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CENTRAL COMMAND: AT THE CENTER OF THE ACTION

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LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

JOSEPH VOTEL  
Commander, United States Central Command

RICHARD ENGEL  
Chief Foreign Correspondent, NBC News

CLARK ERVIN  
Executive Director, Homeland Security Program  
Aspen Institute

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CENTRAL COMMAND: AT THE CENTER OF THE ACTION

(9:00 a.m.)

MR. ERVIN: All right, everyone. If you would please take your seats, make your way into the room please, those of you outside. Everyone, if you could take your seats. Yeah, all right. Everyone, we're going to get started. Well, I think as most of you know, I am Clark Ervin, the executive director of the Homeland Security Program here at the Aspen Institute and the organizer of the Aspen Security Forum as I said last night for those of you who are here which is probably most of you.

This is our seventh annual Aspen Security Forum, so thank you all very much for making time out of your very busy schedules, no doubt, to be with us here in Aspen for the seventh year. This is the official start of our program, so thank you for being here this morning. I want to thank again our sponsors IBM, Intel Security, iSIGHT Partners, Lockheed Martin, Raytheon and Target. Just a couple of quick administrative words before we get into the program this morning.

As some of you know we debuted a global version of the Aspen Security Forum this past spring in April in London, and we called it in a novel fashion Aspen Security Forum Global and the idea is to do that each year. So I wanted to make sure that all of you are aware of that so look for something from us in the upcoming months about the next version of Aspen Security Forum Global in London. Furthermore, there is such demand for content about cyber security that we are debuting a forum, a summit in Boston in the fall in October -- October 5 to be precise, exclusively on cyber, and it's called "The Cambridge Cyber Summit." We're doing it in partnership with MIT and also with CNBC. So look for more information about that soon.

So to start this morning's program, I should mention also that the hash tag is #aspensecurity for those of you who are following us on Twitter. So to start this morning's program, we're very, very pleased to welcome to Aspen; we've been after Ric for a long time and his global travel

schedule finally permits him to be with us. Richard Engel, who is the Chief Foreign Correspondent for NBC News who will be our moderator this morning. Please join me in welcoming Ric who will introduce General Votel.

(Applause)

MR. ENGEL: Well, I think we'll get right into it. So as you all know General Votel, CENTCOM commander, commands the most important battle space one could say in the world. The wars ranging from Afghanistan to the war on ISIS to -- and beyond. So it's a real privilege to have him here. He just came in for this, just arrived and will be leaving shortly after and has his whole contingency upstairs of classified computers and he is very much at work. So without further ado. It has been so much in the news lately and it seemed to be such a -- an important event. How do you assess what has happened in Turkey recently and what is happening in Turkey? Now for the record, Turkey is technically not part of his AO.

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, thanks for that clarifying.

MR. ENGEL: But it is from Turkey in which so much of the -- the attacks against ISIS are launched, and through Turkey that many of the ISIS fighters have traditionally transited through. So with that caveat, what do you make of that --

GEN. VOTEL: Well, that's -- first of all thanks -- thanks Richard, Clark, thanks very much for the invitation to come back and thanks for moderating this morning. So Turkey of course which resides in the European command area of responsibility really sits on a -- an extraordinarily important seam between the Central Region and Europe. And so, Turkey has been an extraordinarily important and vital partner in this -- in all of our activities and it's just beyond being a place where we can park our assets and launch them into Syria or Iraq or do military operations from there.

They have actually been integrated into the things we are doing. They're doing security operations. They are the beneficiary of the information that we are --

are deriving in our understanding of the Islamic state and how they are moving foreign fighters and they have responded to information that we provided to them to do things along their border. So they are absolutely vital to what we're doing. So I think as we look at the events that are take -- taken place over the last two weeks, 10 days here. I think you know there certainly is some reason to be concerned about that obviously. You know, any time there's that -- as they are working through the issues associated with a coup, which don't occur every day and certainly don't occur within NATO countries every day. I think it's something to be very, very concerned about.

MR. ENGEL: What are you concerned about specifically?

