

**RECORD VERSION**

**STATEMENT BY**

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ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY  
AFFAIRS**

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## **Opening**

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the House Armed Services Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on our defense posture and policy in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) areas of responsibility (AORs). It is my honor to appear alongside CENTCOM Commander General Michael “Erik” Kurilla and AFRICOM Commander General Michael E. Langley.

Under President Trump’s leadership and at the direction of Secretary Hegseth, the Department of Defense (DoD) is putting American interests first in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM AORs. Our purpose in doing so is to protect and advance Americans’ security, freedom, and prosperity.

Consistent with this approach, DoD’s priorities in the CENTCOM AOR are:

- 1) Defending the U.S. homeland against credible terrorist threats;
- 2) Denying Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon; and
- 3) Supporting Israel’s ability to defend itself.

And in the AFRICOM AOR, our priorities are:

- 1) Defending the U.S. homeland against credible terrorist threats; and
- 2) Preventing China from expanding access and influence in the African continent in ways that undermine U.S. security and economic interests.

As President Trump has said, the United States will no longer engage in open-ended conflicts, nation-building, or similar efforts. Instead, we will posture and employ America’s military forces to deter or defeat threats to our nation in a decisive manner, as the Joint Force did against the Houthis. This is consistent with the President’s determination to restore and sustain Peace Through Strength.

At the same time, President Trump has emphasized how important it is for the United States to increase burden-sharing with America’s allies and partners. This is especially important in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM AOR given the array of threats facing the United States and our allies and partners in these parts of the world. Our European allies also have interests at stake in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM AORs and can be expected to do more to help deter and defend against shared threats.

## **Middle East**

State and non-state actors across the Middle East continue to threaten the U.S. homeland and our forces across the region. Iran is the world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism and its sponsorship of Hamas, Lebanese Hizballah (LH), Iraqi militias, and the Houthis underscore its center of gravity in the region. Yet, much of the Iranian proxy network suffered significant setbacks over the last year and a half, presenting an opportunity to enable greater leadership from our willing and capable partners in the region to capitalize on such gains. Iran also continues to methodically advance its nuclear program. The Intelligence Community assesses that Iran is undertaking activities that better position it to produce a nuclear weapon, should the regime decide to do so. As President Trump said, Iran must not acquire a nuclear weapon. While the President has

clearly stated his preference for a diplomatic deal, the Department stands ready to provide credible military options to the President, should negotiations fail.

Since Hamas's brutal assault on Israel on October 7th, Israel continues to demonstrate strength and resolve as it defends its people against threats from Hamas in Gaza, Hizballah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, Iran-aligned militias in Iraq, and the Islamic Republic of Iran itself. Israel has stood resolutely against these threats.

After more than a decade of U.S.-led counter-Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) operations, the physical ISIS caliphate in Syria is destroyed, though ISIS remnants remain active. The United States continues to monitor, and when needed, take action against both ISIS and al-Qaida affiliates in Syria. After the fall of the Assad regime, the former regime's chemical weapon stocks are greatly reduced. The drug trade that flourished under Assad has also collapsed, and we will work with our partners and allies in the region to be vigilant against its return. Iran's network of proxy forces that operated inside of Syria has largely collapsed. Russia has withdrawn substantial military capability from Syria, although it is seeking to retain access to its air and naval base on the coast. As President Trump said when he announced lifting sanctions on Syria, we are giving Damascus an opportunity for a "fresh start." The Syrian government officials have also affirmed their willingness to counter Iran and ISIS.

The security situation in Lebanon has also fundamentally changed in the past year. On November 26, 2024, Israel and Lebanon signed the ceasefire understanding, reducing the threat along Israel's northern border. While the Lebanese government is making progress securing the south from LH, the government must sustain this progress and increase pressure against LH.

## Israel

Since October 7, 2023, Israel has stood bravely in the face of Hamas' barbaric terrorist attack, Hizballah's rocket and missile attacks against civilians, Houthi ballistic missile and UAV attacks against civilian targets, and two unprecedented Iranian ballistic missile barrages from Iranian soil. The United States will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Israel in defense of its security. President Trump has made clear that America is fully committed to Israel's security and has backed up this commitment with clear and decisive action. Just days after inauguration, DoD—under President Trump's leadership—released the shipment of 2,000-lb MK-84 bombs to Israel that were languishing in North Carolina since April 2024 due to the Biden Administration's hold. DoD has also delivered six new F-35s to Israel to reinforce Israel's self-reliance and pursue President Trump's goal of achieving peace through strength. In collaboration with the State Department, who is lead on Foreign Military Sales, DoD is also working to progress cases to support Israel's most pressing munitions replenishment requirements. Furthermore, we are working with Israel to make progress on long-term force modernization initiatives—F-35s, advanced F-15s, and KC-46 refuelers—that will preserve Israel's qualitative military edge.

The President has made it clear that his priority is to bring all hostages home. Hamas can no longer be allowed to threaten Israel, and Hamas must not remain in power in Gaza. Secretary Hegseth and DoD are committed to implementing the President's vision.

