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
HEARING TO RECEIVE TESTIMONY ON
THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN

Thursday, February 9, 2017

U.S. Senate
Committee on Armed Services
Washington, D.C.

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

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

Chairman McCain: Well, good morning.

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

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

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

American forces are carrying out that mission today by performing two critical tasks, counterterrorism and training, advising and assisting our Afghan partners. Both
of these tasks are vital to achieving our strategic goals and protecting our homeland. We are taking the fight to America’s enemies in Afghanistan while at the same time building sustainable Afghan Security Forces that can stand on its own, take on violent extremists, and deny terrorists safe haven in their country.

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

Authorities were also tightly restricted. Until last summer, our military was prohibited from targeting the Taliban except in the most extreme circumstances, taking the pressure off the militants and allowing them to rebuild and re-attack. Indeed, while we were fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq, authorities in Afghanistan were so restrictive that it took an entire year before American forces were finally given authority to strike ISIS fighters in Afghanistan. In short, for too long our strategy in Afghanistan has been “don’t lose.”
Meanwhile the risk to American and Afghan forces has only grown worse as the terrorist threat has intensified. The Taliban has grown more lethal, expanded its territorial control, and inflicted heavy casualties on Afghan forces. In October, the Taliban launched multiple concurrent offensives that seriously threatened four provincial capitals. While Afghan forces, with U.S. support, successfully defended those capitals, the Taliban seized the initiative, kept the pressure on Afghan forces, and captured new ground.

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

I want to stress an important point. Afghans are in the fight. They are not looking to us or anyone else to do their fighting for them. They are proud people who want to defend their own country, and they are taking significant casualties. At the same time, they want and need our
continued assistance. It is in our national interest to help our Afghan partners become capable of standing on their own, defending their own country, and defeating our common enemies with less and less assistance.

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

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

Succeeding in Afghanistan will also require a candid evaluation of America’s relationship with Pakistan. Thousands of Pakistanis have served and sacrificed in the fight against our common terrorist enemies. Many gave their lives in recent counterterrorism operations in north Waziristan. But the fact remains that numerous terrorist
groups still operate within Pakistan, attack its neighbors, and kill U.S. forces.

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

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

Senator Reed?
STATEMENT OF HON. JACK REED, U.S. SENATOR FROM RHODE ISLAND

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

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

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

Decisions made last year by President Obama to maintain approximately 8,400 troops in Afghanistan into 2017 and to provide robust support to the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces laid the foundation for a sustainable U.S. and international presence in Afghanistan. The decisions also sent an important message to Afghans, the Taliban, and others in the region, including Pakistan, regarding the commitment of the United States to continued progress in Afghanistan.
Assuming the continued invitation of the Afghan Government and the support of its people, I believe we should adopt a conditions-based approach to our presence in Afghanistan that provides flexibility in the number of military personnel deployed there in support of our longer-term strategy.

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

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

General Nicholson, I look forward to your assessment of
the performance of the Afghan forces over the past year and plans for sustaining the force and addressing the remaining capability shortfalls. Afghanistan is and must remain a key pillar of our long-term global counterterrorism strategy. We continue to observe more aggressive Taliban operations capable of pressuring the Afghan Security Forces simultaneously on multiple fronts.

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

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

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

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

The national unity government, led by President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah, has demonstrated the will to work for a complex set of issues with the goal of
addressing much needed political and governmental reforms. I hope they will continue to do so particularly with respect to anti-corruption, economic development, and other governance initiatives which will be central to long-term success.

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

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

Chairman McCain: Thank you.

Welcome, General.
STATEMENT OF GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON, JR., USA,
COMMANDER, RESOLUTE SUPPORT COMMANDER, UNITED STATES FORCES-
AFGHANISTAN

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

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

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

I would like to start by honoring the men and women who
have served in Afghanistan and who are currently deployed
there:  our U.S. service members, our NATO allies and, by
the way, the NATO allies who invoked article 5 after 9/11
and have been by our side ever since in Afghanistan; and our
NATO partners who have joined the mission in Afghanistan.  I
particularly want to highlight the role of the NATO
Framework nations, Italy, Germany, and Turkey, who provided
leadership, manning, and funding, and our non-NATO partners such as Georgia, who is the largest non-NATO troop-contributing nation.

