

**Opening Statement (As Prepared)**  
**Chairman Adam Smith**  
**House Armed Services Committee Hearing on:**  
***“National Security Challenges and U.S. Military Activities in the Greater Middle East and Africa”***  
**March 10, 2020**

**Live stream the hearing here: <https://armedservices.house.gov/hearings?ID=70240D4A-152B-4162-A3BE-A1C6C59C5E32>**

Good morning. I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today: Kathryn Wheelbarger, Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, General Frank McKenzie, Commander, U.S. Central Command, and General Stephen Townsend, Commander, U.S. Africa Command. I want to thank them for their time today as they provide their views, which are instrumental to our evaluation of the security situations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) regions.

In past posture hearings, I've focused on the Department's strategy and how the budget makes tradeoffs to achieve that strategy. Once again today, I'd like to better understand how this Administration's policies and investments in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM regions adhere to the objectives of the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS). While recognizing the importance of great power competition, how are we ensuring that we are not taking our eye off the counterterrorism mission? How is the Department striking appropriate balance with regard to posture in these regions and how is that being expressed and accounted for in the budget?

I've just returned from a trip to Africa and a visit to AFRICOM's headquarters in Stuttgart. It was clear from my visit that the threat from terrorist groups persists in Africa. The growing threat from the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaida in West Africa and the Sahel, in particular, is extremely concerning. At the same time, the Department is discussing changes to our presence, including potential cuts, as a result of a combatant command (COCOM) review.

The Department's approach to the continent is "by, with, and through" partners to achieve common objectives and the Department has long-standing partnerships and presence in the region that help promote security. Those partnerships exist in countries particularly where there are reports of potential reduction of forces and where the fiscal year (FY) 2021 budget for security cooperation projects cuts to such programs. Let me be clear, I believe reviews are important and make sense, but such reviews must weigh the cost of reducing our presence, or cutting support to our partners. If the Department further reduces what little investment is currently provided, - which, by the way, pays dividends - will the Department be putting itself at a disadvantage for tackling these security threats when they reemerge even stronger down the road? We also know that China and Russia are actively and strategically investing in Africa to expand their influence, exploit the region for economic gain, and increase their advantage against

the United States, including with regard to the international order. As presence and investment decisions are made as a result of these COCOM reviews, it is important that the Department take a hard look at the geo-political strategic risk that will be assumed from these decisions and the gain from investing the small numbers of forces and dollars elsewhere. The committee looks forward to learning more about that topic today, including how our presence in Africa comports with the goals of the NDS. With China and Russia investing so heavily in the continent, the Department should explain how decisions with respect to our military presence there may or may not create new opportunities for destabilizing terrorist organizations, and our long-term strategic competitors.

Finally, in the east, al Shabaab remains a threat. Recent attacks in Somalia and on our partner installation at Manda Bay, Kenya illustrate their capacity to conduct complex attacks in the region. The attack at Manda Bay, unfortunately, took the lives of three Americans – a servicemember and two Department contractors. I understand that the command is still reviewing the events surrounding the attack, but it will be essential that Congress and the Department learn more about this attack and how to prevent further attacks like it going forward.

It is clear that the geographic area spanning Africa, the Middle East, and much of Central and Southwest Asia remains crucial to our national interests. Since last year's hearing, a lot has happened in CENTCOM. Last year, the committee discussed the potential for the redeployment of half our military personnel from Afghanistan. That dynamic seems to have shifted with the signing of the Peace Agreement with the Taliban on February 29th. As I have previously stated, I was cautiously optimistic about the reduction in violence (RIV) agreement. I was also encouraged when it progressed to the conditions-based peace process. However, I am concerned about the recent reports of increasing violence in Afghanistan, and the perception by the Taliban that they can return to attacking the Afghan Security Forces and Afghan government officials.

I'd like to know if this agreement will hold. Also, today, the intra-Afghan dialogue, between the Taliban and representatives of Afghanistan, is set to begin. These negotiations are essential to the establishment of a permanent cease fire and determining the political future of Afghanistan. But it seems there is now an adjustment to this timeline with increased violence and delayed prisoner exchanges having stymied the beginning of talks. All of these factors increase my concern as the Administration has made a commitment to reduce our troop presence in Afghanistan with the signing of the formal peace agreement, but it doesn't seem like the Taliban are meeting their requirements. So, where do we stand in the peace process? Are we moving forward or taking a pause, and how do we ensure the Taliban adhere to their commitments? I understand that we can't expect violence to go down to zero overnight and that the peace process will take patience, but I'd like to hear our witnesses' assessment of whether the process may be in danger of falling down before it even gets started.

Similarly, we need to understand the future of the fight against ISIS, especially in the context of the decision last fall to abandon the northeast border area of Syria to a Turkish incursion. I remain concerned that the Administration's policy in the region has a pattern of vacillating

suddenly and substantively, in ways that appear removed from policy deliberation. The shift in U.S. posture and further reduction in forces by half appeared to occur without a strategy or deliberation and, as a result, weakened our Kurdish partners and our relationship with them. The Russians and Assad's forces have also subsequently moved in and gained further influence. What's next and what is the Administration's policy for Syria?

Nearby, Iraq has been marred this past year by political turmoil – a situation that was potentially made more complicated by increased regional escalation with Iran. That escalation resulted in the death of an American contractor in Iraq and the responding strike on Qassem Soleimani, which appears to have proceeded without a strategy, and may have only raised tensions and put our forces at further risk. This fear was realized when Iran conducted a retaliatory strike on al-Asad airbase, which wounded over 100 U.S. troops to various degrees with traumatic brain injuries. It remains to be seen if Iran is done retaliating. Further, with all the troops and equipment that have been deployed to the Gulf to deter Iran, how is the Department focused on rebuilding the force to compete with Russia and China? The Administration's pursuit of a maximum pressure campaign on Iran appears to be driving them to act out, while the Department is attempting to deter further Iranian aggression with increased forces in the region. I'd like to know the strategy for offramping the cycle of escalation towards a diplomatic solution.

To conclude, I look forward to learning more about plans for the Department's presence and posture in CENTCOM and AFRICOM, how that posture meets the threats and coincides with policy objectives, and how regional decisions affect and comport with our global requirements. Timely and comprehensive assessments from our combatant commanders and policy officials are fundamental to this committee's work to provide necessary resources to the Department.

Thank you and I look forward to the witnesses' testimony.

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