. What is America's policy and strategy

for rolling back a resurgent Taliban, for addressing the terrorist sanctuaries within Pakistan's borders, and pushing back against Iranian and Russian meddling? In short, what does victory look like in Afghanistan, and what is our strategy for achieving it?

Across the region, Russian and Iranian influence is growing at America's expense. Russia and Iran even hosted Syrian peace talks in Moscow last year without America present at the table.

Russia's cruise missiles crisscross the region while its aircraft indiscriminately target Syrian civilians. Iran's proxies wield lethal rockets and ballistic missiles with impunity, sensing that the nuclear deal shield them from American pressure. What is America's policy and strategy to counter Russian and Iranian malign influence that often manifests itself below the threshold of open conflict? How do we restore the trust of our regional allies and partners, and convince them to forgo hedging strategies that only add to uncertainty and instability?

These are the major policy and strategy questions hanging in the balance. The stakes are high—not just for the stability of the Middle East and Africa, but for America's national security. It is not the job of our witnesses to provide answers to these questions. That is job of the President, his administration, and the Congress. We owe our witnesses, and the men and women they lead, unambiguous national security priorities, clarity in our strategic thinking, and an unwavering commitment to provide them the resources required to support the necessary courses of action.

Once again, I want to thank our witnesses for appearing before the committee today and look forward to hearing how their military efforts will help us achieve favorable strategic outcomes. Senator Reed.