

Stenographic Transcript
Before the

COMMITTEE ON
ARMED SERVICES

UNITED STATES SENATE

HEARING TO
RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Thursday, February 9, 2017

Washington, D.C.

ALDERSON COURT REPORTING
1155 CONNECTICUT AVENUE, N.W.
SUITE 200
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20036
(202) 289-2260
www.aldersonreporting.com

1 HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
2 THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

3
4 Thursday, February 9, 2017

5
6 U.S. Senate
7 Committee on Armed Services
8 Washington, D.C.
9

10 The committee met, pursuant to notice, at 9:32 a.m. in
11 Room SD-G50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. John
12 McCain, chairman of the committee, presiding.

13 Committee Members Present: Senators McCain
14 [presiding], Inhofe, Wicker, Fischer, Cotton, Ernst, Tillis,
15 Sullivan, Perdue, Graham, Reed, Nelson, McCaskill, Shaheen,
16 Gillibrand, Blumenthal, Donnelly, Hirono, Kaine, King,
17 Heinrich, Warren, and Peters.
18
19
20
21
22
23
24
25

1 OPENING STATEMENT OF HON. JOHN McCAIN, U.S. SENATOR
2 FROM ARIZONA

3 Chairman McCain: Well, good morning.

4 The Senate Armed Services Committee meets this morning
5 to receive testimony on the situation in Afghanistan.

6 And I am pleased to welcome General John Nicholson back
7 to the committee. We thank you for your many years of
8 distinguished service and your leadership of U.S. and allied
9 forces in Afghanistan at a critical time. And we would ask
10 you to relay to the brave men and women fighting under your
11 command how appreciative and how proud we are of their
12 service.

13 America has been at war in Afghanistan for more than a
14 decade and a half, but it is always worth remembering that
15 American forces went to Afghanistan because that was where,
16 under the sanctuary of the Taliban regime, Al Qaeda planned
17 and trained for the September 11th attacks that killed 3,000
18 innocent civilians on American soil. Our mission was to
19 ensure that Afghanistan would never again be a safe haven
20 for Al Qaeda or other terrorist groups to attack America or
21 our allies and partners. That mission has been successful
22 for 15 years, but it is not over.

23 American forces are carrying out that mission today by
24 performing two critical tasks, counterterrorism and
25 training, advising and assisting our Afghan partners. Both

1 of these tasks are vital to achieving our strategic goals
2 and protecting our homeland. We are taking the fight to
3 America's enemies in Afghanistan while at the same time
4 building sustainable Afghan Security Forces that can stand
5 on its own, take on violent extremists, and deny terrorists
6 safe haven in their country.

7 Unfortunately, in recent years, we have tied the hands
8 of our military in Afghanistan, and instead of trying to
9 win, we settle for just trying not to lose. Time and again,
10 we saw troop withdrawals that seemed to have a lot more to
11 do with American politics than conditions on the ground in
12 Afghanistan. The fixation with the so-called, quote, force
13 management levels in Afghanistan, as well as in Iraq and
14 Syria, seemed far more about measuring troop levels than
15 measuring success.

16 Authorities were also tightly restricted. Until last
17 summer, our military was prohibited from targeting the
18 Taliban except in the most extreme circumstances, taking the
19 pressure off the militants and allowing them to rebuild and
20 re-attack. Indeed, while we were fighting ISIS in Syria and
21 Iraq, authorities in Afghanistan were so restrictive that it
22 took an entire year before American forces were finally
23 given authority to strike ISIS fighters in Afghanistan. In
24 short, for too long our strategy in Afghanistan has been
25 "don't lose."

1 Meanwhile the risk to American and Afghan forces has
2 only grown worse as the terrorist threat has intensified.
3 The Taliban has grown more lethal, expanded its territorial
4 control, and inflicted heavy casualties on Afghan forces.
5 In October, the Taliban launched multiple concurrent
6 offensives that seriously threatened four provincial
7 capitals. While Afghan forces, with U.S. support,
8 successfully defended those capitals, the Taliban seized the
9 initiative, kept the pressure on Afghan forces, and captured
10 new ground.

11 In Afghanistan, as we have seen elsewhere around the
12 world, as America has pulled back, vacuums have opened up
13 and been filled by more of our enemies. Al Qaeda and the
14 Haqqani Network continue to threaten our interests in
15 Afghanistan and beyond. ISIS is trying to carve out another
16 safe haven from which it can plan and execute attacks. Iran
17 is reportedly arming and funding the Taliban. And as if the
18 situation were not complicated enough, Russia is now
19 meddling in Afghanistan in an apparent attempt to prop up
20 the Taliban and undermine the United States.

21 I want to stress an important point. Afghans are in
22 the fight. They are not looking to us or anyone else to do
23 their fighting for them. They are proud people who want to
24 defend their own country, and they are taking significant
25 casualties. At the same time, they want and need our

1 continued assistance. It is in our national interest to
2 help our Afghan partners become capable of standing on their
3 own, defending their own country, and defeating our common
4 enemies with less and less assistance.

5 Securing Afghanistan and preventing another attack on
6 our homeland requires the right number of people in the
7 right places with the right authorities and the right
8 capabilities. This new administration has the opportunity
9 to turn the page and finally give our commanders the
10 resources and authorities they need to seize the initiative
11 and force the enemy to react instead of the other way
12 around.

13 This will likely require additional U.S. and coalition
14 forces and more flexible authorities, and it will require
15 sustained support to the Afghan Security Forces as they
16 develop key enabling capabilities, including intelligence,
17 logistics, special forces, airlift, and close air support.
18 We in the Congress have a vital role to play in providing
19 this support, especially for the Afghan Aviation Initiative.

20 Succeeding in Afghanistan will also require a candid
21 evaluation of America's relationship with Pakistan.
22 Thousands of Pakistanis have served and sacrificed in the
23 fight against our common terrorist enemies. Many gave their
24 lives in recent counterterrorism operations in north
25 Waziristan. But the fact remains that numerous terrorist

1 groups still operate within Pakistan, attack its neighbors,
2 and kill U.S. forces.

3 Put simply, our mission in Afghanistan is immeasurably
4 more difficult, if not impossible, while our enemies possess
5 a safe haven in Pakistan. These sanctuaries must be
6 eliminated, as Pakistani leaders have committed to doing.
7 The new administration must work with the Congress to
8 determine what additional actions are necessary to ensure
9 that the enemies we continue to fight in Afghanistan can
10 find no quarter in Pakistan or in any other country.

11 America has been at war in Afghanistan for 15 years.
12 Weary, as some Americans may be, of this long conflict, it
13 is an imperative that we see our mission through to success.
14 We have seen what happens when we fail to be vigilant. The
15 threats we face are real and the stakes are high, not just
16 for the lives of the Afghan people and the stability of the
17 region, but for America's national security.

18 Senator Reed?

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE
2 ISLAND

3 Senator Reed: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
4 I would like to join in welcoming General Nicholson. Thank
5 you, General, for your service and for your presence here
6 today.

7 As General Nicholson often points out, Afghanistan and
8 the Pakistan area is home to the highest concentration of
9 designated terrorist organizations in the world. And given
10 this context, it is important that the United States, in
11 conjunction with NATO and our other allies, continue our
12 commitment to the security and stability of Afghanistan.

13 Furthermore, Pakistani support for extremist groups
14 operating in Afghanistan, whether it is passive or
15 deliberate, must end if we and Afghanistan are to achieve
16 necessary levels of security.

17 Decisions made last year by President Obama to maintain
18 approximately 8,400 troops in Afghanistan into 2017 and to
19 provide robust support to the Afghan National Defense and
20 Security Forces laid the foundation for a sustainable U.S.
21 and international presence in Afghanistan. The decisions
22 also sent an important message to Afghans, the Taliban, and
23 others in the region, including Pakistan, regarding the
24 commitment of the United States to continued progress in
25 Afghanistan.

1 Assuming the continued invitation of the Afghan
2 Government and the support of its people, I believe we
3 should adopt a conditions-based approach to our presence in
4 Afghanistan that provides flexibility in the number of
5 military personnel deployed there in support of our longer-
6 term strategy.

7 January 2017 marked the second year in which the Afghan
8 Security Forces were the chief guarantors of security in
9 Afghanistan. These forces continue to demonstrate
10 determination and operational cohesion even as they have
11 been confronted by an array of challenges, including
12 intensified urban combat, increased casualties, and nearly
13 continuous conflict that has hindered their ability to reset
14 and refit.

15 This sustained operational tempo is also a challenge to
16 the ongoing coalition training efforts and contributed to
17 the difficulties of recruiting and retraining troops. In
18 addition, sustained combat operations have taken a
19 particular toll on the Afghan Special Operations Forces, the
20 most capable of the Afghan Security Forces, who have been
21 relied upon heavily to retake territory from the Taliban.
22 An over-reliance on their special capabilities is resulting
23 in an unsustainable operational tempo and a high level of
24 casualties.

25 General Nicholson, I look forward to your assessment of

1 the performance of the Afghan forces over the past year and
2 plans for sustaining the force and addressing the remaining
3 capability shortfalls.

4 Afghanistan is and must remain a key pillar of our
5 long-term global counterterrorism strategy. We continue to
6 observe more aggressive Taliban operations capable of
7 pressuring the Afghan Security Forces simultaneously on
8 multiple fronts.

9 This is compounded by elements of the so-called Islamic
10 State in Iraq and the Levant in the Khorasan Province, or
11 ISIL-K, who remain in Afghanistan despite suffering some
12 significant battlefield losses over the past year.

13 Recently the Pakistani military has increased
14 operations on their side of the border. This resulted in an
15 increased number of fighters moving into Afghanistan, which
16 is an ironic but actual outcome of their operations.

17 In addition, elements of Al Qaeda, the Taliban, and
18 other associated groups continue to enjoy a safe haven along
19 the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

20 General, it will be important to hear your views on the
21 status of our counterterror fight and the resources you
22 require to continue this mission.

23 The national unity government, led by President Ghani
24 and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah, has demonstrated the
25 will to work for a complex set of issues with the goal of

1 addressing much needed political and governmental reforms.
2 I hope they will continue to do so particularly with respect
3 to anti-corruption, economic development, and other
4 governance initiatives which will be central to long-term
5 success.

6 General, I look forward to your assessment of the
7 current political context in which our operations are
8 occurring and the progress made by U.S. Government efforts
9 to help the Afghan civil forces build and reform Afghan
10 institutions which are critical to our long-term security.

11 Once again, General, thank you for your service to the
12 country, and I look forward to your testimony.

13 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

14 Welcome, General.

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

1 STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON, JR., USA,
2 COMMANDER, RESOLUTE SUPPORT COMMANDER, UNITED STATES FORCES-
3 AFGHANISTAN

4 General Nicholson: Chairman McCain, Ranking Member
5 Reed, members of the committee, thank you for the honor of
6 appearing before you today. I appreciate this opportunity
7 to update you on our mission in Afghanistan.

8 First, I want to thank the committee for your
9 leadership and your dedication to the men and women of the
10 United States Forces-Afghanistan and the NATO Resolute
11 Support mission. We deeply appreciate your visits to
12 Afghanistan and your steadfast support protects our
13 homeland.

14 Your commitment is also in building an enduring partner
15 in the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces, or
16 ANDSF. They know that we support them, and it gives them
17 the confidence they need to do their job.

18 I would like to start by honoring the men and women who
19 have served in Afghanistan and who are currently deployed
20 there: our U.S. service members, our NATO allies and, by
21 the way, the NATO allies who invoked article 5 after 9/11
22 and have been by our side ever since in Afghanistan; and our
23 NATO partners who have joined the mission in Afghanistan. I
24 particularly want to highlight the role of the NATO
25 Framework nations, Italy, Germany, and Turkey, who provided

1 leadership, manning, and funding, and our non-NATO partners
2 such as Georgia, who is the largest non-NATO troop-
3 contributing nation.

4 We should also remember that as we sit here today, five
5 Americans and two citizens from our coalition partners are
6 being held hostage at unknown locations in the Af-Pak region
7 by members of the Taliban-aligned Haqqani Network.

8 I would also like to highlight the case of Dr. Shakil
9 Afridi, who has been unjustly imprisoned.

10 I want to acknowledge the brave men and women of the
11 Afghan Security Forces and the people of Afghanistan who are
12 fighting for a secure and stable country. The success of
13 our mission depends on their courage, determination, and
14 sacrifice.

15 We especially remember those who made the ultimate
16 sacrifice for our country in Afghanistan. Their strength
17 and the strength of their families inspires us to do our
18 jobs, and our pledge is that we will deliver on their
19 sacrifice.

20 Our main objective in Afghanistan is to prevent our
21 country from being used -- or prevent this country from
22 being used as a safe haven for terrorists to attack the
23 United States and our allies. We perform two complementary
24 missions: the U.S. counterterrorism mission, Operation
25 Freedom Sentinel; and the NATO train, advise, and assist

1 mission, Operation Resolute Support. Of the 98 U.S.-
2 designated terrorist groups globally, 20 operate in the
3 Afghanistan-Pakistan region, along with three violent
4 extremist organizations. This is the highest concentration
5 of terrorist groups anywhere in the world, which underscores
6 the importance of our counterterrorism platform in the
7 Central Asia/South Asia region, which protects our homeland.
8 We remain very focused on the defeat of Al Qaeda and its
9 associates, as well as the defeat of Islamic State-Khorasan
10 Province, which is the ISIL affiliate in Afghanistan.