GEN. VOTEL: What I am concerned about is that it will -- first and foremost is it will have an impact on the operations that we do along that very important scene. Obviously, we're very dependent on Turkey for basing of our resources. I am -- so I'm concerned about that. I'm concerned about that it will impact the level of cooperation and collaboration that we have with Turkey which has been excellent, frankly. And so those two areas I think are the areas that I am most concerned about and working with my fellow combatant commander in EUCOM, General Scaparrotti, that's something we will continue to -- we will continue to work on.

MR. ENGEL: Now is this just you looking forward and analyzing the situation and saying, well, this is something we are going to be concerned about or has something already happened in terms of ability to launch operations or collaboration with -- is there reason to be concerned?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, I think, you already have seen it's been in the open press, there were some limitations on some of our activities at Incirlik Air Base; for example, the power and a few other things were shut off that -- that's been restored, we're kind of back to normal operations there. There are other places where we are continuing to work through. Some of the -- some of the friction that still exists with -- with kind of the

follow-on activities that is impacting some of our operations. We've got ways to mitigate that, to manage that right now and we are.

But I am concerned about the long -- the longer term impact. So there are certainly near-term things that are taking place but there are also longer-term things that were taking place. And I'll give you an example. One of the things is as we certainly had relationships with a lot of Turkish leaders, military leaders in particular. And so I'm impact -- I am concerned about what the impact is on those relationships as we kind of continue to move forward.

MR. ENGEL: Are any of those people in jail now?

GEN. VOTEL: I think -- yes, I think some of them are in jail.

MR. ENGEL: Do you think that Turkey is dismantling its military and other institutions of the state? And if so what does that mean for its ability to cooperate within NATO?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, it's probably a -- that's probably a better question for the department of state or at least for General Scaparrotti, the EUCOM Commander.

MR. ENGEL: Oh, I believe he's in the room.

GEN. VOTEL: Sorry Scap. But I -- you know I don't know. I mean, I just -- they are absolutely, they've been an important NATO partner. They've been an important partner to us for a long period of time. And so I think we just have to -- you know, they certainly have to work through -- they're a sovereign country, they have to work through their own issues and -- and we -- I think we have to be supportive of that where we can be, but we also have things that have to get done.

MR. ENGEL: That is still a developing situation and we will follow that.

GEN. VOTEL: Very much so.

MR. ENGEL: And on something that is also developing, and probably which you could talk with an immense amount of detail about is the campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. A lot of attention has been focused on Mosul. How close is that operation? Is it real? Is ISIS getting dug in? Is this going to be a big fight? When? What can you tell us about it?

GEN. VOTEL: So, thanks. So in -- just in the four months I've been in this position, I've been to Iraq five times and I had a chance, each of those times to meet with Iraqi leadership, military, and some of their Ministry of Defense leadership. I've actually had the chance to meet with the Prime Minister on -- on a couple occasions. One of the things that I'm struck with is I kind of continue to visit with them is the increasing level of confidence that I see in their military leadership and in their political leadership.

MR. ENGEL: The Iraqi government.

GEN. VOTEL: The Iraqi government confidence in their operations and in the approach that they are taking. Now I -- I say that, and I'll caveat it by saying there's certainly a lot left to do and it's far from perfect. They don't approach things the same way we would. They've got different orientations, different approach, and that's fine, that's their approach. But there is a growing level of confidence that the military operations that they are doing are having the affects that we desire against ISIL. And so I think you've seen now over the last several months a number of operations; Fallujah, the most recent operations up in Kiara (phonetic) that have been very, very successful from a military standpoint and have pushed the Islamic state back.

And I think what you're seeing is you're seeing a strategy in both that we are trying to orchestrate in both Iraq and Syria where we are trying to present ISIL with many dilemmas. There they have to deal with a lot of things. And I think when we're able to do that I think it -- it gives us the ability to overwhelm them and it give - - makes it more difficult for them to respond to that. So

part of our strategy has been simultaneity, to do a whole bunch of things at the same time to them in a variety of locations.

I think that strategy is working is working for us, as we move forward. So I do see military progress on the ground in both of those areas. You asked about Mosul. I won't lay out a specific timeline for you. You know, we will go to Mosul when it's time to go to Mosul. Getting ready to go to Mosul isn't just about having the military plan in place. We've got a concept for how we can do that.