## Iran

On Iran, the President's policy is clear: he prefers diplomacy to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, but he is prepared to use all levers of national power should Iran choose the wrong path. This policy is articulated in the President's National Security Memorandum reimposing "maximum pressure" on Iran. The memorandum sets the following priorities: 1) denying Iran a nuclear weapon and intercontinental ballistic missiles; 2) neutralizing Iran's terrorist network; and 3) degrading Iran's ability to develop missile technologies, as well as other asymmetric and conventional weapons capabilities. The Department stands ready to provide the President with the best possible military options to prevent Tehran from pursuing a nuclear weapon, should he need them. If directed by the President, DoD maintains the capabilities—alongside our partners—to deter and, if necessary, respond to an Iranian sprint to a nuclear weapon.

## Lebanon, Egypt, and Jordan

In Lebanon, DoD chairs the "Mechanism," which oversees the implementation of the ceasefire understanding between Israel and Lebanon and is building the capability and capacity of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to be the sole, legitimate guarantor of Lebanese security. Through these efforts, DoD is strongly supporting Israel's right and ability to defend itself, as well as contributing to President Trump's maximum pressure campaign against Iran by degrading Lebanese Hizballah's influence in Lebanon.

Egypt plays an integral role in advancing U.S. movement in the theater, expediting U.S. forces through the Suez Canal. As part of our efforts to increase burden-sharing with our regional partners, the Department of Defense is encouraging Egypt to be more active in addressing instability in its near abroad, particularly Gaza and the Red Sea. Jordan also remains a vital partner in promoting security in the Middle East. The Department of Defense works with Jordan to counter threats that violate Jordanian sovereignty and endanger U.S. and partner forces, to include threats posed by terrorist organizations, including ISIS, and the smuggling of weapons and narcotics across Jordan's borders.

## Syria and Iraq

Iraq is a longstanding U.S. partner and played a key role in defeating the ISIS caliphate alongside the broader Defeat ISIS coalition. The Department will continue to evaluate its military presence in Iraq given the reduced ISIS threat after years of successful counterterrorism operations. As announced last September, the United States and Iraq agreed to transition the U.S.-led Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS's military operation in Iraq to an enduring bilateral security cooperation partnership by this September. President Trump has also made it clear that he will eliminate terrorists in Syria who threaten the homeland, but that America is not interested in nation-building there. The Secretary of Defense directed the consolidation of U.S. forces in Syria in support of the President's objectives.

## Yemen

On March 15, the President launched a large-scale counter-Houthi campaign to restore American freedom of navigation, a stark contrast with previous incremental approaches to Yemen. The operation was designed to be swift and decisive to ensure U.S. forces did not get bogged down in another forever war. Relentless U.S. strikes over the subsequent weeks degraded the Houthis' capabilities and leadership ranks. On May 6, the President announced the end of U.S. strikes against the Houthis after reaching a ceasefire agreement with the group after their commitment to no longer attack U.S. ships.

## Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and the Arabian Gulf

The relative stability, influence, and capabilities of key Gulf partners provides a strategic opportunity to empower greater Gulf leadership in regional security, a dynamic squarely in U.S. strategic interests.

The United States' 80-year partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a force multiplier for accomplishing our strategic objectives in the Middle East. Built on a longstanding foundation of interoperability and shared threats, our defense partnership offers tremendous opportunities to advance a more stable and secure region, combat terrorism, and advance mutual prosperity. As a regional leader, the Kingdom works closely with us on a range of bilateral, regional, and global priorities. Secretary Hegseth has had numerous conversations with the Saudi Minister of Defense in which he has underscored President Trump's commitment to prevent Iran's development of a nuclear weapon, working with partners on eliminating threats to regional security, and upholding freedom of navigation. As Secretary Hegseth commented, this partnership is a critical center of gravity that helps to integrate and steady an otherwise turbulent region.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a strategic and capable partner that has fought alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen; hosts U.S. forces at Al Dhafra Air Base; and plays a critical role in enhancing regional security. The UAE is an original Abraham Accords partner and maintains strong political, defense, and economic engagement with Israel. DoD is committed to our bilateral defense partnership with the UAE, which focuses on building capacity, capability, and interoperability of our militaries through sales of U.S. defense articles, joint exercises and trainings, and regular exchanges.

More broadly, our Gulf partners serve as key enablers for U.S. operations across the USCENTCOM AOR, including in Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain. We actively work with our Gulf partners to enable U.S. regional operations through access, basing, and overflight permissions, coordinate diplomatic and security approaches to regional challenges, share intelligence and early warning, and expand interoperability to address shared threats.