11 Last year, the Afghan forces developed and implemented
12 a detailed campaign plan to take the fight to the enemy. It
13 was a hard fight, but the Afghan forces prevailed. They
14 prevented the Taliban from accomplishing any of their
15 strategic objectives, and the authorities in air power,
16 which I was granted in June, were absolutely critical to the
17 success of the fight last year.

18 The Afghan Special Operations Forces also played a
19 crucial role. As a result of our training, equipping, and
20 partnering the 17,000 strong Afghan Special Forces are the
21 best in the region. They now operate independently on
22 roughly 80 percent of their missions.

23 The Afghan Air Force is also rapidly gaining
24 capability. Their first ground attack aircraft entered the
25 fight in April, and they're now integrating intelligence,

1 surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into their new
2 targeting process. So they are making great progress.

3 Congressional approval of the funding for the Afghan
4 Air Force is key to improving the offensive capability of
5 the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces. There is
6 an urgency to this request in order to get these aircraft
7 and aircrews into the fight as soon as possible.

8 I do remain concerned about the influence of certain
9 external actors, particularly Pakistan, Russia, and Iran,
10 who continue to legitimize and support the Taliban and
11 undermine the Afghan Government's efforts to create a stable
12 Afghanistan. Our complex relationship with Pakistan is best
13 assessed through a holistic review.

14 Many nations are committed to the success of
15 Afghanistan. At the Warsaw Summit last July, NATO
16 reaffirmed its commitment to sustain the ANDSF for 4 more
17 years through 2020.

18 At the Brussels Conference in October, 75 countries and
19 organizations confirmed their intention to provide \$15.2
20 billion to Afghans' development needs, and this plays a very
21 positive role going into the future.

22 India has dedicated another \$1 billion on top of the \$2
23 billion that they have already given to Afghan development
24 needs, and we appreciate their support.

25 These expressions of international commitment reflect

1 the importance which the world places on stability in
2 Afghanistan and confidence in the Afghan people and Afghan
3 Government.

4 The Afghan Security Forces fought bravely in 2016.
5 They will do the same this year and in the years ahead. The
6 Afghan people have confidence in their security services,
7 and they do not want the Taliban to return. They know all
8 too well what that means.

9 We have an exceptional partnership with President
10 Ghani, Chief Executive Abdullah, the Security Forces, and
11 the people of Afghanistan. President Ghani is making bold
12 reforms and implementing anti-corruption measures to
13 professionalize and improve the Afghan Security Forces.

14 The Government of Afghanistan is committed to achieving
15 peace through reconciliation. However, so long as external
16 support and safe haven persist, the path to reconciliation
17 will be extremely difficult. Afghanistan wants peace and we
18 hope that their neighbors realize that their best interests
19 are also served by a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan.

20 Mr. Chairman, committee members, it is a privilege to
21 appear before you, and I look forward to answering your
22 questions.

23 [The prepared statement of General Nicholson follows:]

24

25

1 Chairman McCain: Thank you very much, General.

2 In your overall commander's assessment, are we winning
3 or losing?

4 General Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, I believe we are in a
5 stalemate.

6 Chairman McCain: Thank you.

7 And, of course, our Afghan partners have been
8 sustaining very significant losses. And I am not sure that
9 is sustainable, the level of losses that the ANA is
10 experiencing.

11 General Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, we are very concerned
12 about the level of losses. The current recruitment replaces
13 the level of losses that they are experiencing. However, it
14 does not allow them to get to their full authorized strength
15 which they are below.

16 Chairman McCain: According to the IG, the Taliban
17 controls 15 percent more territory than they did in 2015.
18 Do you agree with that?

19 General Nicholson: Yes, Mr. Chairman, I do.

20 Chairman McCain: As you know and the committee knows,
21 8,400 U.S. troops and 5,000 coalition troops -- that is
22 13,300. And I am fully aware, General -- and I know members
23 are -- that numbers are just one parameter. It is what they
24 do, how they do, how they are equipped, and all that. But
25 it is an important parameter. How many more do you need to

1 get this stalemate reversed?

2 General Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, I have adequate
3 resourcing in my counterterrorism mission. In my train,
4 advise, and assist mission, however, we have a shortfall of
5 a few thousand, and this is in the NATO train, advise,
6 assist mission. So this can come from the U.S. and its
7 allies.

8 Chairman McCain: It is of concern, should it not be,
9 to all of us that you now have Russia, Iran, and Al Qaeda
10 now playing significant roles, one more than the other. But
11 that was not the case a couple years ago. Was it?

12 General Nicholson: Mr. Chairman, I agree. There has
13 been an increase in external actors interfering in the
14 Afghan attainment of peace and stability.

15 Chairman McCain: And the Russian involvement?

16 General Nicholson: The Russian involvement this year
17 has become more difficult. First, they have begun to
18 publicly legitimize the Taliban. This narrative that they
19 promote is that the Taliban are fighting Islamic State, and
20 the Afghan Government is not fighting Islamic State, and
21 that, therefore, there could be a spillover of this group
22 into the region. This is a false narrative. The Afghan
23 Government, along with the U.S. counterterrorism forces, are
24 successfully fighting against Islamic State in Afghanistan.
25 In this year alone, we have reduced their fighters by half,

1 their territory by two-thirds. We have killed their leader,
2 in fact, their top 12 leaders, and continue to disrupt their
3 operations.

4 Chairman McCain: And what is your view of what we need
5 to do concerning the safe haven issue in Pakistan?

6 General Nicholson: Sir, it is very difficult to
7 succeed on the battlefield when your enemy enjoys external
8 support and safe haven. I think we need to continue to work
9 closely with Pakistan --

10 Chairman McCain: And they did some good work in north
11 Waziristan. Right?

12 General Nicholson: They did, sir. And we have great
13 respect for the operation they conducted in Waziristan. It
14 was a very large and significant operation and they suffered
15 heavy casualties.

16 Chairman McCain: But the problem is the Haqqani
17 Network, especially in places like Quetta?

18 General Nicholson: Sir, that is correct. We still
19 have enemy sanctuary in areas like Quetta, as you mentioned,
20 with the Taliban leadership and other cities within the
21 tribal areas for the Haqqani leadership.

22 Chairman McCain: And recently, have your rules of
23 engagement been to the point where you have a greater
24 ability to combat the enemy?

25 General Nicholson: Sir, the rules of engagement I

1 gained in June were instrumental to our success this year.
2 They clearly helped us throughout the year. These rules of
3 engagement or authorities involve the use of U.S. combat-
4 enablers, most notably air power in support of Afghan
5 Security Forces and their campaign.

6 Chairman McCain: As you pointed out in your opening
7 statement, the Afghans want to fight for themselves. Right?

8 General Nicholson: Absolutely.

9 Chairman McCain: They do not want us to go in and
10 fight for them.

11 General Nicholson: Right.

12 Chairman McCain: But if they're going to be effective,
13 they need the kind of assistance and capability, including,
14 you might mention, air capability that we are now training
15 them for. For example, I am proud that many of them are
16 training in F-16's in Tucson, Arizona. But is their air
17 capability not an important component of their capability of
18 assuming the responsibilities from us?

19 General Nicholson: Yes, Mr. Chairman. If I may
20 elaborate on that just a little bit.

21 Offensive capability is what will break the stalemate
22 in Afghanistan. The key offensive capabilities in the
23 Afghan Security Forces are their Special Forces and their
24 Air Force. This investment, which we are requesting, in the
25 Afghan Air Force will help them, as you mentioned, to take

1 over responsibility for their own close air support, and
2 even more importantly, this then will lead to an offensive
3 capability that allows them to overmatch the Taliban or any
4 other group on the battlefield anywhere around the country.

5 Chairman McCain: And it might be nice if they could
6 come to the United States to train.

7 General Nicholson: Yes, sir, and they look forward to
8 this.

9 Chairman McCain: Which they are not allowed to do at
10 the moment.

11 Senator Reed?

12 Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

13 And thank you, General, again for your service, and
14 please relay our thanks and gratitude to the men and women
15 that you lead.

16 General Nicholson: I will, sir.

17 Senator Reed: Not only U.S. forces but NATO forces.

18 General Nicholson: Thank you, sir.

19 Senator Reed: You have stated that your
20 counterterrorism platform, both personnel and equipment, is
21 more than adequate for the task. Is that your view?

22 General Nicholson: That is correct, Senator. We have
23 adequate resources. And I would add when we need to do
24 additional operations, we can surge assets into the country.
25 And this is why it is adequate. General Votel and General

1 Thomas from Central Command and Special Operations Command
2 have the ability to move assets in coordination with the
3 Department. And so this has proven to be a successful
4 tactic.

5 Senator Reed: Very good.

6 So the need for more manpower is on the train, advise,
7 and assist area.

8 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

9 Senator Reed: At this juncture, you are operating at
10 the corps level?

11 General Nicholson: That is correct, Senator.

12 Senator Reed: With some exceptions? Are there any
13 exceptions?

14 General Nicholson: Senator, in the last summer, since
15 we gained the new authorities in June, we began developing
16 what we called expeditionary advising packages, which we
17 would push down below the corps level. Now, this was
18 something we put together based on the authorities and it
19 proved quite successful last year. But we would like to be
20 able to advise below the corps level. This is something
21 that NATO has agreed to in our guidance. It is strictly a
22 question of manning at this point.

23 Senator Reed: So that you would be able to,
24 essentially, have more of these teams below the corps level,
25 at the battalion level, but not down at the individual

1 company platoon level certainly.

2 General Nicholson: Sir, it would most likely be at the
3 brigade level, but we think that would be adequate for what
4 we need to do.

5 Senator Reed: And our NATO allies are prepared to help
6 out too in terms of bulking up these forces?

7 General Nicholson: Sir, I would use as an example our
8 German allies developed an expeditionary advising package
9 that they placed in Kunduz last year. This was a great
10 help. Our Italian allies in the west are looking at
11 something similar. But we have been able to integrate U.S.
12 expeditionary advising packages around the country, as
13 required, in a seamless manner.

14 Senator Reed: Both the chairman and myself and you in
15 your opening statement have commented on the criticality of
16 dealing with Pakistan. And it is a very complicated
17 situation. As you have pointed out, they have conducted
18 very serious and very credible operations. They sustained
19 casualties. But on the other hand, they seem at times,
20 particularly the ISI, their intelligence service, to be
21 aiding and assisting Haqqani Network and others.

22 You have had some dealings with the new chief of staff
23 of the army. I do not know if you have any dealings with
24 the new head of the ISI. But does it make sense to focus
25 our persuasive efforts on not the overall country but on

1 specific sub-elements within Pakistan?

2 General Nicholson: Sir, I have great respect for the
3 Pakistan military and its leaders. I am developing, I
4 believe, a positive and constructive relationship with
5 General Bajwa and his team. And again, we have great
6 respect for the operations they have conducted in the FATA.
7 As both you and the chairman have mentioned, the Pakistan
8 people have also suffered from the scourge of terrorism, and
9 they quite sincerely want to eliminate those terrorists that
10 are attacking their society.

11 If I may, I would like to highlight one example. This
12 year, U.S. counterterrorism efforts killed someone named
13 Omar Khalifa. Omar Khalifa was the head of the Tariq Gidar
14 Group that perpetuated the horrendous attack on the Peshawar
15 army school. This was the attack which killed over 130
16 children in Peshawar and the 2-year commemoration occurred
17 in December. So this is how the United States is working
18 with Pakistan against our common enemies.

19 We also in a raid this year in eastern Afghanistan
20 liberated the son of the former Pakistani prime minister --
21 his name was Haider Gillani -- and returned him to his
22 family in Pakistan.

23 So I highlight these as examples of how the U.S. is
24 working with Pakistan against common enemies. But we need
25 to improve in the areas that you mention. We need to

1 improve the pressure applied on the Haqqanis and the Taliban
2 on the Pakistan side of the border.

3 Senator Reed: Again, General, thank you for your
4 service and I continue to look forward to your continued
5 service. Thank you.

6 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

7 Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe?

8 Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 I mentioned three things when you were generous enough
10 to come to the office. We had a nice visit. Two of the
11 things have been really responded to, and so I will not
12 bring them up.

13 One was, of course, the fact that the Afghan Security
14 Forces -- the districts that they control have gone down to
15 57 percent from the 72 percent, which you did respond to in
16 the chairman's questions.

17 The second thing, which you pretty much answered, is
18 talking about the troop levels. As it is right now, we have
19 about 8,500 of our guys over there.

20 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

21 Senator Inhofe: And about 12,500 total?

22 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

23 Senator Inhofe: And when you said a minute ago that
24 the shortfall is a few thousand, is that we need to correct
25 in order to accomplish what we are trying to accomplish

1 right now? When you say a few thousand, would that be
2 referring to ours or to the total allies in the total
3 figure?