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

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

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

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

Our main objective in Afghanistan is to prevent our country from being used -- or prevent this country from being used as a safe haven for terrorists to attack the United States and our allies. We perform two complementary missions: the U.S. counterterrorism mission, Operation Freedom Sentinel; and the NATO train, advise, and assist
mission, Operation Resolute Support. Of the 98 U.S.-
designated terrorist groups globally, 20 operate in the
Afghanistan-Pakistan region, along with three violent
extremist organizations. This is the highest concentration
of terrorist groups anywhere in the world, which underscores
the importance of our counterterrorism platform in the
Central Asia/South Asia region, which protects our homeland.
We remain very focused on the defeat of Al Qaeda and its
associates, as well as the defeat of Islamic State-Khorasan
Province, which is the ISIL affiliate in Afghanistan.

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

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

The Afghan Air Force is also rapidly gaining
capability. Their first ground attack aircraft entered the
fight in April, and they're now integrating intelligence,
surveillance, and reconnaissance assets into their new targeting process. So they are making great progress.

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

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

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

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

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

These expressions of international commitment reflect
the importance which the world places on stability in
Afghanistan and confidence in the Afghan people and Afghan
Government.

They will do the same this year and in the years ahead. The
Afghan people have confidence in their security services,
and they do not want the Taliban to return. They know all
too well what that means.

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

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

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

[The prepared statement of General Nicholson follows:]
Chairman McCain: Thank you very much, General.

In your overall commander’s assessment, are we winning or losing?

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

Chairman McCain: Thank you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chairman McCain: And the Russian involvement?

General Nicholson: The Russian involvement this year has become more difficult. First, they have begun to publicly legitimize the Taliban. This narrative that they promote is that the Taliban are fighting Islamic State, and the Afghan Government is not fighting Islamic State, and that, therefore, there could be a spillover of this group into the region. This is a false narrative. The Afghan Government, along with the U.S. counterterrorism forces, are successfully fighting against Islamic State in Afghanistan. In this year alone, we have reduced their fighters by half,
their territory by two-thirds. We have killed their leader, in fact, their top 12 leaders, and continue to disrupt their operations.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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


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

General Nicholson: Right.

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

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

Offensive capability is what will break the stalemate in Afghanistan. The key offensive capabilities in the Afghan Security Forces are their Special Forces and their Air Force. This investment, which we are requesting, in the Afghan Air Force will help them, as you mentioned, to take
over responsibility for their own close air support, and
even more importantly, this then will lead to an offensive
capability that allows them to overmatch the Taliban or any
other group on the battlefield anywhere around the country.
Chairman McCain: And it might be nice if they could
come to the United States to train.
General Nicholson: Yes, sir, and they look forward to
this.
Chairman McCain: Which they are not allowed to do at
the moment.
Senator Reed?
Senator Reed: Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.
And thank you, General, again for your service, and
please relay our thanks and gratitude to the men and women
that you lead.
General Nicholson: I will, sir.
Senator Reed: Not only U.S. forces but NATO forces.
General Nicholson: Thank you, sir.
Senator Reed: You have stated that your
counterterrorism platform, both personnel and equipment, is
more than adequate for the task. Is that your view?
General Nicholson: That is correct, Senator. We have
adequate resources. And I would add when we need to do
additional operations, we can surge assets into the country.
And this is why it is adequate. General Votel and General
Thomas from Central Command and Special Operations Command have the ability to move assets in coordination with the Department. And so this has proven to be a successful tactic.

Senator Reed: Very good.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: That is correct, Senator.

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

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

Senator Reed: So that you would be able to, essentially, have more of these teams below the corps level, at the battalion level, but not down at the individual
company platoon level certainly.