Along with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Trump Administration will work with our Gulf partners to advance and provide for the common security and prosperity of the region. We will continue to work with these partners to advance collective approaches to shared threats, particularly in the air and maritime domains. Just last month, Secretary Hegseth signed a Letter

of Intent with the UAE to work to advance our defense relationship in a mutually beneficial fashion under the Major Defense Partner designation. Our work relies on a backbone of interoperability enabled by U.S. Foreign Military Sales (FMS), which currently exceeds \$220 billion in total case value. The Department of Defense remains committed to working with our Gulf partners to enhance their capabilities to successfully defend their territory, people, and the tens of thousands of U.S. citizens living in the Gulf through intelligence, early warning, and training.

At the same time, we will support diplomatic efforts to advance future Saudi-Israeli normalization of relations, which President Trump has publicly noted holds significant potential to finally bring peace in the Middle East. Such an outcome would bring enormous economic opportunities to the United States and the Middle East, building on the success of the first Trump Administration's historic Abraham Accords.

## **Africa**

In Africa, the most pressing security challenges include potential threats to the U.S. homeland emanating from terrorist activity as well as China's ambitions to expand its military power projection capabilities via overseas basing and naval access as well as ambition to establish dominance over critical mineral resources on the continent.

To address those security issues, DoD has two priorities in the AFRICOM AOR. One is to disrupt, degrade, and deny the activities of Africa-based terrorist groups that have both the capability and intent to strike the U.S. homeland or U.S. personnel and facilities. To this end, U.S. forces stand ready to engage and neutralize terrorists through direct action. At the same time, the Department is working with African nations to grow their operational independence to counter shared threats.

At the same time, DoD will work to prevent and counter efforts by China to position its own forces in the AFRICOM AOR in ways that threaten our ability to defend the U.S. homeland and deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. We will also work closely with interagency partners to counter Chinese efforts to exclude the United States from critical markets on the continent.

DoD's largest force posture location in Africa is Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti, which hosts 3,300 DoD military personnel and civilians that support AFRICOM, CENTCOM, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), and U.S. Transportation Command (TRANSCOM) operations. This base, along with smaller enduring locations provide support to contingency operations, episodic military-to-military engagements, and crisis response.

## Horn of Africa

In the Horn of Africa, ISIS-Somalia presents a near-term threat to American national security. DoD carries out direct action against terrorist targets in coordination with the Somali government and supports local forces conducting counter-ISIS operations. Meanwhile, Al Shabaab remains al Qaeda's wealthiest affiliate and poses a persistent threat to U.S. partners in the region. Since

February 2025, DoD has conducted over 30 strikes in Somalia, denying sanctuary for credible terrorist threats, degrading their ability to attack the U.S. homeland, and helping local partners take and hold terrain in their fight to defeat these groups.

DoD's counterterrorism efforts in East Africa are complemented by regional security partners such as Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda, Djibouti, and Egypt through bilateral troop deployments, and other allies and partners from Europe and the Middle East. To counter Al Shabaab expansion, DoD is working to support a resource-sustainable approach by increasing burden sharing in Somalia by capable and engaged international partners to address shared threats.

### Sahel and West Africa

In the Sahel, where Al-Qaeda and ISIS affiliates are destabilizing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, and attempting to expand their operations to coastal states along the Gulf of Guinea. Al-Qaeda and ISIS also exploit under-governed spaces and markets in the Sahel and West Africa for illicit trafficking and resource extraction, which fund terrorist activities both within and outside the region. For our European allies, the effects of Sahel and West Africa exploitation for terrorism often hit closest to home for them. To prevent the expansion of these terrorist threats, DoD is focused on strengthening the operational independence of partners in West Africa that are committed to degrading and containing terrorist threats. Additionally, DoD is seeking opportunities to increase burden-sharing with European allies who also have a vested interest in countering terrorists operating in these sub-regions.

### North Africa

In North Africa, DoD's strong defense relationships with Tunisia and Morocco are crucial for countering terrorism in the region. These countries independently disrupt terrorist networks and share the burden of strengthening the counterterrorism capabilities of their neighbors across Africa.

### *Deterring China and Other Adversaries*

China continues to seek the support of African countries for establishing maritime points of presence, building upon its naval support base in Djibouti, to advance its goal of developing the People's Liberation Army (PLA) into a force that can project and sustain military power well beyond the Indo-Pacific, including in ways that could threaten the Joint Force's ability to defend the U.S. homeland or deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific. DoD is also concerned by Beijing's efforts to gain dominance over contested critical minerals necessary for defense production, including in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

Enhancing our partnerships in Africa and limiting China's influence and ability to project power will be critical to hedge against these threats and protect and secure U.S. interests in Africa. DoD counters the military activities of China by offering African partners an alternative model of empowerment to Beijing's predatory practices. DoD works with African partners on shared objectives to help keep Americans safe, creating space for U.S. companies and investment.

## **Closing**

To conclude, I want to emphasize the important role of Congress in enabling the Department of Defense to achieve our objectives in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM AORs. Your support and engagement have been – and will continue to be – critical to advancing peace through strength.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on behalf of DoD and Secretary Hegseth. I appreciate your continued support to the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Guardians, and civilians who work every day in service of the American people.