4 General Nicholson: Sir, this is in the area of the
5 train, advise, assist mission, which is a NATO mission. So
6 these contributions could come from our allies, as well as
7 the United States. We have identified the requirement and
8 the desire to advise below the corps level. So these
9 additional forces would enable us to thicken our advisory
10 effort across the Afghan ministries and do more advising
11 below the corps level. So this is an area that I am
12 currently in discussion with my chain of command, with
13 General Votel, General Scaparotti, Chairman Dunford,
14 Secretary Mattis. And I know that in the coming weeks when
15 Secretary Mattis has a chance to attend the defense
16 ministerials next week and to consult with allies and visit
17 the theater, then we are going to be able to discuss this in
18 greater detail.

19 Senator Inhofe: That clarification is good, and I
20 think it is necessary because the media will be covering
21 this. We want to make sure that they know what we are
22 talking about here.

23 General Nicholson: Thank you, sir.

24 Senator Inhofe: Now, the main thing I wanted to cover-
25 - and it is one that is -- you know, we have these meetings

1 and we have private meetings with you and all the great
2 people that we are depending on. And I am very proud of all
3 of you. We had that opportunity. You also have the
4 opportunity to consult with us because we have a little
5 closer contact with the people out there who are paying for
6 all this stuff.

7 And one of the problems that we have is -- even in my
8 State of Oklahoma, I will go back and they will talk about
9 we have been there 15 years now. We have been doing this.
10 Why is it worth all of that? The strongest thing that I can
11 say is something I honestly believe in my heart, and that is
12 if we do not do it over there, it is going to be done in the
13 homeland. You addressed this in your written statement when
14 you said your predecessor, General Campbell, said if we do
15 not stay engaged here to build the Afghans' capacity to
16 fight this threat, keep the sanctuary down, it is coming
17 back to our homeland. Then you reemphasized that in your
18 opening statement.

19 Now, what I would like to do is -- I think it is worth
20 getting into the record here as to how this might affect
21 something on our homeland. We understand this. We have
22 gotten a lot of things in confidential briefings, but I
23 think it is very important for the country to know that.
24 Any comments you can make on any specifics? I know that
25 when you had the death of -- they had actually had plans for

1 an attack on the mainland. Can you comment on that?

2 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator, thank you, and thank
3 you for the opportunity to articulate this.

4 We believe, as we have said, that our operations in
5 Afghanistan directly protect the homeland. The individual
6 you are referring to is named Faruq al-Qatari. We killed
7 him on October the 23rd in eastern Afghanistan in a remote
8 area of Kunar Province. Faruq al-Qatari was an external
9 operations director for Al Qaeda. He was involved in
10 plotting against the U.S. homeland. So this is one example,
11 without getting into classified details, of a specific
12 terrorist operating in Afghanistan who was involved in
13 plotting against the U.S. homeland.

14 More importantly, his organization, Al Qaeda, and
15 affiliates have been severely attritted and degraded, as you
16 know. And our objective is to destroy them in Afghanistan,
17 and we will continue to keep pressure. But in order to do
18 that, we need to maintain the counterterrorism platform that
19 we have in Afghanistan in an enduring manner. So this is
20 how it directly relates to our national security and
21 homeland.

22 I would also add, Senator, if I may, that from the
23 height of our engagement in Afghanistan over the past 15
24 years, we were over 100,000 troops. We are now down to
25 about 10 percent of that. So as we look at this commitment

1 over time, that surge that we did into Afghanistan enabled
2 us to build the Afghan Security Forces. And as the chairman
3 mentioned, now it is they who are doing most of the
4 fighting.

5 The height of our assistance to the Afghan Security
6 Forces was \$10 billion to \$12 billion in those years that we
7 were building. We are now down to about \$3.5 billion for
8 the Afghan Security Forces fund with additional funds to
9 support our troops. So there has been a reduction in the
10 overall cost of this mission.

11 Senator Inhofe: Yes, and I appreciate that. My time
12 has expired.

13 But it is the homeland connection that we need to be
14 armed with. You have done a very good job. Thank you.

15 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

16 Chairman McCain: Senator Warren?

17 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 And thank you, General Nicholson. Thank you for taking
19 command of our mission in Afghanistan. And thank you for
20 meeting with me earlier this week. I appreciate the
21 generosity of your time.

22 We officially ended our combat mission in Afghanistan
23 at the end of 2014, but obviously, we still maintain a
24 substantial presence there. And one of our primary
25 objectives in Afghanistan is to help build and sustain the

1 capacity of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
2 to secure their own country, as you have discussed. And
3 that includes paying salaries for Afghan personnel.

4 Now, I understand why this kind of support is
5 powerfully important when you're trying to build a local
6 force. But in a report issued last month identifying the
7 greatest threats to the success of our mission, the Special
8 Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction repeated
9 the nagging problem of salaries being paid to non-existent
10 or so-called ghost soldiers and ghost police officers.

11 To succeed, I understand that the Afghan forces must be
12 trained and capable, but above all, they must be fully
13 manned. There must actually be people there. And although
14 they are authorized at 352,000, reports have estimated that
15 there are still tens of thousands of those ghost personnel
16 who are getting salaries and included in those numbers. So
17 that means the strength of the Afghan forces must be
18 substantially less.

19 It is dangerous for our troops, obviously, damaging to
20 the missions. It is also just plain, old corruption, and
21 the American taxpayers are footing the bill.

22 General, I know that you recently identified corruption
23 as a serious problem that you wanted to tackle, one of the
24 biggest challenges facing the Afghan Security Forces. And
25 so I wonder, could you just speak to the question of how we

1 are helping the Afghan ministries of defense and interior
2 develop a fully operational system to help eliminate this
3 problem?

4 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for
5 highlighting this issue. And it is a critical issue. In
6 fact, as we looked at the high casualty rates last year, the
7 principal causes that we identified were, number one,
8 failures in leadership on the battlefield. Second was
9 corruption, as you have highlighted. So the corruption
10 primarily has occurred in the pay system and the personnel
11 system, as you have highlighted, ma'am, and also in the
12 supply system. The third factor of high casualties was
13 tactics and primarily the reduction of the checkpoints out
14 there, the isolated checkpoints that become more vulnerable
15 to attack.

16 So back to the point of corruption, how to improve
17 this. And this is where in my opening statement I commented
18 on President Ghani's courage in going after this. So we
19 have done a number of things.

20 On the specific issue of ghost soldiers, you are
21 correct. We believe there are some tens of thousands fewer
22 soldiers in the field than have been reported, and we work
23 closely with the SIGAR on this going forward and with the
24 Government of Afghanistan.

25 So specifically this year in response to this problem,

1 we have issued a letter to the Afghan Government advising
2 them that we are withholding the funding for those soldiers
3 who we cannot biometrically account for. So the biometric
4 enrollment of soldiers creates an identity in the system
5 that is hard to fake basically, whereas previously we paid
6 based upon the number that they stated that they had. So
7 the biometric enrollment is ongoing, and we look to have
8 that complete in the next 4 to 5 months. Then we will give
9 them the money for those soldiers who are actually
10 biometrically enrolled.

11 We have additionally asked for capabilities to better
12 follow our money through the Afghan ministries, to follow
13 the money, make sure it is not being inappropriately
14 diverted so we can be good stewards of our taxpayer
15 resources.

16 Senator Warren: Good. Thank you very much, General.

17 We have been in Afghanistan for 15 years. We have
18 spent \$117 billion in American taxpayer funds. And
19 according to the Special Inspector General, we are spending
20 \$13 million every day to be in Afghanistan. \$13 million.
21 More than 2,000 American service members have made the
22 ultimate sacrifice there. More than 8,400 American service
23 members are there today, along with thousands of diplomatic
24 personnel and contractors. Our military cannot and should
25 not be in Afghanistan forever. Our end goal must be to help

1 Afghanistan build a self-sustaining force that is capable of
2 securing the country so our U.S. troops can come home.

3 And I appreciate your work in this direction. Thank
4 you, General.

5 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

6 Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

7 Chairman McCain: Senator Fischer?

8 Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 Thank you, General, for your service and thank you for
10 the service of those that you command. It is appreciated by
11 everyone in this country.

12 When you and I had our conversation in my office, we
13 talked about possible additional capabilities that you would
14 need. And we specifically kind of focused in on the
15 contractors that are in Afghanistan now. Could you talk
16 about the consequences of the so-called boots on the ground
17 limitation that we are looking at, particularly with respect
18 to the reliance that we have on contractors?

19 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for raising
20 that issue, and it has two implications. Of course, it has
21 an implication for us on the ground in Afghanistan, but also
22 for overall readiness of our armed services, which I know is
23 of great concern to this committee.

24 So specifically, as the force manning levels have taken
25 effect, what we have done in some cases is substitute

1 contractors for soldiers in order to meet the force manning
2 levels. I will give you an example of that in the case of
3 our aviation brigade. So we have the combat aviation
4 brigade in the 1st Infantry Division from Fort Riley, Kansas
5 is in Afghanistan. They deployed with their helicopters and
6 their pilots and their staffs, but because of our troop
7 limitations, we left their mechanics back in Fort Riley and
8 substituted contract mechanics. And this was in order to
9 optimize the amount of actual uniformed soldiers we were
10 allowed.

11 This contract for maintenance runs into the tens of
12 millions of dollars, and then the soldiers who are trained
13 to be mechanics are sitting back at Fort Riley not having
14 the opportunity to do their job. So this has a direct
15 impact on Army readiness, and it also costs us more money.

16 So as we have begun these discussions with the
17 administration and with Secretary Mattis, this is one of the
18 issues that we have put on the table is how to optimize
19 readiness and our performance on the battlefield by managing
20 by objective and not by a force manning level.

21 Currently with contractors, we have roughly a two to
22 one ratio of contractors to soldiers, and if we look at
23 deploying whole units instead of portions of units, then
24 this would enable us to reduce our contractor load somewhat,
25 and it would be better for Army and service readiness.

1 Senator Fischer: I would imagine you are going to
2 raise those concerns and ask for more flexibility then from
3 these limitations when you are able to have those
4 discussions?

5 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator.

6 Senator Fischer: You spoke about the increase in
7 Russian involvement in Afghanistan and that growing
8 relationship that they are having with the Taliban. Can you
9 elaborate on that a little bit more for us, please?

10 General Nicholson: Yes, ma'am.

11 So in addition to the public legitimizing of the
12 Taliban, which is surprising given the Taliban have evolved
13 over the years into a narco-insurgency and one that engages
14 in extensive criminal activity, narcotics, kidnapping,
15 illegal mining, and other forms of criminal activity to fund
16 their operations, Russia has legitimized them with this
17 false narrative of fighting ISIL-K. They also have
18 initiated a series of meetings in Moscow to which the
19 Afghans have not been invited for the first several meetings
20 in which to discuss the future of Afghanistan.

21 Afghanistan is trying to work with all of its neighbors
22 and all of the stakeholders. They have reached out to the
23 Russians about this. And we believe that a peace and
24 reconciliation process in Afghanistan should be Afghan-led,
25 and this has been the position of the United States

1 Government and we believe this will be the most lasting,
2 enduring, effective peace arrangement. So ultimately where
3 we are trying to go and help the Afghans go is to get to a
4 point where they reconcile with the belligerents in this
5 long war that they have experienced and be able to move
6 forward with a peaceful and prosperous country.

7 Senator Fischer: Thank you, General.

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

9 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

10 Chairman McCain: Senator Peters?

11 Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

12 And, General, it is wonderful to have you here and I
13 appreciate the time that we had yesterday in my office as
14 well talking about a number of these issues.

15 During this hearing, a number of folks have referenced
16 the Inspector General's report about what has been happening
17 in Afghanistan, and I want to just highlight some of those
18 findings that I find particularly striking and then ask a
19 question.

20 But as others have mentioned, since 2001, 2,247 U.S.
21 military personnel have died. 20,000 have been wounded.
22 Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. has spent more on
23 Afghanistan's reconstruction than it did on the Marshall
24 Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II.
25 Reconstructing Afghanistan has now become the largest

1 expenditure to rebuild a single country in our Nation's
2 history. The Afghan Security Forces are not capable of
3 providing security for the whole country. The Afghan
4 Government cannot sustain many of the investments that the
5 U.S. taxpayers have made in the country. Despite a U.S.
6 investment of \$8.5 billion in counternarcotics, Afghan opium
7 production is now at an all-time high. Despite \$70 billion
8 in U.S. investment in Afghan Security Forces, only 63
9 percent of the country is under government control.
10 Corruption continues to erode legitimacy, limiting
11 effectiveness, bolstering support for the opposing
12 insurgency. And after 15 years, Afghanistan still cannot
13 support itself financially or functionally, and long-term
14 financial assistance will be required if the country is to
15 survive.

16 Not a good record after 15 years of involvement in
17 Afghanistan. After what I have heard today and what we
18 talked about yesterday, it is becoming even more complicated
19 with the Russian involvement, Chinese involvement in natural
20 resources, and the list goes on.

21 If you could just say -- you know, and what I have
22 heard is a lot of what I have heard over the last 15 years
23 of what the United States will be doing in Afghanistan.
24 What are we going to do that is different that has not been
25 done in 15 years given this I think pretty damaging report

1 about what has happened over the last 15 years?

2 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, and I
3 appreciate reviewing this and the chance to talk about
4 President Ghani's plan for the way ahead.