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

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

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

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

You have had some dealings with the new chief of staff of the army. I do not know if you have any dealings with the new head of the ISI. But does it make sense to focus our persuasive efforts on not the overall country but on
specific sub-elements within Pakistan?

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

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

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

So I highlight these as examples of how the U.S. is working with Pakistan against common enemies. But we need to improve in the areas that you mention. We need to
improve the pressure applied on the Haqqanis and the Taliban on the Pakistan side of the border.

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman McCain: Senator Inhofe?

Senator Inhofe: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Inhofe: And about 12,500 total?

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Inhofe: And when you said a minute ago that the shortfall is a few thousand, is that we need to correct in order to accomplish what we are trying to accomplish
right now? When you say a few thousand, would that be referring to ours or to the total allies in the total figure?

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

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, sir.

Senator Inhofe: Now, the main thing I wanted to cover- - and it is one that is -- you know, we have these meetings
and we have private meetings with you and all the great people that we are depending on. And I am very proud of all of you. We had that opportunity. You also have the opportunity to consult with us because we have a little closer contact with the people out there who are paying for all this stuff.

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

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

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

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

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

    I would also add, Senator, if I may, that from the height of our engagement in Afghanistan over the past 15 years, we were over 100,000 troops. We are now down to about 10 percent of that. So as we look at this commitment
over time, that surge that we did into Afghanistan enabled
us to build the Afghan Security Forces. And as the chairman
mentioned, now it is they who are doing most of the
fighting.

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman McCain: Senator Warren?

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

We officially ended our combat mission in Afghanistan
at the end of 2014, but obviously, we still maintain a
substantial presence there. And one of our primary
objectives in Afghanistan is to help build and sustain the
capacity of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
to secure their own country, as you have discussed. And
that includes paying salaries for Afghan personnel.

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

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

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

General, I know that you recently identified corruption
as a serious problem that you wanted to tackle, one of the
biggest challenges facing the Afghan Security Forces. And
so I wonder, could you just speak to the question of how we
are helping the Afghan ministries of defense and interior
develop a fully operational system to help eliminate this
problem?

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

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

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

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

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

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

We have been in Afghanistan for 15 years. We have spent $117 billion in American taxpayer funds. And according to the Special Inspector General, we are spending $13 million every day to be in Afghanistan. $13 million. More than 2,000 American service members have made the ultimate sacrifice there. More than 8,400 American service members are there today, along with thousands of diplomatic personnel and contractors. Our military cannot and should not be in Afghanistan forever. Our end goal must be to help
Afghanistan build a self-sustaining force that is capable of securing the country so our U.S. troops can come home.

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Senator Warren: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Fischer?

Senator Fischer: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

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

So specifically, as the force manning levels have taken effect, what we have done in some cases is substitute
contractors for soldiers in order to meet the force manning levels. I will give you an example of that in the case of our aviation brigade. So we have the combat aviation brigade in the 1st Infantry Division from Fort Riley, Kansas is in Afghanistan. They deployed with their helicopters and their pilots and their staffs, but because of our troop limitations, we left their mechanics back in Fort Riley and substituted contract mechanics. And this was in order to optimize the amount of actual uniformed soldiers we were allowed.

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

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

Currently with contractors, we have roughly a two to one ratio of contractors to soldiers, and if we look at deploying whole units instead of portions of units, then this would enable us to reduce our contractor load somewhat, and it would be better for Army and service readiness.
Senator Fischer: I would imagine you are going to raise those concerns and ask for more flexibility then from these limitations when you are able to have those discussions?


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

General Nicholson: Yes, ma’am.

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

Afghanistan is trying to work with all of its neighbors and all of the stakeholders. They have reached out to the Russians about this. And we believe that a peace and reconciliation process in Afghanistan should be Afghan-led, and this has been the position of the United States
Government and we believe this will be the most lasting, enduring, effective peace arrangement. So ultimately where we are trying to go and help the Afghans go is to get to a point where they reconcile with the belligerents in this long war that they have experienced and be able to move forward with a peaceful and prosperous country.

Senator Fischer: Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman McCain: Senator Peters?