But the more important part of going to Mosul is the political governance plan, it is the stabilization plan, and it is the humanitarian plan. And those three things really have to be put into place before we can actually execute I think a very successful military operation. From the military standpoint, the key thing we're focused on is force generation, generating the brigades, retraining the brigades, making sure we've got the right amount of force.

One of the important thoughts that came out of last week's defense ministerial is that -- that was shared with me is that we shouldn't be in too much of a rush to get to Mosul, frankly. Making sure these four plans we talked about that we've got the right force in place is -- is very -- very important.

MR. ENGEL: Four plans?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, the -- the humanitarian, stabilization, political plan, and the military plan. All of that's got to be orchestrated.

MR. ENGEL: So to stay in Iraq for a minute, it is a very messy battlefield. You have a Shia militias operating there. Some of them tied to Iraqi clerics, some of them tied to Iran. You have the Kurds who are operating there, some of which have different loyalties. Some are loyal to Syria, others are loyal to different groups. You obviously have the Iraqi army. How is this being coordinated? How much of the fighting is being done



by the official Iraqi army, by the militia, by the Kurds?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, I can tell you that as we -- the most recent operation that -- that we've done up in Kiara, that was completely by the Iraqi -- by the Iraqi security forces, by the Iraqi army. They came up both -- both sides of that. They orchestrated the river crossing, which frankly was a pretty significant river crossing by anybody's standards. So they -- they've done that. There -- now, there certainly are a lot as you point out, as we saw in Fallujah, there were a lot of different organizations there.

There was Iraqi security forces. There was -- there are special operations forces, there were the Shia PMF element was involved. There police elements involved. So orchestrating that I think is a challenge.

MR. ENGEL: Who does the de-confliction?

GEN. VOTEL: The de-confliction --

MR. ENGEL: And where does it take place?

GEN. VOTEL: The de-confliction, principally that is done at the MOD and at the Prime Minister level. Prime Minister Abadi has been extraordinarily involved in the decision-making for many of these operations. And I think he's demonstrated a pretty good ability to understand both the tactical and operational aspects of the things we're doing and to provide the right guidance to help -- so far to help kind of help manage that problem that you just talked about.

MR. ENGEL: And how blunt are the conversations? Do you say to Abadi or someone from the US government, say, we don't want the Shia militias in there. You have to tell them they can go on a different day or they come from the South and we're going to come from the north. Is it that specific?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, much like we do with our own leadership. You know our responsibility as senior military leaders, and in this particular role is to

provide our best military advice. And so we do that and that does include very blunt discussions in terms of how we -- how we think they ought to best approach things. Given the forces they have, given the other things that are taking place on -- on -- on the battlefield.

You know, I guess the -- the one thing I would just -- if I could just kind of go back a little bit, you know, I think it's important to recognize the approach that we are taking here. This approach is different than when we were in Operation Iraqi Freedom and -- we have in Afghanistan, as we are very much in a buy with and through approach here. We are working through our partners. It is about them doing this. And so our role is different this time and that is a -- it is a different approach; so it doesn't go as fast as we would want it to go. It doesn't go as effectively as we wanted to go.

They don't do all the same tactical or operational things that we might want to do but our goal is using our expertise, using our capabilities to enable them and using our advice and our experience to help them through that. And in my experience, relatively minimal here, in four months and in the time that I've been in this position from my previous position is they -- they've been good about taking that advice onboard.

MR. ENGEL: So, let's leave Iraq for a second and head up north toward Syria. The border between Iraq and Syria. Still open? Militants still able to cross that border?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, it's a huge -- it's a huge border so I, it's porous and I think there's probably some that are able to move back and forth across that. That said I think the situation along the border is much more stable particularly between Iraq and Syria to clean the Kurdistan area is much more stable than it has been. I think as you've moved further out to the west kind of in the Anbar portion of -- of Iraq, I think that's probably still fairly open there.

MR. ENGEL: The City of Aleppo is currently under siege? There are estimates of about 350,000 people

inside the city. They are almost entirely surrounded. The main hospitals in the city were just bombed a couple of days ago. There's fears of mass starvation in the city. These are -- it is being attacked by Assad Forces and Russian Forces. What happens to Aleppo and what does it mean for your mission?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, I think what it means for -- I mean what it means for the mission is that as you pointed out, it means that there's a human disaster that's taking place here right now that will have to be addressed some particular point. And as people move in and out of that area as they respond to the situation on ground, it's going to create impacts on our ability to go after our principal objective which is the Islamic state. And so I am concerned about what is taking place there, and again I, you know it's -- anybody, any person, doesn't have to be military but anybody look at that can't find it acceptable to see the human suffering situation is taking place there.