5 And I acknowledge and again express our appreciation
6 for the great support from this body to sustain this effort.
7 Our number objective has been to protect the homeland, and
8 we have not had another attack on the homeland from
9 Afghanistan in the 15 years that we have been there. So I
10 would say that is point number one.

11 As I mentioned before, Senator, I acknowledge fully the
12 significant sunk costs that we have made in Afghanistan. I
13 would mention that we now, though, are at about 10 percent
14 of what we once were in terms of troop commitment and have
15 reduced those other expenditures significantly. Yes, the
16 problems persist, and I do not want to in any way minimize
17 those.

18 What we have with President Ghani is a partner who is
19 willing to boldly go after these problems, and this is
20 significant. I offered the example of the ghost soldiers.
21 This was something that he was willing to do that previously
22 we had not been able to do.

23 I also want to share the plans we are working with the
24 Afghan Government, which Ghani calls the ANDSF road map,
25 4-year road map. After the Warsaw Summit this summer in

1 July of 2016 when the allies granted 4 more years of
2 commitment to Afghanistan, President Ghani sat down with his
3 team and us to say how are we going to achieve success in
4 the next 4 years. We are working on that plan now. This
5 plan involves expanding the amount of control that the
6 government has over the population.

7 I should point out that this investment that we have
8 made has resulted in an Afghan population who universally --
9 well, almost universally -- 87 percent reject the Taliban.
10 They do not want a return of the Taliban. Three-quarters of
11 the population have great confidence in their Security
12 Forces. So this is a population and a government who want
13 to work with us and need our support.

14 Geostrategically, it is a critically important region
15 of the world. This is a tough neighborhood, Iran, Pakistan,
16 China, Central Asia. Once removed, you have other conflict
17 zones. We have a partner in Afghanistan, a moderate Islamic
18 republic, that wants to partner with us against terrorism.
19 We have a population who reject terrorism. And we have an
20 ability to have a counterterrorism platform in a critically
21 important part of the world.

22 So success going forward we believe means helping the
23 Afghans to achieve this greater population control. That
24 then will enable us to have the enduring counterterrorism
25 platform to help to continue to protect our homeland and

1 those of our allies.

2 We also see if we can get to a place of reconciliation,
3 that we then bring a degree of stability to this critical
4 region that will benefit the entire neighborhood, to include
5 India, China, everyone.

6 So in my initial conversations with my new chain of
7 command, we have touched upon all of these areas. So your
8 concerns and the concerns of this committee are at the top
9 of the list as we discuss this going forward on how we can
10 achieve success in Afghanistan going forward to protect our
11 national interests along the lines I just outlined.

12 Senator Peters: Thank you, General. Appreciate it.

13 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

14 Chairman McCain: And, General, I might add that there
15 are some of us who predicted exactly the scenario that has
16 taken place as the previous President withdrew our forces to
17 levels that put the remaining troops' lives in danger and we
18 are doomed to failure because of everything ranging from
19 incredible rules of engagement that required a National
20 Security Council approval to repel an attack to the
21 unilateral and unnecessary and unwarranted reduction of
22 forces, which led us to the position we are in today, which
23 was predicted -- predicted -- by many of us who know
24 something about warfare.

25 Senator Cotton?

1 Senator Cotton: General, welcome back.

2 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

3 Senator Cotton: You obviously have heard some
4 skepticism from this committee today, as you have in the
5 past, about the ongoing mission in Afghanistan. We have
6 accomplished a lot of things there that benefit the Afghan
7 people. You know, they are safer. They have more GDP per
8 capita. They have better education, especially for girls.
9 Those are all great things.

10 We have to worry more, though, about the safety and the
11 prosperity and the education of the American people.

12 So could you just tell us in plain language what are
13 the American people -- what are working folks out in
14 Arkansas getting for more than 15 years of our presence in
15 Afghanistan?

16 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. Thank you for that
17 question and for your support and your service in
18 Afghanistan.

19 Our number one goal is to protect the homeland from any
20 attack emanating from the region. And, of course, we have
21 achieved that in the last 15 years. However, we need to
22 stay on top of it because of this confluence of 20 terrorist
23 groups in the region.

24 I believe this is an enduring commitment to keep
25 pressure on these groups and help the Afghans move towards a

1 successful end state. What would that look like? Success
2 might be the maintenance of this enduring counterterrorism
3 effort to keep pressure on these groups. It means that we
4 would destroy Islamic State and Al Qaeda inside Afghanistan,
5 something which we are actively pursuing every day. It
6 means that we would help the Afghan Security Forces and
7 Government to extend their control to a larger and larger
8 percentage of the population. It means that we would help
9 Afghanistan become ideally a place where reconciliation is
10 achieved with the belligerents and then they can become a
11 more stable and prosperous entity in a critical part of the
12 world.

13 I recognize the distance of Afghanistan and the length
14 of this has been challenging for the American people to
15 support. However, I personally believe that this effort
16 that we are undertaking there is protecting the homeland and
17 preventing these terrorists from bringing their fight to our
18 doorstep.

19 Senator Cotton: If the United States just said we have
20 had enough, you know, 15 years is long enough, let us just
21 roll up our operation there and come home, do you think that
22 we would face the risk of an attack planned and directed
23 from Afghanistan?

24 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator, definitely.

25 Senator Cotton: That is a pretty big success then in

1 our 15 years of operations there?

2 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator.

3 Senator Cotton: A year ago, your predecessor, General
4 Campbell, testified about his concern of the role Iran was
5 playing in Afghanistan. Could you give us your view of what
6 Iran has been up to in the last year since he testified?

7 General Nicholson: Iran is directly supporting the
8 Taliban in western Afghanistan. There is a complex
9 relationship between Afghanistan and Iran, and it not only
10 involves security matters like this. Iran is also
11 recruiting Afghan Shia to fight against Islamic State in
12 Syria and Iraq.

13 On the other hand, there are also areas of cooperation
14 between Iran and Afghanistan. Number one would be economic
15 cooperation. The governments of India, Iran, and
16 Afghanistan signed an agreement over the Chabahar Port in
17 southern Afghanistan. Actually this initiative would be
18 very beneficial to Afghanistan in terms of economic
19 development. There are also ongoing conversations about
20 water treaties between Afghanistan and Iran. Iran needs
21 Afghanistan's water.

22 So it is a complex relationship. It has areas of
23 potential synergy and benefit for both parties, but it also
24 has important security equities. And so the Afghan
25 Government is raising these issues with the Government of

1 Iran and asking them not to support the Taliban and
2 undermine the Afghan Government.

3 Senator Cotton: Is Iran's support for the Taliban
4 primarily or exclusively located in Herat and Farah, or are
5 they supporting the Taliban throughout the country?

6 General Nicholson: Without getting into a lot of
7 classified material in an open hearing like this, Senator, I
8 would say it is primarily in the west, but their financial
9 inroads go around the country in the north and in Kabul in
10 particular.

11 Senator Cotton: So Iran, which is a Shiite-led
12 government, is supporting a Sunni-led movement, the Taliban,
13 in Afghanistan but recruiting Shia from Afghanistan to
14 travel to Syria and fight. It seems like a complex act from
15 Tehran united by a single consideration, which is
16 undermining U.S. interests.

17 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. I would agree with
18 that. I think a number of -- when we look at Russian and
19 Iranian actions in Afghanistan, I believe that in part they
20 are to undermine the United States and NATO and prevent this
21 strong partnership that we have with the Afghans and the
22 region.

23 But it is complex, as you point out. They are
24 recruiting Shia. The Afghans are concerned about the Shia
25 fighters returning to Afghanistan at some point and will

1 they become a destabilizing factor or not? And this is of
2 great concern to the Afghan Government.

3 Senator Cotton: Thank you, General. Be safe,
4 downrange. Say hi to the troops.

5 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

6 Chairman McCain: Senator Gillibrand?

7 Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

8 I want to continue this discussion about ISIL
9 specifically. The Afghan Interior Ministry in early January
10 said that the Islamic State-Khorasan was now active in at
11 least 11 of the county's 34 districts. And we have seen
12 reports that Russia, China, and Pakistan recently met in
13 Moscow to discuss the growing influence of ISIL in
14 Afghanistan and the deteriorating security situation there.

15 What is your understanding of the size and lethality of
16 ISIL's presence in Afghanistan, and what, if any, was the
17 U.S. Government's role in the Russia meeting? And what
18 counter-ISIL coordination have you seen between the Afghan
19 Government and its regional counterparts to date?

20 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

21 There is no U.S. role in the Russia dialogue, as far as
22 I understand, with respect to ISIL. This was a conference
23 where they invited China, Pakistan, and now other regional
24 countries. And I believe for the next meeting, they have
25 extended an invitation to Afghanistan.

1 So back to ISIL, so we saw Islamic State-Khorasan
2 Province was formed of fighters from existing groups in
3 Afghanistan and Pakistan. Primarily their membership has
4 come from the Tariqi Taliban-Pakistan, the TTP, which is a
5 Pakistan-based opponent of the Pakistan regime, from the
6 Orakzai Agency. These fighters en masse joined ISIL-K and
7 formed the initial group of fighters who then moved into
8 Afghanistan into Nangahar Province, and their spread was out
9 to about 11 districts initially. They have had recruitment
10 activities around the country, but they attempted to
11 establish their form of the caliphate starting in Nangahar
12 Province with Jalalabad as the capital. So this was their
13 aspiration, but they failed to achieve it.

14 When authorities were granted for the U.S. to begin
15 striking Islamic State, since that time, we have worked
16 closely with the Afghans doing several deliberate operations
17 against Islamic State in Afghanistan. During the time of my
18 command, we have done three of these operations, and we have
19 shrunk their geographic space from this larger 11-district
20 number down to a smaller 3 to 4 districts in southern
21 Nangahar.

22 But they are still there, and they have shown an
23 ability to conduct suicide attacks inside Kabul and
24 elsewhere around the country. So they have attacked Shia
25 targets primarily. They attacked at a peaceful

1 demonstration. They have attacked at Shia mosques. They
2 have attacked on Shia religious holidays. So we see a
3 definite ISIL-K/Shia connection there.

4 I would comment that this group is universally rejected
5 by the Afghan people. These are primarily non-Afghans in
6 this group. In addition to the TTP, we have members of the
7 Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Are there some Afghans in
8 there? Yes, but very few. And generally I would say they
9 have been attracted by the money -- ISIL pays their fighters
10 more -- and by the ideology and the effective information --

11 Senator Gillibrand: Which countries are they from?

12 General Nicholson: They are from Pakistan and
13 Uzbekistan. So the Islamic Movement-Uzbekistan and from
14 Pakistan.

15 Senator Gillibrand: And can you amplify a little more
16 about the Pakistani-Afghan bilateral relationship and the
17 Afghan Government's ability to take control from the
18 irreconcilable Taliban in parts of the country where they
19 are dominant? And what is your assessment of Pakistan's
20 commitment to deny sanctuary to Afghan Taliban?

21 General Nicholson: Ma'am, this is a complex
22 relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As President
23 Ghani has said, he wants peace in the region. Pakistan and
24 Afghanistan in the past have worked together on a process
25 for peace most recently called the quadrilateral process

1 last spring. And this progressed to a certain point, but
2 then the Taliban rejected the peace process. I think at
3 that point, we were working very closely with Pakistan, the
4 United States, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan working
5 together on this process, and since then, we have lost
6 ground.

7 And so I will say that the Pakistan leadership has
8 articulated that they support our objective of a stable and
9 peaceful Afghanistan. All of their leaders have said they
10 were committed to this, but thus far, we have not seen this
11 translate into any change in terms of behavior, if you will,
12 in terms of Taliban or Haqqani freedom of action to operate
13 from sanctuaries in Pakistan.

14 Senator Gillibrand: And in my last few seconds, there
15 as a report that the first female Afghan fighter pilot
16 sought asylum in the U.S. last December. And her quotes
17 were things are not changing for the better in Afghanistan.
18 Things are getting worse. What is the status of women in
19 Afghanistan today? And have the successes we have made been
20 unwound?

21 General Nicholson: I think we have made many successes
22 with women in Afghanistan, ma'am. And let me expand the
23 aperture beyond the services, although I will come back to
24 that.

25 When the Taliban were there, only 1 million children

1 were in school. That has expanded now to about 9 million
2 children. 40 percent are women. You have women
3 parliamentarians, women ministers, women governors, women
4 members of the provincial councils. We have 3,000 women in
5 the Ministry of Interior. We are making progress across the
6 board on the role of women in society and throughout their
7 military.

8 This is a high priority for President Ghani and his
9 wife, Mrs. Ghani. Her Excellency and I chair a meeting on a
10 quarterly basis called "Women and Security," and all of the
11 ministers come to this. My wife has attended this meeting.
12 We work together on these issues frequently. And we
13 appreciate the support from this committee and the Congress
14 on funding women's initiatives. They have been very
15 important going forward.

16 Thank you.

17 Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst?

18 Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

19 General Nicholson, thank you so much. It is great to
20 see you back on American soil, and I want to thank you for
21 your continued service. But I also want to take the time to
22 thank your family who is with you today as well for their
23 support of you and for sharing you and your talents in a
24 leadership capacity in a very difficult theater of
25 operations. So thank you and your family very much.

