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Ranking Member Smith Opening Statement (As Delivered) for Full Committee Hearing on “U.S. Military Posture and National Security Challenges in the Greater Middle East and Africa”

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman and welcome to our witnesses. Thank you for your service and commitment to working with the Committee to conduct essential oversight of the Department’s activities with respect to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM) regions. I want to thank you for providing your views as we evaluate the security situations in those regions and the impacts on the defense and national security interests of the United States.

Today marks the 80th day of President Trump’s “War of Choice” against Iran, a conflict that is devoid of strategy, and needs to end immediately. This conflict has come a significant cost; the lives of 14 service members, hundreds wounded, and thousands of civilians killed. When it comes to executing Operation Epic Fury, our men and women in uniform continue to demonstrate why they are second to none. And, have no doubt, Iran is a pariah state that has for years destabilized the region, facilitated hundreds of attacks on U.S. personnel, and slaughtered its own people. But are we strategically better off today than we were 80 days ago? Iran’s nuclear capability has not been degraded and global markets are reeling from the closure of the Strait of Hormuz. Some countries are now rationing fuel and, here at home, fuel and food prices continue to increase – why?

At the end of the 12-Day War between Iran and Israel, Iran and its proxies were at their weakest point in decades. Instead of capitalizing on that advantage with tough and skilled negotiations, President Trump launched this ill-fated attack on Iran. The Strait of Hormuz is now closed, Iran has the same nuclear capability it did at the completion of Operation Midnight Hammer, and despite the best efforts of Pakistan and others, negotiations appear to be at an impasse.

We also need better answers to the question of the cost of this conflict to the American taxpayer. Initial estimates of \$25 billion quickly rose to \$29 billion — and yet we're now told those figures

don't account for rebuilding battle-damaged infrastructure. How can we claim to have a realistic picture of this conflict's true cost when reconstruction of damaged and destroyed facilities across the region hasn't been factored in?

It has also been 80 days since the strike on the Minab girls' school and there has not been an admission of responsibility. Even with the investigation underway; the Department of Defense (DoD) can and should acknowledge if military operations unintentionally caused these deaths, even if the current investigation will provide a more in-depth perspective on the strike and what might be done to prevent future harm.

I also don't want to lose sight of the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and the impact that has on the people and government of Lebanon. What is the status of Gaza, is the Civil-Military Coordination Center still getting enough aid to the Palestinians and is there any progress on standing up the International Stabilization Force? Syria, the al-Shara government, is it proving to be a reliable security partner and our Kurdish and other minorities being included in the new government. Iraq seems to be imperiled with Iranian aligned militias interwoven throughout the security sector destabilizing the country and attacking U.S and Kurdish interests. CENTCOM remains a complex and layered area of responsibility, and I want to make sure we understand how the DoD continues to advance U.S. security interests along with our partners and allies throughout the region.

Globally, the threat of extremist organizations remains, with the primary focus being the fight against ISIS. Their violent extremist ideology remains a threat and the organization continues to look for ways to exploit opportunities to build their networks, particularly in Africa. Until this weekend, the ISIS second in command was based in the Lake Chad region. We should continue working with our partners to inhibit the return of ISIS and extremist organizations. As the administration looks to adjust our posture it is important to ensure such adjustments account for important considerations such as access and intelligence.

Extremist organizations continue to proliferate. In West Africa, Al Qaeda affiliate Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) has made significant gains in Mali. Its reach has spread throughout the region. This is one area that is critically important for our witnesses to address today. General Anderson referred to the Black Hole. I'd like to know what work is being done to address the Black Hole and how the Department can best be postured to address this challenge.

Nearby, the terrorism threat continues in Somalia. Al-Shabaab continues to operate and gain territory and ISIS-Somalia maintains a foothold. The U.S. maintains the deployment of a small force to Somalia in support of the Somali's fight with al-Shabaab. Secretary Zimmerman noted in his statement that partners like Turkey, Ethiopia, and Kenya may present an opportunity to take on a greater role in Somalia if enabled. I'd like to better understand the strategy and how this approach would shape the fight in Somalia, the role of U.S. forces, the future of the U.S. presence, and the efforts to address our national security challenges.

Finally, what does the Black Hole and strategy of moving to push for more burden sharing mean for being able to monitor violent extremist organizations and how does that impact competition with the PRC and understanding what has impact on the first island chain?

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.

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