

**OPENING STATEMENT OF U.S. SENATOR JACK REED
RANKING MEMBER, SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE**

**ROOM SD-G50
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
Thursday, January 28, 2016**

**To consider the nomination of Lieutenant General John W. Nicholson, USA
Nominee to be Commander, Resolute Support and
Commander, United States Forces-Afghanistan
(As Prepared for Delivery)**

Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I would like to join you in welcoming Lieutenant General Nicholson and in thanking him for his willingness to accept Command of Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan at this very important time. I would also like to join Senator McCain in welcoming General Nicholson's wife, Norien McDonald, his daughter Caroline, his son, John, his father Jack and his uncle, Jim.

Lieutenant General Nicholson is uniquely qualified to assume these responsibilities, having spent much of the last 10 years focused on the mission in Afghanistan, including approximately 3.5 years deployed in country, and having held a number of relevant U.S. and NATO command positions.

I recently traveled to Afghanistan and it is evident that the past year has been one of significant political and security transition for the country. The transfer of security responsibilities from the Coalition to the Afghan National Security Forces or ANSF hasn't been without its challenges – as evidenced by the temporary seizure of Kunduz City and other areas by the Taliban. Further complicating the security situation has been the emergence of the so-called "Islamic State in the Khorasan Province" or ISKP. Operations by the Pakistani military on their side of the border, while a welcome development, have also added to the dynamic security situation by displacing elements of al Qaeda, the Pakistani Taliban, and other bad actors into Afghanistan. Lieutenant General Nicholson, I look forward to your assessment of what you see as the greatest security challenges facing the ANSF in the coming year.

The ANSF have now had the sole responsibility for securing their country for a little more than a year and, fortunately, have remained cohesive and responsive throughout. The ANSF have continued to prove their willingness to fight for and to retake areas contested by the Taliban, while

increasing their overall operational capacity under Coalition train, advise, and assist activities. Lieutenant General Nicholson, I would be interested in your thoughts on what you see as the greatest challenges in building the capacity of the ANSF going forward and how you would expect the train, advise and assist mission to evolve under your command.

With regard to counterterrorism, the second mission of our forces in Afghanistan, I support the reported recent approval by the White House of targeted strikes against ISKP. Furthermore, the joint operation by Afghan and U.S. forces in October to destroy what was, according to General Campbell, “probably the largest” al Qaeda training camp identified since 9/11 is a stark reminder of the group’s resilience. Lieutenant General Nicholson, I look forward to hearing your assessment of the homeland threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan and your views on the need to retain a robust counterterrorism mission in the region.

As the President announced in October, it is his intention to maintain approximately 9,800 troops in Afghanistan through most of 2016, with a plan to draw down to approximately 5,500 troops by January of 2017. Lieutenant General Nicholson, if confirmed, I expect that you will conduct your own assessment of the pace of withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan and I believe that any recommendations you might make on this front should be given great weight.

The last year has also been one of political transition in Afghanistan under the National Unity Government led by President Ghani and CEO Abdullah. Like all political progress in Afghanistan, it has been challenging. However, the National Unity Government has held together, preventing a breakdown in governance and providing an opportunity for progress on an ambitious reform agenda – including progress on governance and anti-corruption initiatives – going forward. The Afghans will also have to work hard on economic development, which has been negatively impacted by the Coalition drawdown, and reversing the “brain drain” of the nation’s youth.

Lieutenant General Nicholson, these are just a few of the challenges you will confront if confirmed. I again thank you for your willingness to serve in this critical position and I look forward to supporting your nomination.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.