Senator Peters: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

But as others have mentioned, since 2001, 2,247 U.S. military personnel have died. 20,000 have been wounded. Adjusted for inflation, the U.S. has spent more on Afghanistan’s reconstruction than it did on the Marshall Plan to rebuild Western Europe after World War II. Reconstructing Afghanistan has now become the largest
expenditure to rebuild a single country in our Nation’s history. The Afghan Security Forces are not capable of providing security for the whole country. The Afghan Government cannot sustain many of the investments that the U.S. taxpayers have made in the country. Despite a U.S. investment of $8.5 billion in counternarcotics, Afghan opium production is now at an all-time high. Despite $70 billion in U.S. investment in Afghan Security Forces, only 63 percent of the country is under government control. Corruption continues to erode legitimacy, limiting effectiveness, bolstering support for the opposing insurgency. And after 15 years, Afghanistan still cannot support itself financially or functionally, and long-term financial assistance will be required if the country is to survive.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I also want to share the plans we are working with the Afghan Government, which Ghani calls the ANDSF road map, 4-year road map. After the Warsaw Summit this summer in
July of 2016 when the allies granted 4 more years of commitment to Afghanistan, President Ghani sat down with his team and us to say how are we going to achieve success in the next 4 years. We are working on that plan now. This plan involves expanding the amount of control that the government has over the population.

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

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

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

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

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

Senator Peters: Thank you, General. Appreciate it.

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

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

Senator Cotton?
Senator Cotton: General, welcome back.

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, Senator, definitely.

Senator Cotton: That is a pretty big success then in
our 15 years of operations there?


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

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

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

So it is a complex relationship. It has areas of potential synergy and benefit for both parties, but it also has important security equities. And so the Afghan Government is raising these issues with the Government of
Iran and asking them not to support the Taliban and undermine the Afghan Government.

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

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

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

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

But it is complex, as you point out. They are recruiting Shia. The Afghans are concerned about the Shia fighters returning to Afghanistan at some point and will
they become a destabilizing factor or not? And this is of
great concern to the Afghan Government.

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman McCain: Senator Gillibrand?

Senator Gillibrand: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

There is no U.S. role in the Russia dialogue, as far as
I understand, with respect to ISIL. This was a conference
where they invited China, Pakistan, and now other regional
countries. And I believe for the next meeting, they have
extended an invitation to Afghanistan.
So back to ISIL, so we saw Islamic State-Khorasan Province was formed of fighters from existing groups in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Primarily their membership has come from the Tariqi Taliban-Pakistan, the TTP, which is a Pakistan-based opponent of the Pakistan regime, from the Orakzai Agency. These fighters en masse joined ISIL-K and formed the initial group of fighters who then moved into Afghanistan into Nangahar Province, and their spread was out to about 11 districts initially. They have had recruitment activities around the country, but they attempted to establish their form of the caliphate starting in Nangahar Province with Jalalabad as the capital. So this was their aspiration, but they failed to achieve it.

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

But they are still there, and they have shown an ability to conduct suicide attacks inside Kabul and elsewhere around the country. So they have attacked Shia targets primarily. They attacked at a peaceful
demonstration. They have attacked at Shia mosques. They have attacked on Shia religious holidays. So we see a definite ISIL-K/Shia connection there.

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

Senator Gillibrand: Which countries are they from?

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

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

General Nicholson: Ma’am, this is a complex relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As President Ghani has said, he wants peace in the region. Pakistan and Afghanistan in the past have worked together on a process for peace most recently called the quadrilateral process
last spring. And this progressed to a certain point, but then the Taliban rejected the peace process. I think at that point, we were working very closely with Pakistan, the United States, China, Afghanistan, and Pakistan working together on this process, and since then, we have lost ground.

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

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

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

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

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

Thank you.

Chairman McCain: Senator Ernst?