MR. ENGEL: A lot of this conference seems to be focused on countering the messaging of violent extremism and how to stop ISIS. But if you're living in Aleppo or anywhere near Aleppo and you see a city, a large city surrounded and the people starting to starve to death as they have been starving to death in other places, isn't that the best message for violent extremism? How do you counter that with -- with an online app or a scrubbing of the internet?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, you know I think the way you counter the Islamic State's ideologies, you have to expose it for what it is and I think that is what the approach is that we are taking. Now, certainly we have military capabilities that we are using but we are also working very closely with the Department of State and their global engagement center that is kind of been retooled to focus on this. But I think that the strategy here is to expose ISIL for what they are and to call them out for the things that they are doing.

And I do think we are beginning to make progress in that particular area. Certainly it's a great strength

for them, it's certainly something that fits into their center of gravity and something we have to stay focused on but I think in my view that's -- that's the approach we have to take.

MR. ENGEL: I asked about Aleppo first on purpose because it leads to where I'm going now. There is this campaign against Aleppo by the Assad Regime and Russia. The US, and the State Department has made it quite clear, is making more and more overtures toward Russia. How is that coordination with Russia right now? Is it collaboration? Is it coordination? Is it a synchronized policy?

MR. VOTEL It's none of the above from my perspective. What I -- what we do militarily with Russia right now is de-confliction in the air to ensure safety of flight, and that's the principle mechanism. And we do that every day with them and it's done in a positive and it's done in a professional manner where we ensure safety of -- flight safety of operations for both of our forces that are operating in what can become a congested airspace and that I think has worked.

But what you're alluding to here is not in place yet. That I've -- I mean we're obviously aware paying very close attention to the ongoing discussions that are taking place and you know when that has been resolved and when directions have been provided to us we'll be prepared to move to whatever the next level is of that we -- that we work with them.

MR. ENGEL: So, at your level it's strictly de-confliction to make sure that, your planes don't shoot each other down.

GEN. VOTEL: That's the best way. Yeah, that is the best way I describe it. It's really -- it's about ensuring safety of flight and making sure that we are not shooting on their stuff and they are not on ours.

MR. ENGEL: So if there is a Russian Assad campaign which is moving toward Raqqa. And then there is a US-led campaign moving toward Raqqa. Who gets there

first?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, you know, well -- I guess we'll see. I mean -- you know, I think that is -- that's clearly something that's not a discussion that's really, I think, come to pass yet on that because I don't think either -- either of us are necessarily in a position as you are well aware, we're very much involved in -- in our operations out in the Manbij area, and that's been a priority for us and we'll finish that first and then we'll begin to look to the next phase of this which will ultimately take us down towards Raqqa.

But you know as we move forward in that then we'll continue to use the mechanisms we have in place or new ones that are provided to us to help address that.

MR. ENGEL: What about with the Assad regime? Any de-confliction there? Any coordination there?

MR. VOTEL: None from us.

MR. ENGEL: None directly from the military.

GEN. VOTEL: We do not -- we're not talking to the Assad regime.

MR. ENGEL: You mentioned Manbij, and there was an article this morning in the New York Times about a large trove of documents, I think 10,000 was the number mentioned.

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah.

MR. ENGEL: These were documents supposedly taken from Manbij, which was a center of foreign fighters, ISIS foreign fighters in Syria. How important are these documents? What's --

GEN. VOTEL: Well, I'd say it's extraordinarily important, and you know, this is a big deal I think but it's not a new deal. I mean the idea of, you know, capturing enemy material and exploiting and try to understand it to help our operations certainly isn't

anything new. It's really -- it's been a basis for how we approach things for a long time. It's a key part of our network on network approach that we take.