1 I would like to pick up where we left off in
2 Afghanistan when I visited a couple months ago. And you,
3 better than most, understand -- coming out of 2nd Ranger
4 Battalion, you understand that General Creighton Abrams had
5 directed the establishment of the first Ranger battalion
6 many years ago, and that is established in the Army. And he
7 said that this unit was to be -- and I am going to quote
8 him-- an elite, light, and the most proficient infantry in
9 the world, a battalion that can do things with its hands and
10 weapons better than anyone. Wherever the battalion goes, it
11 must be apparent that it is the best. End quote.

12 And today the Army does continue with the Abrams
13 charter, and we send our Rangers into regular units all
14 around the globe. And we know that this is for the
15 betterment of those units and to boost their performance.
16 We had had a discussion about the Afghan regular forces and
17 how they were not performing maybe as they should but, but
18 the Afghan Special Forces were performing quite well but
19 they were being over-utilized.

20 Do you think it is time that the Afghan Army introduce
21 per se an Abrams charter into its own forces and start
22 sharing some of those talents with the regular units so that
23 they can boost their performance as well?

24 General Nicholson: Thank you very much, Senator. And
25 I also want to thank you for your service in our Army and in

1 Afghanistan. And thank you for the visit, and it was great
2 that your unit that you commanded was in Afghanistan at the
3 time you visited, and they deeply appreciated your visit.

4 Senator Ernst: Thank you.

5 General Nicholson: I also appreciate very much your
6 sentiments for my family. Thank you. I will pass that on
7 to everyone.

8 And with respect to the Ranger regiment, I think the
9 reason I was smiling is you are hitting on an exact theme
10 that we are working with the Afghans.

11 First, I want to acknowledge the great contributions
12 that the 75th Ranger Regiment are making to our campaign in
13 Afghanistan and have done for years. In fact, my personal
14 security officer, Master Sergeant Joe Lockton, is a member
15 of the 75th Ranger Regiment. And as an example, he has 15
16 deployments to Afghanistan. 15 deployments to Afghanistan.
17 And the Rangers are key in our counterterrorism mission in
18 Afghanistan going forward.

19 You are exactly right about the Abrams charter. And in
20 fact, in working with President Ghani, we have worked
21 closely on how to leverage the excellence that we have seen
22 in the Afghan Special Forces and leverage that for the good
23 of the rest of the Army. So one of the hallmarks of the
24 4-year road map, which we are working together on, is to
25 increase the size of the Afghan Special Forces because these

1 units have proven so effective on the battlefield.

2 So we cannot produce these units overnight. As you
3 well know, ma'am, it takes years to grow a special
4 operations soldier, a Ranger, a commando. So we are
5 embarked upon a plan where they are recruiting more
6 commandos now, and we are expanding those units one company
7 at a time so that in the 4 years we have gained by the
8 Warsaw Summit, we will almost double the number of special
9 forces units.

10 When we couple that with the air force capability, this
11 gives an offensive punch to the Afghan Security Forces that
12 the enemy will not be able to stand up to. So the nucleus
13 of special forces will provide the offensive capability to
14 the Afghan Army to enable it to expand, to break the
15 stalemate and expand their control over the country.

16 Senator Ernst: Very good. I am glad to hear that.

17 In the spring, 300 marines are set to deploy to the
18 Helmand Province, and that is quite a historic and a
19 symbolic place for our marines. And as you know, some
20 estimates project 80 percent of Helmand Province is now
21 controlled by the Taliban, a province that supplies the
22 Taliban with approximately 60 percent of their funding. And
23 it is my understanding that the marines are replacing an
24 equally sized army unit that is currently deployed in the
25 region. The chairman stated something about, you know, we

1 are not really trying to win, we are just trying not to
2 lose. Do you see this as moving the ball forward in the
3 ability to help the Afghans, or are we going to continue to
4 see losses in Helmand?

5 General Nicholson: Ma'am, first off to echo the
6 conversation I had earlier with the chairman, we want to
7 succeed in Afghanistan. We believe that success in
8 Afghanistan is critical to the United States, to our NATO
9 alliance and, of course, to the Afghan people.

10 Helmand, as you pointed out, is important to the
11 Taliban because as a narco-insurgency, this is where they
12 get their money. And the principal poppy-producing
13 provinces in Afghanistan are Helmand, Kandahar, and to the
14 west increasingly Farah Province. And we have seen a move
15 by the Taliban to try to gain ground in Farah because of
16 this.

17 So the advisory effort -- at the end of 2014, as we
18 drew down our presence, we shrunk our advisory effort in
19 Helmand and other places around the country quite
20 significantly. So in the last year, it became apparent that
21 we needed to -- instead of advising on an ad hoc basis, we
22 needed to go in there with a permanent structure, really
23 purpose-built to advise. And so when we reached this
24 conclusion, I reached out to the Commandant, General Neller,
25 to request his assistance with this because the Marine Corps

1 has deep experience in Helmand. They have a lot of skin in
2 the game. They did a great job down there. We wanted to
3 see if the Marine Corps could come back and help us with
4 this critical area that has been so important in their
5 impressive legacy.

6 So we are very grateful that the Marines have stepped
7 up to assist in Helmand, we look forward to getting the team
8 over there. They will be arriving this spring. And when
9 they come in, they will have a more structured advisory
10 effort than we have had up to this point.

11 We have suffered casualties in Helmand in our advising
12 capacity this year, sadly. And this was in our special
13 forces units who were accompanying Afghan commandos on
14 missions in Helmand. But overall, we are going to work hard
15 to keep the potential for casualties to an absolute minimum.

16 Sadly, there has been some recent fighting in Sangin.
17 We had another American Special Forces soldier severely
18 wounded in Sangin this morning just before I walked into the
19 hearing. So this just highlights the criticality of this
20 region and the need to keep focused on the Afghan success
21 down there.

22 The final piece I would add is that the 215th Corps,
23 which is the corps in Sangin -- after the tough fight in
24 2015, we did a significant regeneration effort on the 215th
25 Corps. Again, we are embarked upon a significant

1 regeneration effort now because that is where the Afghans
2 are suffering very high casualties. We put in a new
3 commander. His name is General Amazi. He has been doing a
4 great job with the unit down there, but they do need our
5 help with regeneration and building. We have a great
6 governor down there, Governor Hyat, who is doing a very good
7 job. But we have experienced problems with police
8 corruption to a significant extent, which are undermining
9 our efforts.

10 So this is an area, in relation to some of the earlier
11 questions I answered on corruption and ghost soldiers in
12 particular that we are very focused on -- is Helmand. So it
13 is a comprehensive effort to try and get Helmand back on
14 track and the Marines are going to play a key role in it.

15 Senator Ernst: Thank you, General.

16 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

17 Chairman McCain: Let me just be sure. Right now you
18 stated at the beginning that we are at a stalemate. Do you
19 believe we are developing a strategy to break that
20 stalemate?

21 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator.

22 Chairman McCain: Senator King?

23 Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

24 I want to move to a sort of higher strategic level.
25 The original justification and the one that you have

1 emphasized today is the sanctuary argument, that we have to
2 go after and stabilize Afghanistan so that it cannot be
3 again used as a sanctuary for terrorist attacks on the
4 homeland.

5 My concern about that strategy is that if it is not
6 Afghanistan, it could be somewhere else. That is a strategy
7 that could justify significant investment and occupation, if
8 you will -- and I do not use that in a military term, but
9 presence in Libya, Iraq, Syria, Mali, eastern Pakistan.

10 Where does it stop? In other words, our original
11 mission was Al Qaeda. We were very successful. Al Qaeda
12 was broken up, but it has moved to other places. Now we are
13 in the business of keeping Afghanistan afloat from the
14 Taliban and all these other groups. Help me out with where
15 you draw the lines on this sanctuary strategy which could be
16 anywhere in the world.

17 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. And thank you for
18 that question.

19 I think there are some aspects that are unique to
20 Afghanistan that do not apply elsewhere in the world.
21 Number one would be the number of terrorist groups. So,
22 again, the U.S. has designated 98 groups globally. 20 are
23 in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So this is the highest
24 concentration anywhere in the world. So this policy of
25 creating an enduring counterterrorism platform applies to

1 this region in a way that it would not in some of the other
2 areas that you mentioned that do not have this high
3 concentration of terrorists.

4 I would suggest that some of these other areas could be
5 handled by our global counterterrorism strategy. And I do
6 not want to speak for General Thomas of Special Operations
7 Command or the Chairman or the Joint Staff. I know they are
8 working on this. We think because of the high concentration
9 of terrorist groups in this region that it would necessitate
10 an enduring counterterrorism platform.

11 The conditions in this region also lend themselves to
12 the growth of these organizations. These 20 groups sit on
13 top of a population between Afghanistan and Pakistan of over
14 200 million people. 70 percent of them are under the age of
15 30. Employment is low. There are radical forms of --

16 Senator King: Fertile ground.

17 General Nicholson: It is like a Petri dish, if you
18 will, into which you drop the 20 strands of DNA of these
19 terrorist groups. And then what we see happening is
20 convergence and growth and connections develop between --

21 Senator King: But you understand the concern.

22 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

23 Senator King: And I think you have articulated why
24 Afghanistan.

25 Let me change the subject somewhat. As I understand,

1 opium production is up.

2 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

3 Senator King: The fields are up. I would argue that
4 we are being invaded every day. We are losing four people
5 an hour in this country to overdose deaths, heroin, opium
6 grown in places like Afghanistan.

7 If the fields in Afghanistan were terrorist camps
8 killing four people an hour in the United States, they would
9 be gone. They would be long gone. Why do we not take that
10 out? Why doesn't air power just eliminate that source of
11 this scourge in our country?

12 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. The counternarcotics
13 policy is not the purview of the Defense Department. I do
14 not want to get in front of those agencies or the
15 administration as they consider this. But you have
16 highlighted an area that is extremely important to the
17 outcome in Afghanistan.

18 Senator King: I do not want to make Afghanistan safe
19 for shipping heroin to the United States.

20 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

21 Senator, I agree with you and support that. This is a
22 topic that we have raised with our chain of command, and it
23 needs to be a part of, I believe, a policy consideration on
24 the way forward in Afghanistan.

25 Senator King: And I think President Ghani has to

1 understand that part of our support rests upon the control
2 of that industry which is destructive around the world, but
3 especially destructive in this country.

4 Finally, you mentioned several times Pakistan. We are
5 never going to win this fight as long as Pakistan is acting
6 as a sanctuary, resupply base, all of those things.

7 What can we do to get Pakistan off the dime on these
8 issues? They were good in Waziristan, but as you pointed
9 out, there are plenty of areas they have left untouched.
10 What do we have to do? Do we cut off funding, have a
11 summit, or something? Because we are doing all of this work
12 in Afghanistan, which will never achieve final success or
13 thorough success as long as Pakistan is sitting there
14 enabling a lot of this activity.

15 General Nicholson: Senator, I agree with you. We need
16 to do a holistic review of our Pakistan policy and sit down
17 with Pakistan leaders. And, of course, we have an
18 opportunity for such a review given the new administration
19 and the new chain of command. And we have many areas where
20 we could be working together in our mutual benefit. And I
21 think this is key to the future. I know I am personally
22 committed to this and working with my Pakistani
23 counterparts. I know that President Ghani wants to work
24 with Pakistan towards a peaceful resolution. And in my
25 initial conversations with my chain of command, this is a

1 high priority for all of us.

2 Senator King: Pakistan is a substantial recipient of
3 U.S. foreign aid, and it seems to me there ought to be some
4 connections drawn because they are endangering American
5 lives and the viability of the country of Afghanistan.

6 Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

7 Chairman McCain: Senator Perdue?

8 Senator Perdue: Thank you, General. I really
9 appreciated our time this week.

10 Let me ask you a couple questions. Is Osama bin Laden
11 walking the face of the earth today?

12 General Nicholson: I'm sorry?

13 Senator Perdue: Is Osama bin Laden walking the face of
14 the earth?

15 General Nicholson: No, sir, he is not.

16 Senator Perdue: Have thousands of Al Qaeda fighters
17 been taken out of the fight?

18 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

19 Senator Perdue: Has Al Qaeda mounted a major attack on
20 the homeland here in the United States?

21 General Nicholson: No, sir.

22 Senator Perdue: Will you go home and remind your
23 troops that those facts are not lost on us here in
24 Washington? I think that is very important.

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.

1 Senator Perdue: I have a question about Russia. I am
2 very concerned that it is confusing -- and what we saw them
3 do in Syria -- and it is not lost on us here -- that they
4 have now established, it seems like, permanent presence
5 there in Tartus and Latakia, something that we do not have
6 in the area. It makes them positioned to do very nefarious
7 things in that area going forward.

8 I am very concerned that in Afghanistan now after years
9 of being out, they are back in there. And I am concerned it
10 looks like, sir, in the north and northeast of Afghanistan--
11 it seems like Russia is coordinating with and helping ISIS
12 in the north and northeast. Is that a fact, sir?

13 General Nicholson: Sir, we do not have that
14 information. We know they are overtly legitimizing the
15 Taliban, and we have reports of support to the Taliban. But
16 anything more than that, sir, I would ask to discuss in
17 another forum.