Senator Ernst: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

General Nicholson, thank you so much. It is great to see you back on American soil, and I want to thank you for your continued service. But I also want to take the time to thank your family who is with you today as well for their support of you and for sharing you and your talents in a leadership capacity in a very difficult theater of operations. So thank you and your family very much.
I would like to pick up where we left off in Afghanistan when I visited a couple months ago. And you, better than most, understand -- coming out of 2nd Ranger Battalion, you understand that General Creighton Abrams had directed the establishment of the first Ranger battalion many years ago, and that is established in the Army. And he said that this unit was to be -- and I am going to quote him-- an elite, light, and the most proficient infantry in the world, a battalion that can do things with its hands and weapons better than anyone. Wherever the battalion goes, it must be apparent that it is the best. End quote.

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

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

General Nicholson: Thank you very much, Senator. And I also want to thank you for your service in our Army and in
Afghanistan. And thank you for the visit, and it was great that your unit that you commanded was in Afghanistan at the time you visited, and they deeply appreciated your visit.

Senator Ernst: Thank you.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the spring, 300 marines are set to deploy to the Helmand Province, and that is quite a historic and a symbolic place for our marines. And as you know, some estimates project 80 percent of Helmand Province is now controlled by the Taliban, a province that supplies the Taliban with approximately 60 percent of their funding. And it is my understanding that the marines are replacing an equally sized army unit that is currently deployed in the region. The chairman stated something about, you know, we
are not really trying to win, we are just trying not to lose. Do you see this as moving the ball forward in the ability to help the Afghans, or are we going to continue to see losses in Helmand?

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

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

So the advisory effort -- at the end of 2014, as we drew down our presence, we shrunk our advisory effort in Helmand and other places around the country quite significantly. So in the last year, it became apparent that we needed to -- instead of advising on an ad hoc basis, we needed to go in there with a permanent structure, really purpose-built to advise. And so when we reached this conclusion, I reached out to the Commandant, General Neller, to request his assistance with this because the Marine Corps
has deep experience in Helmand. They have a lot of skin in the game. They did a great job down there. We wanted to see if the Marine Corps could come back and help us with this critical area that has been so important in their impressive legacy.

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

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

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

The final piece I would add is that the 215th Corps, which is the corps in Sangin -- after the tough fight in 2015, we did a significant regeneration effort on the 215th Corps. Again, we are embarked upon a significant
regeneration effort now because that is where the Afghans
are suffering very high casualties. We put in a new
commander. His name is General Amazi. He has been doing a
great job with the unit down there, but they do need our
help with regeneration and building. We have a great
governor down there, Governor Hyat, who is doing a very good
job. But we have experienced problems with police
corruption to a significant extent, which are undermining
our efforts.

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

Senator Ernst: Thank you, General.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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


Chairman McCain: Senator King?

Senator King: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

I want to move to a sort of higher strategic level.

The original justification and the one that you have
emphasized today is the sanctuary argument, that we have to
go after and stabilize Afghanistan so that it cannot be
again used as a sanctuary for terrorist attacks on the
homeland.

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

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

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

I think there are some aspects that are unique to
Afghanistan that do not apply elsewhere in the world.
Number one would be the number of terrorist groups. So,
again, the U.S. has designated 98 groups globally. 20 are
in Afghanistan and Pakistan. So this is the highest
concentration anywhere in the world. So this policy of
creating an enduring counterterrorism platform applies to
this region in a way that it would not in some of the other areas that you mentioned that do not have this high concentration of terrorists.

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

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

Senator King: Fertile ground.

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

Senator King: But you understand the concern.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

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

What can we do to get Pakistan off the dime on these
issues? They were good in Waziristan, but as you pointed
out, there are plenty of areas they have left untouched.

What do we have to do? Do we cut off funding, have a
summit, or something? Because we are doing all of this work
in Afghanistan, which will never achieve final success or
thorough success as long as Pakistan is sitting there
enabling a lot of this activity.

