**Ranking Member Smith Opening Remarks**

**Full Committee Hearing**

**Military Assessment of Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East**

**March 29, 2017**

I thank the Chairman for holding this important hearing, and I thank General Votel for appearing today. I value the General’s professional military insights, as they pertain to a complex and wide-ranging array of issues, and I very much appreciate his commitment to keeping the Congress well informed of the constantly evolving dynamics within U.S. Central Command’s area of responsibility.

Recent reports of military progress in the counter-ISIS campaign are encouraging. ISIS is on the defensive, as Iraqi Security Forces push to liberate Mosul and as the Syrian Democratic Forces simultaneously pressure Raqqa. It appears that the persistent, cooperative methodology implemented by Operation Inherent Resolve is succeeding, largely due to the efforts of our partners in the region. Clearly, much still needs to be accomplished militarily in the fight against ISIS, but I wish to emphasize that military achievements alone will not guaranty an acceptable end state. The United States must work within the international community and employ a whole-of-government approach to foster and sustain political, economic, and social conditions that are conducive to long-term stability. Residual discontent will once again metastasize into violent extremism. Moreover, as the military campaign against ISIS continues to unfold, we must make every effort to minimize the risk of civilian casualties and to address the serious humanitarian situation resultant of years of conflict. As we strive to decisively win the military fight against ISIS, we must be just as careful, just as prepared, and just as determined to secure a prosperous and durable peace.

We have long endeavored to reach a similar end state in Afghanistan. For over fifteen years, the United States has focused on eliminating Al Qaeda and other dangerous international terrorist groups and on preventing Afghanistan from being used as a safe haven for terrorist activities. We have also worked diligently with our allies and partners to train, advise, and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (the ANDSF). Without a doubt, the ANDSF are embroiled in a difficult struggle to stabilize Afghanistan. However, the ANDSF have responded to setbacks and challenges and their capabilities continue to improve. Despite significant progress, the ANDSF still needs help in building indigenous leadership and institutional capacities. We also need to continue to assist the ANDSF in establishing and maintaining a capable air force and in developing other key enablers. In short, the Afghans are not yet ready to secure their own country without our assistance and that of our coalition partners. We should continue to evaluate, and to adapt as needed to, evolving conditions, as we empower the ANDSF to secure Afghanistan. In doing so, we need to stay mindful of the fragile security situation in Pakistan, a nuclear-armed state that is also vulnerable to extremist threats. We need to ensure that our cooperative counterterrorism efforts with Pakistan yield actual, enduring results that will bolster sustainable stability in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Although our military commitments in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan consume a lot of attention, we must also be alert to other regional security implications. Core Al Qaeda has not been entirely eliminated, and some Al Qaeda affiliates continue to pose threats to the United States. Iran poses another significant challenge. While The United States and other key members of the international community concluded an agreement with Iran regarding its nuclear program, Iran remains a State Sponsor of Terrorism, and it exerts influence over the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Houthis in Yemen. We must deter Iran from precipitating conflicts and dissuade it from engaging in malign activities. Russia too is becoming more regionally involved. The Russian military is operating in Syria, and Russia may be establishing ties to the Afghan Taliban. These regional considerations should factor in broader U.S. policy on Russia.

Other regional threats also abound. Illicit trafficking, cyber threats, and threats to freedom of navigation are just a few examples taken from a diverse spectrum.

It is, therefore, critical that we receive a comprehensive military assessment from the combatant commander. A thorough understanding of our posture in the Middle East is fundamental to this committee’s work in shaping the defense budget and in providing the resources necessary for U.S. Central Command to perform its duties effectively.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I look forward to receiving the General’s testimony.