

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

**ROOM SD-G50
DIRKSEN SENATE OFFICE BUILDING
Tuesday, March 15, 2022**

To receive testimony on the posture of United States Central Command and United States Africa Command
(As prepared for Delivery)

REED: Good morning. The Committee meets today to receive testimony from General Kenneth McKenzie, Commander of United States Central Command, and General Stephen Townsend, Commander of United States Africa Command. Thank you both for your service, and I am grateful to the men and women serving under your commands. I understand this will likely be the last appearance before this committee for both of you, and I thank you for your service to the nation.

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

On the nuclear front, in the five years since then-President Trump pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, Iran has made key advances. It has decreased "breakout time" to several weeks, from a year under the agreement. It has increased uranium enrichment to 60%, instead of just under 4% allowed under the agreement. Iran has hardened its infrastructure and replaced damaged equipment with more advanced models. And while negotiations to return Iran to the JCPOA are in the final stages, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has introduced new complications. General McKenzie, given these current dynamics, I would like your thoughts on how to best respond to Iranian malign behavior in the region—including collaborating with allies and partners to counter drone and missile attacks, while preserving space to return the JCPOA.

Last August marked the end of our 20-year military mission in Afghanistan. Despite transitioning all forces from Afghanistan, the Biden administration has

maintained its commitment to ensuring that Afghanistan cannot be used as a base for ISIS-K, al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups to conduct attacks against the United States or its allies. As such, we have assumed an “over the horizon” posture to counter and degrade such threats. I would ask for an update on our capabilities and whether additional regional agreements have been reached to ensure we have a robust counterterrorism architecture to address the threats from these terrorist groups.

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

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

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

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

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

Let me now turn to the Ranking Member, Senator Inhofe.