So I -- I think it's extraordinarily important and we've been very well supported by the intelligence community, in the interagency in helping exploit that information. Yeah, I think it is providing us -- is beginning to provide us a deeper understanding into their -- certainly their tactics and techniques. It has given us better understanding on how they orchestrate things like foreign fighters. It gives us ideas about how they are communicating among themselves. It gives us idea how they are managing their resources.

MR. ENGEL: What are these documents? In the past and -- and I've come across some documents as well. We had ISIS registration folders. These were personnel files. Are these new documents more personal files?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, I think it -- I think it's -- Richard it's all of the above. It is -- it is a you know it's data associated with computers it's -- it's hard copy papers, it's files, it's directories like you just highlighted there. So it's a combination of a lot of stuff. It's videos, it's pictures, it's all kinds of stuff that we see so.

MR. ENGEL: In the past ISIS has always been very quick at its ability to regenerate. US military takes a thousand fighters off the battlefield, the next month they get a thousand new recruits. Are they still replacing their numbers as quickly, and if not, why not?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah I think -- I think the global community here, largely led by our law enforcement professionals, and certainly in our country and in a variety of other countries here are doing a much better job today of helping to control the flow of foreign fighters that came so heavily at the beginning of this into Syria and eventually into Iraq. So well I won't give you any number, because I don't really have any that are particularly you know super reliable here in terms of that. But in -- as I look at that, this data over time I

definitely see a decrease in the amount of foreign fighters that are able to successfully reach Iraq and Syria and I see the tangible things that many of our partners, law enforcement, military, others are doing to better control the flow.

And so I think we are doing a better job with that. But if I could just to talk a little bit about ISIL, you know this -- this is, you know I would share three observations about this. This is a connected enemy. What they do in Iraq and Syria has influences outside of there. I mean, we're well aware of the caliphate and the different provinces they stood out that you know go from North Africa you know all the way down the Southeast Asia in terms of that. So it is a connected network. They are able to influence or perhaps direct things that are taking place outside of this.

So the things that we are attacking in places like Manbij, are having -- will have an impact on that. It probably won't stop it but will have an impact on it. They're vulnerable, and so this -- this -- what you just talked, about this exploitation of this treasure trove of material will make them more vulnerable and we will exploit that, and they are adaptive. And we will expect them to adapt.

MR. ENGEL: Jeh Johnson last night spoke about a third level of ISIS involvement. He talked about directed, inspired and something in between where they're encouraged or nudged along. Is that -- are we -- are you seeing more of that where you have -- if let's say Orlando is a typical inspired, doesn't seem like they had any direct linkages, and Paris, Bataclan, as a direct attack where militants from the -- from the heart of the Islamic state went out into the attack. Are we seeing something in between emerging?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, I would generally agree with -- with that approach. I think -- I think -- again it's an adapter, it's an adaptive organization so they're looking for any way that they can propagate their ideology and approach.

MR. ENGEL: ISIS is not the only extremist group in Syria and Iraq. Particularly in Syria there is a group called the Nusra front. Now the Nusra front started off as the official Al Qaeda affiliate, and a lot of Nusra front members bled away and joined ISIS. Are you seeing now that ISIS is being attacked, more people heading back to the Nusra front, and the reason also the Nusra front is interesting right now, the group in its internal dialogue keeps talking about rebranding itself, officially denouncing its ties to ISIS in order to make it more palatable to the local communities, to make it seem more legitimate. Are you following that?

GEN. VOTEL: Oh yeah we -- we absolutely are, and you know to your last comment there in, you know again I just take it back. These organizations are extraordinary savvy, they're extraordinarily adaptive and so we should expect that they're going to be doing things and while they can maybe grow another branch of the tree that makes it look a little different that branch comes back into the core ideology and core approach. So at the center of that, it's still Al Qaeda and --

MR. ENGEL: SO, if Nusra renounces its ties to Al-Qaeda, it doesn't impact your view of them?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, as you know -- you know, I've set aside policy discussions and other things that might be associated with that. To me it doesn't make a significant difference. They are an organization to be concerned about.

MR. ENGEL: Do you think they are an organization to be concerned about long-term? There was a David Ignatius who I also believe is in the room wrote an article not long ago saying that there's a real concern and growing concern about Nusra's lethality, it's aggressiveness.

GEN. VOTEL: Yes, I personally would share in that assessment.