General Nicholson: Senator, I agree with you. We need
to do a holistic review of our Pakistan policy and sit down
with Pakistan leaders. And, of course, we have an
opportunity for such a review given the new administration
and the new chain of command. And we have many areas where
we could be working together in our mutual benefit. And I
think this is key to the future. I know I am personally
committed to this and working with my Pakistani
counterparts. I know that President Ghani wants to work
with Pakistan towards a peaceful resolution. And in my
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.
Senator Perdue: I have a question about Russia. I am very concerned that it is confusing -- and what we saw them do in Syria -- and it is not lost on us here -- that they have now established, it seems like, permanent presence there in Tartus and Latakia, something that we do not have in the area. It makes them positioned to do very nefarious things in that area going forward.

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

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

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

General Nicholson: No, sir. I think it is to
undermine the United States and NATO.

Senator Perdue: Thank you.

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

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

Senator Perdue: Speaking of that, you talked about training and advising below the corps level earlier. And two areas that you have said that you are doing that is aviation and special forces. You have already talked to the special forces. In Helmand Province, I think you learned when you were down there helping to rebuild the 215th corps-
- is that one of the things that you came back with and
learned -- your forces came back and learned from that, that
you have to be below the corps level in aviation training
and assisting?

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

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

General Nicholson: Sir, thank you.

Well, first, the viability of an enduring
counterterrorism platform in Afghanistan is critically
important to our national security and preventing an attack
on the homeland. There are some objectives that we would
seek going forward: the destruction of Al Qaeda in
Afghanistan, the destruction of Islamic State in
Afghanistan, helping the Afghans to extend their control
over the population to at least 80 percent of the population going forward, working closely with the Pakistanis to eliminate or reduce sanctuary for the Taliban, Haqqani, and other groups inside Pakistan, and then working with the Afghans and the international community for an Afghan-led peace and reconciliation process. I think if we can get these elements into our plan going forward — and, indeed, we are working on that — then we can bring this fight to a successful conclusion going forward that enables us to continue our CT efforts but in an environment of a prosperous, stable Afghanistan.

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

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator McCaskill?

Senator McCaskill: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

I am going to be a broken record again and get to contracting. I have had a chance to review the SIGAR report that just came out. And even though we have made progress -- and I will acknowledge we have made some progress -- there
are still some problems that I think we have got to talk about. And we are talking about $100 billion to contractors in Afghanistan in the last 8 years. And this is real money. This is a significant amount of taxpayer resources that are going to contractors.

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

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

[The information follows:]

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

General Nicholson: Yes, ma’am.

Senator McCaskill: And money was being wasted.

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

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

General Nicholson: Ma’am, the limitation on forces limits our ability to do oversight. There is no question about it. In fact, we are in a situation where we have to substitute contractors for service members to do functions that normally service members would do. So I offered a couple of examples earlier. For example, on aviation maintenance, we bring in contract mechanics to maintain our
helicopters because we leave their mechanics back in the States because of force manning limitations. Now, I acknowledge I have authority to move these forces around, but the overall limitation puts us in a situation where we try to optimize having uniformed service members doing only things that they can do and substituting contractors wherever possible so that we can maximize our advisory effort. But we have gotten to a point now where I think I from a commander’s standpoint would rather see soldiers doing what soldiers are trained to do and then not spend the money on contractors, which is inevitably more expensive.

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

Corruption is a big part of this. Do you believe that
we have made any progress overall in Afghanistan on the
corruption front?

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

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

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

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

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

Senator McCaskill: That is great.
General Nicholson: These are the two greatest areas. I should point out President Ghani initiated a body called the National Procurement Council, and because of the corruption surrounding contracting, he personally oversees the awarding of the large government contracts and a committee that is transparent. We attend it. SIGAR attends it. Our own contracting officials attend it. And then they work through a very rigorous process to try and reduce the space for corruption in the contracting process.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, ma’am.

[The information follows:]

[COMMITTEE INSERT]
Senator McCaskill: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman McCain: Senator Tillis?

Senator Tillis: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

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

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Senator, right now, I feel I have the authorities necessary to strike in the areas where we
need to. This will be an issue we will discuss with my
chain of command going forward. And as we discussed
earlier, we are engaged in those conversations right now
about the AUMF and about the authorities going forward. So
I would ask, sir, your indulgence to let those conversations
play out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Positive, but a lot of work left to
do, sir.