18 Senator Perdue: You spoke in I think -- well, it was
19 recently in December I think. You said that you condemn the
20 malign influence of external actors, particularly Pakistan,
21 Russia, and Iran. You said, quote, Russia has overtly lent
22 legitimacy to the Taliban by claiming the Taliban is
23 fighting ISIS. Do you believe Russia's intent in
24 Afghanistan has anything to do with ISIS?

25 General Nicholson: No, sir. I think it is to

1 undermine the United States and NATO.

2 Senator Perdue: Thank you.

3 General Campbell spoke before he left over there I
4 believe in 2016 that -- and I quote. One of the greatest
5 tactical challenges for the Afghan Security Forces has been
6 overcoming the Afghan Air Force's extremely limited, organic
7 close air support capability. I know a lot of the Afghan
8 pilots are being trained on the A-29. How is the A-29 being
9 successful in close air support in Afghanistan?

10 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. The A-29's were first
11 introduced in April. We have grown our pool of pilots to
12 around 20. We have eight aircraft there, and these eight
13 aircraft have done in excess of 800 -- I mean, it has been a
14 significant effort. The system that does this, though, is
15 more than pilots and aircraft. It also involves the Afghan
16 tactical air controllers on the ground and the Afghan
17 maintainers back at the base. So we have seen progress in
18 all these areas. In fact, it has been very impressive for
19 such a young capability.

20 Senator Perdue: Speaking of that, you talked about
21 training and advising below the corps level earlier. And
22 two areas that you have said that you are doing that is
23 aviation and special forces. You have already talked to the
24 special forces. In Helmand Province, I think you learned
25 when you were down there helping to rebuild the 215th corps-

1 - is that one of the things that you came back with and
2 learned -- your forces came back and learned from that, that
3 you have to be below the corps level in aviation training
4 and assisting?

5 General Nicholson: Absolutely, sir. So the
6 authorities I was granted in June to use combat enablers in
7 support of Afghans necessitate that I be able to push
8 advisors below the corps level if we are to accurately
9 provide and effectively provide and in a way that avoids
10 civilian casualties the use of these assets below the corps
11 level.

12 Senator Perdue: Sir, in closing -- I am about out of
13 time, but what are the three to five things you would advise
14 this new President to consider that you need to be
15 successful against the counterterrorism fight that you have,
16 defeating Al Qaeda, and finding some solution with the
17 Taliban in Afghanistan?

18 General Nicholson: Sir, thank you.

19 Well, first, the viability of an enduring
20 counterterrorism platform in Afghanistan is critically
21 important to our national security and preventing an attack
22 on the homeland. There are some objectives that we would
23 seek going forward: the destruction of Al Qaeda in
24 Afghanistan, the destruction of Islamic State in
25 Afghanistan, helping the Afghans to extend their control

1 over the population to at least 80 percent of the population
2 going forward, working closely with the Pakistanis to
3 eliminate or reduce sanctuary for the Taliban, Haqqani, and
4 other groups inside Pakistan, and then working with the
5 Afghans and the international community for an Afghan-led
6 peace and reconciliation process. I think if we can get
7 these elements into our plan going forward -- and, indeed,
8 we are working on that -- then we can bring this fight to a
9 successful conclusion going forward that enables us to
10 continue our CT efforts but in an environment of a
11 prosperous, stable Afghanistan.

12 Senator Perdue: Sir, thank you for your
13 professionalism and for your leadership. I hope to see you
14 there soon.

15 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

16 Chairman McCain: Senator McCaskill?

17 Senator McCaskill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

18 Thank you, General, and thank you to your family, and
19 most importantly, please tell all the men and women that you
20 lead how much we respect the choices they have made to
21 protect our country.

22 I am going to be a broken record again and get to
23 contracting. I have had a chance to review the SIGAR report
24 that just came out. And even though we have made progress--
25 and I will acknowledge we have made some progress -- there

1 are still some problems that I think we have got to talk
2 about. And we are talking about \$100 billion to contractors
3 in Afghanistan in the last 8 years. And this is real money.
4 This is a significant amount of taxpayer resources that are
5 going to contractors.

6 The report cites problems that are cited over and over
7 and over again. I think one of those problems that we have
8 corrected -- and I want to make sure on the record that you
9 can confirm that. We put in the NDAA last year a provision
10 that you cannot spend money building anything in areas of
11 the country where we cannot get oversight personnel there to
12 check to see the progress and to make sure the money is not
13 walking away. In fact, are you confident now that there is
14 no project that is ongoing with contractor money right now
15 in Afghanistan paid for by U.S. dollars where our oversight
16 personnel, our civilian oversight personnel cannot get to it
17 to look at it?

18 General Nicholson: I believe so, ma'am, but I'd like
19 to take that one for the record and go back and verify that
20 and give you a more thorough answer.

21 [The information follows:]

22 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

23

24

25

1 Senator McCaskill: That would be terrific because what
2 we learned is that there were areas that we were paying
3 contractors, many of which were local contractors, in areas
4 that we could not get to because of security concerns. And
5 that is where the money was disappearing and things were not
6 getting built.

7 General Nicholson: Yes, ma'am.

8 Senator McCaskill: And money was being wasted.

9 17 of the 45 construction projects that have been
10 inspected since 2009 did not meet contract requirements and
11 specifications. And apparently the DOD has acknowledged
12 that in many instances that the U.S. forces lack the
13 capacity to administer, oversee, and close contracts to
14 ensure proper performance.

15 I know you are being asked to do a lot, and I know it
16 is hard. But do you think you have adequate forces to do
17 the oversight necessary on this contract work that is so
18 incredibly expensive?

19 General Nicholson: Ma'am, the limitation on forces
20 limits our ability to do oversight. There is no question
21 about it. In fact, we are in a situation where we have to
22 substitute contractors for service members to do functions
23 that normally service members would do. So I offered a
24 couple of examples earlier. For example, on aviation
25 maintenance, we bring in contract mechanics to maintain our

1 helicopters because we leave their mechanics back in the
2 States because of force manning limitations. Now, I
3 acknowledge I have authority to move these forces around,
4 but the overall limitation puts us in a situation where we
5 try to optimize having uniformed service members doing only
6 things that they can do and substituting contractors
7 wherever possible so that we can maximize our advisory
8 effort. But we have gotten to a point now where I think I
9 from a commander's standpoint would rather see soldiers
10 doing what soldiers are trained to do and then not spend the
11 money on contractors, which is inevitably more expensive.

12 Senator McCaskill: Inevitably. And it is one of those
13 things that -- we do this a lot in government under the
14 guise of saying, well, we are going to limit how many
15 employees we have or what our ground strength is. It does
16 not change the requirements of a federal agency, and it
17 certainly does not change the mission of our military. So
18 we just plus-up contractors many times without adequate
19 scoping, without adequate work on the contract, without
20 oversight, paying contractors bonuses when they have done a
21 terrible job. So I just did not want to let this moment
22 pass without telling you that there is somebody that is
23 still paying really close attention on the contractor side.
24 And I will look forward to working with you on that.

25 Corruption is a big part of this. Do you believe that

1 we have made any progress overall in Afghanistan on the
2 corruption front?

3 General Nicholson: I think we have made some progress
4 recently. President Ghani is very --

5 Senator McCaskill: I know he did that agency, the
6 government agency -- right -- the corruption -- the
7 development phase of the ACJC, the anti-corruption effort he
8 is doing?

9 General Nicholson: So, for example, the Anti-
10 Corruption Justice Center you just mentioned, stood up by
11 President Ghani with support of the international community-
12 - we had our first trial of a two-star general in the
13 Ministry of Interior. He was convicted of 14 years in jail
14 for engagement in bribery concerning a fuel contract. We
15 have pulled back fuel contracts under CSTCA instead of the
16 ministries because of the corruption that was linked to
17 them.

18 We are going after the reduction of ghost soldiers and
19 we are holding back the money in terms of pay accounts until
20 they can verify they have the people.

21 So these efforts alone -- for example, fuel contracts
22 total \$200 million. By putting them under control of our
23 contracting officials, we can reduce that space for
24 corruption. The same with the pay.

25 Senator McCaskill: That is great.

1 General Nicholson: These are the two greatest areas.

2 I should point out President Ghani initiated a body
3 called the National Procurement Council, and because of the
4 corruption surrounding contracting, he personally oversees
5 the awarding of the large government contracts and a
6 committee that is transparent. We attend it. SIGAR attends
7 it. Our own contracting officials attend it. And then they
8 work through a very rigorous process to try and reduce the
9 space for corruption in the contracting process.

10 So back to your original question, I do think under
11 President Ghani's leadership we have made progress. Are we
12 finished? Absolutely not. We have a lot more work left to
13 do.

14 Senator McCaskill: Thank you. And for the record, if
15 we could get the relative strength in numbers of the 20
16 different terrorist groups that you say are on the ground in
17 Afghanistan, I think it would be good for us to get in
18 perspective where the numbers are and even any help that you
19 can give us in a nonclassified setting in terms of
20 geographic location.

21 General Nicholson: Yes, ma'am.

22 [The information follows:]

23 [COMMITTEE INSERT]

24

25

1 Senator McCaskill: Thank you.

2 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

3 Chairman McCain: Senator Tillis?

4 Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

5 General Nicholson, thank you for your leadership and
6 for your concise answers to tough questions.

7 If this has been asked before and you have answered it,
8 just refer and we will go to the record rather than re-
9 answering a question. I am sorry I was not able to be here.
10 I have three competing committee meetings right now.

11 With the authorization for the use of military force
12 and the presidential policy guidelines, when I was in
13 Afghanistan, it looked like there were some kinks, at least
14 2 years ago, in terms of you being able to take the fight to
15 people that maybe should be targeted.

16 Do you feel like we are getting to a point where you
17 have all the authorizations, one, under presidential policy
18 guidelines, which I assume are being modified as we speak or
19 at least being assessed?

20 And, two, could you talk a little bit about the need to
21 revisit an authorization for the use of military force,
22 particularly in the area that you are concerned with? What
23 would be the benefit or the disadvantage?

24 General Nicholson: Senator, right now, I feel I have
25 the authorities necessary to strike in the areas where we

1 need to. This will be an issue we will discuss with my
2 chain of command going forward. And as we discussed
3 earlier, we are engaged in those conversations right now
4 about the AUMF and about the authorities going forward. So
5 I would ask, sir, your indulgence to let those conversations
6 play out.

7 On the specific authorities, the ones I was granted in
8 June were instrumental to our success this year. And with
9 those authorities, I can strike in the areas where we need
10 to when we need to. But if I could come back to you,
11 Senator, in another forum on the specifics, I would request
12 that.

13 Senator Tillis: Well, thank you. And I think that
14 those were some authorities that we were talking about when
15 we visited Afghanistan almost 2 years ago. So I am glad to
16 see they have finally come. Long time coming.

17 You mentioned earlier the investment by other nations
18 in the economic side and the development side in
19 Afghanistan. I know that about 2 years ago, we were talking
20 about a potential cliff that we were running over in 2017
21 because of funding just to get infrastructure in place, to
22 get rid of corruption, to continue to build. Do you feel
23 like we have overcome that threat and that we have got the
24 adequate amount of non-military funding flowing in from our
25 partner nations and the United States to keep the economic

1 revival going?

2 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. This year we had the
3 Brussels donor conference in October. And the Afghan
4 Government made a significant effort in engaging with all
5 the donors. We had over 75 countries and organizations
6 there, and they expressed an intent to commit \$15.2 billion
7 to Afghans' development aid. So this was a significant
8 success story for Afghanistan.

9 I think this built upon the success of the Warsaw
10 conference, NATO summit, at which the alliance committed to
11 4 more years. And I believe that there was a connection
12 between this, that the confidence demonstrated in the Afghan
13 Security Forces at the Warsaw Summit to commit to 4 more
14 years provided assurance to the donors that there would be a
15 more secure environment going forward.

16 Now, our job, of course, is to work with the Afghans to
17 improve the security situation, break the stalemate, get to
18 a place where they can apply these development dollars most
19 effectively.

20 Senator Tillis: And just the questions I think Senator
21 McCaskill was running down, I will go back and listen to the
22 dialogue. I got in on the tail end. But in a yes/no way,
23 are we on a positive path in terms of corruption and other
24 sort of government agency issues in Afghanistan?

25 General Nicholson: Positive, but a lot of work left to

1 do, sir.

2 Senator Tillis: Thank you.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

4 Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal?

5 Senator Blumenthal: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and
6 thanks for having this hearing which is so important.

7 And, General Nicholson, I join my colleagues in
8 thanking you for your service and everyone who works with
9 you and under you. Thank them as well.

10 You mentioned in your testimony -- and I am quoting --
11 of the 98 U.S.-designated terrorist organizations globally,
12 20 are located in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region. This
13 constitutes the highest concentration of terrorist groups
14 anywhere in the world and demonstrates the importance of
15 this mission.

16 Are we getting the kind of cooperation that we need
17 from the Pakistanis?

18 General Nicholson: Senator, we would like to see
19 greater cooperation.

20 Senator Blumenthal: Where specifically in your view
21 has it been deficient?

22 General Nicholson: Specifically, sir, with respect to
23 the Haqqani Network and the Taliban sanctuaries and presence
24 inside Pakistan.

