

Statement of Chairman Adam Smith
House Armed Services Committee Hearing on:
“U.S. Military Posture and National Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa”
March 23, 2022

Good morning.

I'd like to welcome our witnesses here today: Dr. Celeste Wallander, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, General Michael “Erik” Kurilla, Commander, U.S. Central Command, and General Michael Langley, Commander, U.S. Africa Command. I want to thank them for providing their views as we evaluate of the security situations in the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) regions and build the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA).

The National Defense Strategy (NDS) emphasizes integrated deterrence, a concept that includes using all instruments of our national power as well as the essential capabilities and capacity of our partners and allies. Strengthening democratic principles and our partnerships and alliances across the globe is crucial to the core concept of providing for American security. It is also essential to meeting our objectives in the CENTCOM and AFRICOM regions.

In AFRICOM, the holistic 3Ds, diplomacy, development, and defense, are central to approach the challenges our partners face and their stability. In 2019 Congress passed the Global Fragility Act and it required 10-year plans for implementing whole-of-government U.S. strategy to prevent conflict and promote stability in key areas. I look forward to reviewing plans for all countries, including the Coastal West Africa region (Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Togo). Addressing instability in Coastal West Africa is even more important as extremist organizations continue to proliferate across the continent, spreading violence and destabilizing countries, particularly in the Sahel, and threaten to spill over into the coastal countries.

The threat of terrorism also continues in the Horn of Africa. After the withdrawal of all U.S. forces by the previous Administration in 2021, in May of last year, President Biden announced the deployment of a small force to Somalia, where al-Shabaab is now al-Qaeda's largest, most well-funded affiliate. Today is an opportunity to learn more from our witnesses about the Somali fight against al-Shabaab, the role of U.S. forces, and the drawdown plans for the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS).

The Department engages in Africa to help partners and allies improve their security and fight extremism via mechanism such as security cooperation, rule-of-law and human rights training, joint counterterrorism efforts, and capacity building. Department of Defense investment in Africa, however, remains limited. I'd like to know more from our witnesses about how the Department intends to address the threats in the region and what resourcing is required to do so.

In the NDS, the Department has also identified the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as the pacing challenge and Russia as an acute threat. These strategic competitors are active in the AFRICOM region. The United States is competing for influence in Africa, while the Wagner

Group expands its presence and the PRC continues to invest significant economic resources. In today's hearing I'd like to better understand the Administration's priorities in AFRICOM, including how it fits within the global strategy that seeks to compete with Russia and the PRC. Further, how does the Department plan to manage risk and strike the appropriate balance to address the threat of instability?

We also need to make sure the Department, along with our partners, remain focused on the fight against ISIS in the CENTCOM region. While they have been degraded in Iraq and Syria, their violent extremist ideology remains a threat. In 2021, the Biden Administration announced the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq, and that our established operation there would focus on training and equipping our partners in the Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). We need updates on how that mission is taking shape, the complexities of the mission with our SDF partners, and the resources needed to properly support the mission.

Throughout the region we continue to see Iran's malign activities. Iranian proxy militias in Iraq and Syria that conduct drone and rocket attacks on US and partner forces. Iran's support of Houthi rebels in Yemen. The provision of lethal aid within the region, and more recently with their partnership with Russia, the expansion of that lethal aid to the war in Ukraine. How are we working with our partners to increase our force-protection and inhibit attacks? Further, what is the Administration's plan to deter Iranian aggression in the region and beyond? I'd like to know what role the Department will play within the Administration's plans to defend American interests in the region while avoiding escalation, and what that may mean for our posture and presence in the Gulf. Also, I am curious to hear the witnesses' thoughts on the recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia brokered by the PRC. How might this impact the conflict in Yemen and is it reflective of increased influence of the PRC in the region?

As we look to Afghanistan, our goal in the region has always been to prevent transnational terrorists from launching an attack against the United States or our allies. Now that it has been over 18 months since our military left Afghanistan, I think it is appropriate to hear an update regarding how we are monitoring the situation in Afghanistan, where we are currently doing that from, recent modifications to the command structure, and what if any plans are there to modify the mission going forward. What exactly is the threat posed by violent extremists like ISIS-K, the analysis that supports that conclusion, other threats that might emanate from the region, and who are our partners as we watch this region closely?

Finally, the U.S. military's commitment to protecting innocent life must be ironclad. The Department must have credible processes to investigate civilian casualty reports and to internalize lessons learned, and it must address processes to mitigate civilian harm. To that end, the inclusion of Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMR-AP) was an essential element in last year's NDAA. I look forward working with the Department as they begin to execute that plan.

To conclude, I look forward to learning more about plans for the Department's presence and posture in CENTCOM and AFRICOM, how that posture manages risk, meets the threats, and

coincides with policy objectives, and how regional decisions affect and comport with our global requirements.

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