Senator Tillis: Thank you.

Thank you, Mr. Chair.

Chairman McCain: Senator Blumenthal?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Senator Blumenthal: And that would be the northern
area of Pakistan.

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

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


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

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

Senator Blumenthal: And I know, General Nicholson, that you are sincere and you are absolutely right in that statement. But I have heard that view from commanders in
your position repeatedly over the years, as have my
colleagues. And I am just wondering what will and can be
done to change it.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir. It is the number one
factor that could produce a positive result in Afghanistan.
And so it is critical.
You mentioned a range of actions and I think this is exactly what we need to consider on both ends of the spectrum.
Senator Blumenthal: I appreciate that. And thank you for your frankness to the committee.
I want to just ask briefly about one other area concerning helicopters. As you know, because you responded to our letter, Senator Ernst and I wrote to the Department of Defense asking that it develop a plan to field an American alternative to the MI-17, which it has done. The Department of Defense announced its intention to replace the MI-17 helicopters with upgraded Blackhawks as part of the fiscal year 2017 supplemental funding to support overseas contingency operations submitted to Congress in November of 2016.
Could you comment briefly on the status of that effort?
General Nicholson: Sir, I am told that this will be a part of the next supplemental submission that will be made, but it has not been completed yet. But it is an issue I have raised because this is critical and there is an urgency to getting this program going. It will take, from the time the funding is approved till the aircraft arrival on the battlefield, over 20 months. And so we want to get these
aircraft and these crews into the fight as soon as possible.

It will be critical to the offensive effort to regain the
territory and the population that the government seeks to
regain to break the stalemate. So this is why this
particular aviation initiative is so critical to the way
going forward.

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

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

General Nicholson: We will keep you updated, Senator.

Senator Blumenthal: Thanks, General Nicholson.

Senator Reed [presiding]: On behalf of the chairman,

Senator Graham: Thank you very much.

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

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


Senator Graham: What do you think their goals are in
Afghanistan? Why are they changing?

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

Senator Graham: Okay. I agree with you.

What about Iran?

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

Senator Graham: So they have back yard issues.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

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

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

Senator Graham: Do you think, generally speaking, the Afghans want democracy?
General Nicholson: Yes, Senator. They want a representative form of government. They have a form of social democracy. It has existed for centuries and centuries.

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

General Nicholson: It is, Senator.

Senator Graham: And it is hard.

General Nicholson: Oh, absolutely.

Senator Graham: It is hard here.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

Can we win?

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Graham: Briefly describe what winning would look like.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.
Senator Graham: And they are willing to do that.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Graham: Continue.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Graham: Okay.

General Nicholson: Sir, the Taliban are the ones who were connected to Al Qaeda. The Afghan people -- 87 percent of them -- think a return to Taliban rule would be bad for the country.
Senator Graham: Do you believe that we should designate the Taliban as a terrorist organization?

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

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


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

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

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


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

General Nicholson: It would help, sir.

Senator Graham: What does losing look like?

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

Senator Graham: Is that possible if we leave?

Senator Graham: Is it likely if we leave?

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

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

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

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

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

Senator Graham: Rather than an artificial number.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

Senator Graham: And the objective is to win.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Graham: The objective is to stop terrorism
from growing over there to attack us here at home. The objective is to keep Afghans stable and on a trajectory of rule of law, a democratic nation. Is that correct?

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Graham: Thank you.

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

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

General Nicholson: Sir, with respect to Afghanistan --
Senator Nelson: Yes.

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

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

Senator Nelson: And is that progression increasing?

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

Senator Nelson: In Afghanistan.

General Nicholson: Sir, the support of the Taliban --
the Taliban are the medium for many of these other terrorist
groups to operate because of the convergence of these
groups. So your logic is absolutely sound, sir.

Senator Nelson: Does that include ISIS?