25 Senator Blumenthal: And that would be the northern

1 area of Pakistan.

2 General Nicholson: Sir, this would primarily be in
3 what they call the tribal areas of Pakistan, north and west,
4 primarily western areas, so around the City of Quetta, which
5 is in Balochistan where a Taliban leadership resides and in
6 other areas of the tribal areas where the Haqqani leadership
7 resides.

8 Senator Blumenthal: And that area has bedeviled us for
9 years, most of the past decade. Correct?

10 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator.

11 Senator Blumenthal: Are we doing enough to bring
12 pressure to bear on the Pakistan Government to be more
13 aggressive and active because my understanding is that the
14 materials for IEDs, a lot of the other kind of support for
15 our adversaries in Afghanistan continue to come from that
16 area of Pakistan.

17 General Nicholson: That is correct, Senator. And with
18 respect to pressure, I think we need to do a holistic review
19 of our relationship with Pakistan. There are many areas of
20 common interest where we could work together and we want to
21 achieve progress in these areas. But you are absolutely
22 right. It has been frustrating.

23 Senator Blumenthal: And I know, General Nicholson,
24 that you are sincere and you are absolutely right in that
25 statement. But I have heard that view from commanders in

1 your position repeatedly over the years, as have my
2 colleagues. And I am just wondering what will and can be
3 done to change it.

4 General Nicholson: Sir, this is a key discussion with
5 my chain of command and with the Secretary of Defense, with
6 the White House. I think this needs to be at the top of the
7 agenda when it comes to the future of our policy in the
8 region. I have teed this up. I know my chain of command is
9 ready to have that conversation. I would ask your
10 indulgence, sir, to not get in front of my chain of command
11 on this particular topic, but I know that this is at the
12 very top of our list when it comes to the future in the
13 region.

14 Senator Blumenthal: I appreciate that you cannot be
15 ahead of your chain of command, but you are an integral part
16 of that chain of command and one of the most able parts of
17 that chain. And so I hope that you will convey the urgency
18 of that message. I know you feel it more than we do. But I
19 think that a lot of Americans are frustrated that the
20 bordering nation, which purports to be allied on so many
21 areas, is still the source of hostile resources and fighters
22 and others who commit the kinds of acts that you related
23 just this morning with the serious wounds suffered by one of
24 our special operators.

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. It is the number one

1 factor that could produce a positive result in Afghanistan.
2 And so it is critical.

3 You mentioned a range of actions and I think this is
4 exactly what we need to consider on both ends of the
5 spectrum.

6 Senator Blumenthal: I appreciate that. And thank you
7 for your frankness to the committee.

8 I want to just ask briefly about one other area
9 concerning helicopters. As you know, because you responded
10 to our letter, Senator Ernst and I wrote to the Department
11 of Defense asking that it develop a plan to field an
12 American alternative to the MI-17, which it has done. The
13 Department of Defense announced its intention to replace the
14 MI-17 helicopters with upgraded Blackhawks as part of the
15 fiscal year 2017 supplemental funding to support overseas
16 contingency operations submitted to Congress in November of
17 2016.

18 Could you comment briefly on the status of that effort?

19 General Nicholson: Sir, I am told that this will be a
20 part of the next supplemental submission that will be made,
21 but it has not been completed yet. But it is an issue I
22 have raised because this is critical and there is an urgency
23 to getting this program going. It will take, from the time
24 the funding is approved till the aircraft arrival on the
25 battlefield, over 20 months. And so we want to get these

1 aircraft and these crews into the fight as soon as possible.
2 It will be critical to the offensive effort to regain the
3 territory and the population that the government seeks to
4 regain to break the stalemate. So this is why this
5 particular aviation initiative is so critical to the way
6 going forward.

7 And as you pointed out, Senator, the use of U.S.
8 airframes, U.S. training deepens the relationship with the
9 Afghans and the United States. And, of course, much of that
10 funding goes back into the U.S. economy.

11 Senator Blumenthal: My time has expired. But I
12 appreciate your efforts in that regard and I would like to
13 stay current on them. Thank you very much.

14 General Nicholson: We will keep you updated, Senator.

15 Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, General Nicholson.

16 Senator Reed [presiding]: On behalf of the chairman,
17 Senator Graham.

18 Senator Graham: Thank you very much.

19 To you and all those under your command, thank you for
20 what you do in protecting our Nation. I cannot thank you
21 and those who serve in Afghanistan enough.

22 You mentioned in your testimony that you see a change
23 in Russian behavior for the worse. Is that correct?

24 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator.

25 Senator Graham: What do you think their goals are in

1 Afghanistan? Why are they changing?

2 General Nicholson: Senator, I think their goal is to
3 undermine the United States and NATO in Afghanistan.

4 Senator Graham: Okay. I agree with you.

5 What about Iran?

6 General Nicholson: Sir, of course, Iran also but it is
7 a little more complex. So there are mutual interests that
8 Iran and Afghanistan share: water rights, commerce. We
9 welcomed the recent economic treaty between Iran,
10 Afghanistan, and India on the Chabahar Port. We think this
11 offers Afghanistan an economic alternative to going
12 through --

13 Senator Graham: So they have back yard issues.

14 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

15 Senator Graham: But they also have a strategic goal of
16 stopping democracy. Would you agree?

17 General Nicholson: Sir, I do think their actions are
18 undermining the Afghan Government, similar to what the
19 Russians are doing.

20 Senator Graham: Is it fair to say the Iranians do not
21 want a democracy on their border?

22 General Nicholson: Sir, I think it would be a threat
23 to them.

24 Senator Graham: Do you think, generally speaking, the
25 Afghans want democracy?

1 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. They want a
2 representative form of government. They have a form of
3 social democracy. It has existed for centuries and
4 centuries.

5 Senator Graham: But a democracy that they are
6 practicing now is relatively new to the country. Is that
7 fair to say?

8 General Nicholson: It is, Senator.

9 Senator Graham: And it is hard.

10 General Nicholson: Oh, absolutely.

11 Senator Graham: It is hard here.

12 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

13 Senator Graham: We need to be patient with people in
14 Afghanistan because they are just starting a process we have
15 been doing for 200 years.

16 Can we win?

17 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

18 Senator Graham: Briefly describe what winning would
19 look like.

20 General Nicholson: Sir, number one, the presence of
21 our enduring CT platform protects our homeland. Number one.

22 Senator Graham: So winning for America is to have a
23 footprint in Afghanistan to protect the homeland against
24 terrorist organizations in the region.

25 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

1 Senator Graham: And they are willing to do that.

2 General Nicholson: Yes, sir, absolutely. They call
3 this their foundational partnership.

4 Senator Graham: So that is winning for us, winning for
5 them.

6 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

7 Senator Graham: Continue.

8 General Nicholson: Sir, it would involve the
9 destruction of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, the destruction of
10 Islamic State in Afghanistan, helping the Afghan Government
11 to expand its control over the population --

12 Senator Graham: Is it fair to say that most Afghans
13 want the same thing when it comes to Al Qaeda?

14 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

15 Senator Graham: So we are aligned with the Afghan
16 people.

17 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

18 Senator Graham: So that is winning for them and
19 winning for us.

20 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

21 Senator Graham: Okay.

22 General Nicholson: Sir, the Taliban are the ones who
23 were connected to Al Qaeda. The Afghan people -- 87 percent
24 of them -- think a return to Taliban rule would be bad for
25 the country.

1 Senator Graham: Do you believe that we should
2 designate the Taliban as a terrorist organization?

3 General Nicholson: Sir, that is a conversation I need
4 to have with my chain of command and the organization. They
5 are definitely our enemy in Afghanistan.

6 Senator Graham: It is fair to say that the Taliban
7 aided bin Laden dramatically.

8 General Nicholson: Absolutely.

9 Senator Graham: So if we designated them as a
10 terrorist organization, would you have more authority when
11 it comes to engaging them?

12 General Nicholson: Sir, if I was granted those
13 authorities by the administration, I would.

14 Senator Graham: Would you use them if you were granted
15 them?

16 General Nicholson: Absolutely.

17 Senator Graham: Do you think that could change the
18 momentum on the battlefield?

19 General Nicholson: It would help, sir.

20 Senator Graham: What does losing look like?

21 General Nicholson: Sir, losing would be an attack
22 emanating from this region against our homeland or our
23 allies.

24 Senator Graham: Is that possible if we leave?

25 General Nicholson: Absolutely.

1 Senator Graham: Is it likely if we leave?

2 General Nicholson: I think so, sir. It is just a
3 matter of time.

4 Senator Graham: So when it comes to staying, do you
5 feel like you have the ability now to ask for more troops?

6 General Nicholson: I think that conversation is open
7 to that. Yes, sir.

8 Senator Graham: Do you think this administration is
9 more open to troops from what you can tell in the early
10 stages?

11 General Nicholson: Sir, my initial impression -- and,
12 again, these conversations are ongoing -- is that we are
13 open to a discussion of an objectives-based approach, a
14 conditions-based approach --

15 Senator Graham: Rather than an artificial number.

16 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

17 Senator Graham: So your goal is for the chain of
18 command to convey to our new President that the best thing
19 that could happen for our success in Afghanistan is to have
20 troop levels married against the objectives.

21 General Nicholson: Yes, sir, against the objectives
22 and the conditions on the ground.

23 Senator Graham: And the objective is to win.

24 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

25 Senator Graham: The objective is to stop terrorism

1 from growing over there to attack us here at home. The
2 objective is to keep Afghans stable and on a trajectory of
3 rule of law, a democratic nation. Is that correct?

4 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

5 Senator Graham: And you believe you can do that with
6 less than 50,000 troops?

7 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

8 Senator Graham: You believe you could do that with
9 less than 30,000 troops?

10 General Nicholson: Sir, that is a conversation I need
11 to have with my chain of command. But, yes, that --

12 Senator Graham: Is it fair to say, General, that
13 success in Afghanistan will be judged not based on the day
14 we leave but what we leave behind?

15 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

16 Senator Graham: And you think we can leave behind a
17 stable Afghanistan?

18 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

19 Senator Graham: Thank you.

20 Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, Senator
21 Nelson.

22 Senator Nelson: General, if the Russians' stated goal
23 is to undermine the influence of the United States, when did
24 this effort start?

25 General Nicholson: Sir, with respect to Afghanistan --

1 Senator Nelson: Yes.

2 General Nicholson: -- they have not stated that as
3 their goal.

4 Senator Nelson: No. I understand that is your
5 opinion, and I agree with you.

6 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

7 Senator Nelson: When did the evidence of them cozying
8 up to the Taliban start?

9 General Nicholson: Sir, it started in 2016, so just
10 within the last year this has started. And it was a gradual
11 progression.

12 Senator Nelson: And is that progression increasing?

13 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

14 Senator Nelson: I think we better let President Trump
15 know that.

16 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

17 Senator Nelson: If Russia is cozying up to the
18 Taliban-- and that is a kind word -- if they are giving
19 equipment that we have some evidence that the Taliban is
20 getting it and other things that we cannot mention in this
21 unclassified setting and the Taliban is also associated with
22 Al Qaeda, therefore, Russia indirectly is helping Al Qaeda.

23 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

24 Senator Nelson: In Afghanistan.

25 General Nicholson: Sir, the support of the Taliban --

1 the Taliban are the medium for many of these other terrorist
2 groups to operate because of the convergence of these
3 groups. So your logic is absolutely sound, sir.

4 Senator Nelson: Does that include ISIS?

5 General Nicholson: Sir, we do not see that same level
6 of cooperation between the Taliban and ISIS. They are in
7 conflict with one another. But the Taliban is not achieving
8 the key effects and reducing IS. That is coming from the
9 United States in the Afghan counterterrorism effort.

10 Senator Nelson: In response to Senator Graham, you
11 said when we leave -- restate what you said. In your
12 opinion, we can leave a stable Afghanistan when we leave?

13 General Nicholson: Sir, I think key would be the
14 reconciliation as the ultimate goal between the belligerents
15 and Afghanistan. So this is what the government wants, is a
16 reconciliation with the belligerents. Of note, this year
17 there was a reconciliation with the Hezb-e-Islami Gulbulddin
18 group and 20,000 of them are returning to Afghanistan to be
19 reintegrated into society. So if this goes well, then this
20 hopefully would be a catalyst for further reconciliation.
21 So that is the ultimate goal. When I say stability, it
22 means ultimately a political reconciliation. And so our
23 objective will be to assist the Afghans to achieve that.

24 Part of that is military pressure. So President
25 Ghani's approach to this has been fight, fracture, talk. So

1 we need to keep military pressure on them. And I
2 articulated some of the ways in which we would do that:
3 through the use of special forces, Afghan Air Force, to
4 increase their control, through diplomatic engagement with
5 the Pakistanis to increase pressure on that side of the
6 border. So this would be a whole-of-government approach,
7 but the objective of this would be an eventual
8 reconciliation. This will take some years I believe.

9 Senator Nelson: Does that reconciliation include the
10 Taliban?

11 General Nicholson: Ideally the Taliban would
12 reconcile, and then that would remove their support for
13 these groups who then could not exist without them.