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

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

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

Part of that is military pressure. So President
Ghani’s approach to this has been fight, fracture, talk. So
we need to keep military pressure on them. And I
articulated some of the ways in which we would do that:
through the use of special forces, Afghan Air Force, to
increase their control, through diplomatic engagement with
the Pakistanis to increase pressure on that side of the
border. So this would be a whole-of-government approach,
but the objective of this would be an eventual
reconciliation. This will take some years I believe.

Senator Nelson: Does that reconciliation include the
Taliban?

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

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Sir, they are ideologically in
conflict, and then in practical matters, they are vying for
control in certain areas. But I do not see an effective
effort by the Taliban against ISIS.

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

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

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

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

Senator Nelson: Yes, I agree.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.
Senator Reed: On behalf of Chairman McCain, let me recognize Senator Shaheen.

Senator Shaheen: Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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

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

So what has changed the dynamic there?

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

Secondly would be, again, this concern about Central Asia and the desire to maintain their influence in Central Asia. And so this narrative of a threat spilling over from Afghanistan is touching a nerve with the Central Asian republics because during the anti-Soviet jihad and what
followed, they had this concern. And then in Central Asia, there is a concern about terrorism.

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

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Ma’am, we are seeing additional engagement by the Russians with Pakistan. There was recently a training exercise conducted in Pakistan with Russian troops. And we have, again, reporting of increased
conversations going on in the country about potential
support to these groups.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, ma’am.

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

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

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

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

Senator Shaheen: I really appreciate that.

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

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

Senator Shaheen: Thank you very much, General.

General Nicholson: Thank you, ma’am.

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

Senator Kaine: Thank you, Mr. Chair.

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

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

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

General Nicholson: Sir, there may be, but I have not
seen it. I think these are two separate issues, but we know there is a dialogue. We know there is a relationship between Russia and Iran. You know, Russia is selling advanced weapon systems to Iran. So we know there is communication between them.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

General Nicholson: Yes, sir.

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

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

Senator Kaine: There was a statement that the President made a couple weeks back, maybe 10 days ago, that he thought he could ally with Russia and potentially use Russia as a check against Iran. Tell me if you do not feel
you can comment on that. That is a fair answer. But I
wonder, do you think that that is realistic that given all
the areas where Russia and Iran are now working to at least
promote a similar purpose, including, according to your
testimony, in Afghanistan? Do you think it is likely that
the U.S. could peel Russia away from its cooperation and
coordination with Iran?

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

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

Senator Kaine: Because of being on the border.


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

Senator Kaine: Anti-opium production.

General Nicholson: Yes, sir. So the counternarcotics,
the trade. And then what the Afghans would seek to reduce
is eliminate the support to the Taliban. Let us deal with
each other as neighbors, and let us work on these areas of
mutual interest. So I think there is potential in the
Afghan-Iranian relationship for a more positive outcome than
what we see with the Russian relationship.
The Russians, of course, lack legitimacy in Afghanistan because of the anti-Soviet jihad. Millions of Afghans were killed by Russians and Russian-backed forces in Afghanistan. So there is a legitimacy question when it comes to Russia’s involvement in Afghanistan that is right at the forefront of this conversation with the Afghan people.

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

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

Senator Kaine: I met with the Afghan Ambassador to the United States yesterday, and we had a good visit. One of the things he said to me is -- and I just am curious as to your opinion on this. Sometimes, you know, our military or intel do not see it the same way as they see it, as they are describing it. But he said the thing that is most exciting now to Afghans is that they really have a national identity, a national voice. They are discussing tough issues, some of
which are hard to solve, but they are discussing them openly and publicly. He painted a pretty positive view of the civil government and the relationship between the members of the coalition. I am curious if your view is as positive.

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

Senator Kaine: Thank you so much.

Thanks, Mr. Chair.

General Nicholson: Thank you, Senator.

Chairman McCain: General, thank you for your
testimony. Thank you for a very informative exchange you have had with the members here.

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

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

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

So we thank you for your service. We thank you for your testimony this morning. Unfortunately, tragically for you, some of us will be visiting you in Kabul.
Thank you, General.

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

Chairman McCain: Really? Thank you.

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