14 Senator Nelson: How does the Taliban reconcile with
15 the Government of Afghanistan when in fact they are being
16 aided and abetted by the Russians to counter all of our
17 efforts?

18 General Nicholson: Sir, you are exactly right. This
19 is the challenge. And so this requires a whole-of-
20 government approach, diplomatic, as well as military, to
21 fundamentally get us to a place where we can have a
22 reconciliation.

23 Senator Nelson: So you really do not see a dynamic
24 between ISIS and the Taliban.

25 General Nicholson: Sir, they are ideologically in

1 conflict, and then in practical matters, they are vying for
2 control in certain areas. But I do not see an effective
3 effort by the Taliban against ISIS.

4 Senator Nelson: But you have to be careful about that
5 in the future because obviously ISIS, just like Al Qaeda,
6 would be against our interests, U.S. interests.

7 General Nicholson: Absolutely, sir. And what we have
8 seen is fighters changing allegiances. So I think this is
9 an important point to note. One of the dangers of this area
10 is that fighters will change allegiance, for example, from
11 the Pakistani Taliban and join ISIS. So the majority of the
12 fighters in ISIS right now came from the TTP, the Pakistani
13 Taliban, and joined the banner of ISIS.

14 Senator Nelson: Do you think there is any reason that
15 the Russians, other than trying to undermine us, would be
16 wanting to expand their sphere of influence and take back
17 the territory that they got whipped and had to leave
18 Afghanistan with their tail between their legs?

19 General Nicholson: Senator, I think they are concerned
20 that if there is a coalition and a U.S. presence in
21 Afghanistan, that this affects their ability to influence
22 the Central Asian states to the north. So I do think this
23 is part of their concern.

24 Senator Nelson: Yes, I agree.

25 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

1 Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me
2 recognize Senator Shaheen.

3 Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 And again, thank you, General Nicholson, for being here
5 and for your service.

6 I just want to pick up a little bit on Senator Nelson's
7 line of questioning because, as you said in your testimony,
8 we are seeing Russian influence in Afghanistan only
9 recently. Earlier, oh, 4 or 5 years ago, we were actually
10 bringing in our supply line with Russia's help into
11 Afghanistan.

12 So what has changed the dynamic there?

13 General Nicholson: Ma'am, so within the last year is
14 when we have seen this shift to this overt legitimizing of
15 the Taliban and then reports of support provided to the
16 Taliban and others in the north. So I think getting a
17 little bit out of just the purely Afghan context,
18 undoubtedly the issues we are seeing in Iraq and Syria in
19 terms of cooperation with the Russians in that effort --
20 perhaps there is some spillover from that.

21 Secondly would be, again, this concern about Central
22 Asia and the desire to maintain their influence in Central
23 Asia. And so this narrative of a threat spilling over from
24 Afghanistan is touching a nerve with the Central Asian
25 republics because during the anti-Soviet jihad and what

1 followed, they had this concern. And then in Central Asia,
2 there is a concern about terrorism.

3 And I think it is fair to say there are legitimate
4 concerns that Russia has about the region with respect to
5 counternarcotics because much of the narcotics flow from
6 Afghanistan into Russia and then, secondly, the spread of
7 terrorism is of concern. But we are dealing with that
8 concern. So there is no acknowledgement that the U.S.
9 Government and the Afghans are working together to contain
10 this terrorist threat.

11 Senator Shaheen: And is there any evidence that the
12 Russians are providing money, material, fighters to the
13 Taliban?

14 General Nicholson: Ma'am, there is some classified
15 reporting that I would request to share with you in another
16 venue. But we are concerned about, in general, support.
17 And I will just leave it at that.

18 Senator Shaheen: What does this mean for the dynamic
19 between Russia and Pakistan? Are we seeing additional
20 engagement in Pakistan because of what is happening in
21 Afghanistan?

22 General Nicholson: Ma'am, we are seeing additional
23 engagement by the Russians with Pakistan. There was
24 recently a training exercise conducted in Pakistan with
25 Russian troops. And we have, again, reporting of increased

1 conversations going on in the country about potential
2 support to these groups.

3 Senator Shaheen: Well, clearly given Pakistan's
4 nuclear arsenal, that should give us all much more reason to
5 be very concerned about what is happening in that region.

6 General Nicholson: Yes, ma'am.

7 Senator Shaheen: I had the opportunity when we had the
8 confirmation hearing for Secretary Mattis to ask him about
9 our special immigrant visa program for Iraq and Afghanistan,
10 which, as I am sure you are very aware, has made a huge
11 difference for our men and women serving on the ground. My
12 understanding is that we are soon going to run out of SIV
13 visas for Afghans who are in the pipeline to come to the
14 U.S. who are being threatened.

15 Can you speak to how important you think that program
16 is and why we should extend it to make sure we address those
17 people who have been so helpful to us?

18 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator, for your
19 support for that program. As you may be aware, I wrote a
20 letter to Chairman McCain last year on this program. We are
21 strong supporters of this program because these brave
22 Afghans, who have fought alongside us and served alongside
23 us, we believe strongly deserve the opportunity, if they
24 wish, if they so desire, to participate in this program.

25 We do have a backlog, and we do have many, many Afghans

1 who would like to come to the United States. And I know
2 many of these Afghans who have come and joined our society.
3 They are very productive citizens and great contributors.
4 And so I strongly support this program and will continue to
5 do so and offer my help in any way that I can.

6 Senator Shaheen: I really appreciate that.

7 Can you also talk about what you think the message
8 would be if we end the program and refuse to allow in any
9 more people who have helped us?

10 General Nicholson: Yes, ma'am. I think this would be
11 the wrong message to send to our Afghan partners. Just to
12 give one data point on the fighting, the difficulty of the
13 fighting, as has been mentioned several times here today,
14 the Afghans are willing and want to fight for their country.
15 And so in 1 year, in this period we have just had in the
16 last 2 years, they have suffered almost twice as many
17 casualties as we suffered in the previous 10 years. And I
18 just mention that not to highlight the casualties but as an
19 indicator of the depth of commitment of these Afghans to our
20 common cause. They do not want terrorists in their country.
21 They want a peaceful and stable environment for their
22 families. They want to improve the world that they live in
23 for their children. I mean, they share many, many
24 objectives with us. So these Afghans who have worked
25 alongside us, who have taken great risks I think deserve

1 this opportunity, if they so desire, to come to the United
2 States.

3 Senator Shaheen: Thank you very much, General.

4 General Nicholson: Thank you, ma'am.

5 Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, Senator
6 Kaine.

7 Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

8 General, wonderful testimony. I was backing and
9 forth to the Foreign Relations Committee and I actually
10 took your testimony. We were having a hearing about Russia
11 and I took your testimony up and read it to our witnesses.
12 And I wanted to ask you about it. I know some others have
13 asked you, but I am curious.

14 On page 10, Russia has become more assertive over the
15 past year overtly lending legitimacy to the Taliban to
16 undermine NATO efforts and bolster belligerents using a
17 false narrative that only the Taliban are fighting ISIL-K.
18 Similarly, neighboring Iran is providing support to the
19 Taliban while also engaging the Afghan Government over
20 issues of water rights, trade, and security.

21 Are you seeing any coordination between efforts of
22 Russia and Iran in this? You mentioned them back to back in
23 the same paragraph. You do not draw a causal link, but I
24 was curious about your thoughts on that.

25 General Nicholson: Sir, there may be, but I have not

1 seen it. I think these are two separate issues, but we know
2 there is a dialogue. We know there is a relationship
3 between Russia and Iran. You know, Russia is selling
4 advanced weapon systems to Iran. So we know there is
5 communication between them.

6 Senator Kaine: Russia and Iran are deeply engaged
7 together in the campaign in Syria.

8 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

9 Senator Kaine: Iran allowed Russia to use airbases in
10 Iran for the Syrian campaign.

11 General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

12 Senator Kaine: So it would seem to be a little bit
13 unlikely that they would be both engaging in efforts to
14 bolster or prop up the Taliban completely independently of
15 one another. At least they would probably be communicating
16 about those efforts. Would you not think that is a fair
17 assumption?

18 General Nicholson: Absolutely, Senator. They are
19 communicating about the efforts we believe and that the
20 effect of their efforts are undermining the Afghan
21 Government.

22 Senator Kaine: There was a statement that the
23 President made a couple weeks back, maybe 10 days ago, that
24 he thought he could ally with Russia and potentially use
25 Russia as a check against Iran. Tell me if you do not feel

1 you can comment on that. That is a fair answer. But I
2 wonder, do you think that that is realistic that given all
3 the areas where Russia and Iran are now working to at least
4 promote a similar purpose, including, according to your
5 testimony, in Afghanistan? Do you think it is likely that
6 the U.S. could peel Russia away from its cooperation and
7 coordination with Iran?

8 General Nicholson: Sir, I have not had the chance to
9 discuss that with my chain of command. That has not been
10 something we have looked as an option.

11 I look at it from an Afghan perspective. I think there
12 are areas of interest that Iran has with Afghanistan.

13 Senator Kaine: Because of being on the border.

14 General Nicholson: Exactly. Water rights, trade.

15 The Afghans are trying to establish a state-to-state
16 relationship with Iran to deal with these matters of mutual
17 concern.

18 Senator Kaine: Anti-opium production.

19 General Nicholson: Yes, sir. So the counternarcotics,
20 the trade. And then what the Afghans would seek to reduce
21 is eliminate the support to the Taliban. Let us deal with
22 each other as neighbors, and let us work on these areas of
23 mutual interest. So I think there is potential in the
24 Afghan-Iranian relationship for a more positive outcome than
25 what we see with the Russian relationship.

1 The Russians, of course, lack legitimacy in Afghanistan
2 because of the anti-Soviet jihad. Millions of Afghans were
3 killed by Russians and Russian-backed forces in Afghanistan.
4 So there is a legitimacy question when it comes to Russia's
5 involvement in Afghanistan that is right at the forefront of
6 this conversation with the Afghan people.

7 Senator Kaine: Although it is also the case, it shows
8 how anti-NATO Russia is that they would engage with elements
9 of the Taliban, some of whom were responsible for kicking
10 the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, that they would try to
11 bolster the Taliban as a check against NATO influence in
12 Afghanistan. That is a pretty bold statement of how much
13 they hate NATO.

14 General Nicholson: It is surprising, Senator,
15 especially when you also consider the Taliban's involvement
16 in the narcotics trade and the detrimental impact that
17 narcotics from Afghanistan are having on Russian society.

18 Senator Kaine: I met with the Afghan Ambassador to the
19 United States yesterday, and we had a good visit. One of
20 the things he said to me is -- and I just am curious as to
21 your opinion on this. Sometimes, you know, our military or
22 intel do not see it the same way as they see it, as they are
23 describing it. But he said the thing that is most exciting
24 now to Afghans is that they really have a national identity,
25 a national voice. They are discussing tough issues, some of

1 which are hard to solve, but they are discussing them openly
2 and publicly. He painted a pretty positive view of the
3 civil government and the relationship between the members of
4 the coalition. I am curious if your view is as positive.

5 General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. We have an extremely
6 positive relationship with the government. We work very
7 closely on the security equities going forward. I think
8 that the tough fight they experienced this year that threw
9 us together in ways, use of our authorities, our soldiers
10 advising and assisting them on the ground in the way that we
11 did and the way that they prevailed -- there is nothing like
12 going through a difficult shared experience to bring you
13 closer. And I think the Afghans are convinced of our
14 commitment to them. They saw the international community at
15 Warsaw commit to 4 more years in Afghanistan, and then the
16 international donor community came together with \$15
17 billion. So I think the Afghan people took those as very
18 reassuring signs. Despite the difficulty of the fight, what
19 they saw was strong commitment at the strategic level by the
20 international community to peace and stability in
21 Afghanistan.

22 Senator Kaine: Thank you so much.

23 Thanks, Mr. Chair.

24 General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

25 Chairman McCain: General, thank you for your

1 testimony. Thank you for a very informative exchange you
2 have had with the members here.

3 I think there is one point that is very obvious as we
4 discussed at the beginning is that we are not winning. And
5 I know that you have been asked by our Secretary of Defense
6 and others for a strategy to change that equation. And I
7 know you have not fleshed all of that out, but you have been
8 faced with this situation for quite a period of time.

9 We look forward to your sharing with us the elements of
10 that strategy. And we on both sides, obviously, are
11 committed to seeing the situation resolved in a more
12 beneficial fashion.

13 As we said at the beginning, we have been many years,
14 and there has been a great sacrifice made by Afghans and our
15 brave Americans. And we need a strategy to succeed. If we
16 can know that strategy, which is being developed I hope, I
17 can assure you you will receive the bipartisan strong
18 support from members of this committee and the Congress.
19 But we need to develop that strategy, and we need to know
20 what assets and capabilities and support that the Congress
21 can give you.

22 So we thank you for your service. We thank you for
23 your testimony this morning.

24 Unfortunately, tragically for you, some of us will be
25 visiting you in Kabul.

1 Thank you, General.

2 General Nicholson: I look forward to your visit,
3 Senator. Thank you very much for the opportunity.

4 Chairman McCain: Really? Thank you.

5 [Whereupon, at 11:32 a.m., the hearing was adjourned.]

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25