MR. ENGEL: That we should ---



GEN. VOTEL: That we should be concerned about them long-term.

MR. ENGEL: Not just focused on.

GEN. VOTEL: Not just focused on what they're doing here.

MR. ENGEL: Changing the subject a little bit and then I want to open up to some questions. Iran, the Iran nuclear deal was designed to change Iran's behavior. Has it?

GEN. VOTEL: No, I don't think that it has changed their behavior. I think it's addressed a specific threat that existed. I think it's -- it's probably been successful in addressing that or certainly at least putting it off for a number of years, but it has not necessarily changed the behavior that we see in Central Command with respect to Iran. I still have facts and (inaudible) that operate in close proximity to US vessels that transit through the Arabian Gulf.

We still see them supporting organizations like Lebanese Hezbollah. We still see them supporting the Assad regime. We still see them with their linkages in to places like Bahrain. We still see them backing the Houthi network. We still see aspects of their cyber ambition. So I personally have not seen a change in behavior.

MR. ENGEL: A recent announcement, the President recently announced that the troop levels in Afghanistan would not decline at the previously-announced rate, that they would -- they would be somewhat higher, more troops for longer potentially. Why? What's going on in Afghanistan? Why couldn't the troop levels go down?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, I think you know I think Ric, as we've talked about in the past at least on the military side here is that these -- these decisions have to be conditions based. They can't be time based, and so I -- as we looked at that situation, I think we looked at the -- at the conditions on the ground and we made our best military advice, our best recommendation that we should

stay at a level that was higher than we had anticipated.

MR. ENGEL: But is it the Taliban's growing strength? Is it the Afghan government's weakness? Is it ISIS's strength? What is it that --

GEN. VOTEL: I think it's a -- it might be a little bit of a combination of all that I think as I look at the -- just the enemy situation a place like Afghanistan we, you know we do see, you know, an aggregation of these organizations in a way that we have not necessarily seen before. So we see Taliban is much more closely linked to the Haqqani network, for example. Siraj Haqqani is now the deputy leader of the Taliban, that -- that's different.

We've seen Al Qaeda now twice, you know profess bayat to the Taliban. And there's been other organizations that have -- that have kind of come together with. So there -- there has been this level of collaboration and cooperation between these groups I think that has made this a more dangerous -- made more dangerous threat and so we've tried to pay attention to that.

If I could say, you know, just about Afghanistan since you raised it here. Again I would tell you right now the Afghan forces with the assistance of our coalition that is there, are executing a successful security, sustainable security strategy. They've been -- they've been very successful in Kanduz where they started. They were successful down in Helmand, they've moved their operations up in the Nangahar area here in accordance with their plan and they actually are achieving their objectives but more importantly they're preventing the Taliban and the organizations that are associated to that from achieving their objectives.

They're doing that at an extraordinarily heavy cost. I'm concerned about their casualties, I'm concerned about their sustainability; we've got to pay attention to that. So the training advise assist that we keep in with the elevated numbers along with our US CT element I think is -- is really properly organized and sourced right now to do what we need to do.

MR. ENGEL: Do you think it's a forever war? Do we have troops in Afghanistan the same way we have troops in Korea for decades and decades?

GEN. VOTEL: I don't know if it's -- if it's -- you know forever war, define forever. I think we have to be committed to this. I think this is a protracted conflict against these organizations. You know the successful operation Mosul won't eliminate ISIL, they will go to the next version of ISIL and we'll have to -- we'll have to -- they will adapt and we will have to adapt. I think this is a protracted fight and we have to stay with them, and we have to stay with our partners as we move forward.

MR. ENGEL: I'm sure there are a lot of questions. You had your hand up first, maybe someone can come with you and while he's coming to you just allow me to say thank you very much for your time.

GEN. VOTEL: Thanks Richard.

MR. ENGEL: And it's already been very interesting, so please.

MR. FAILY: Lukman Faily, used to be Iraqi ambassador three weeks ago. Let me first thank you for all the work you and your colleagues have done in Iraq and we are very much appreciative of that. In relation to the last question you raised and the relation to troops availability or numbers in -- in the region with the opportunity lost of not having a SOFA with Iraq before and the reactionary need over the last few years just to cope and deal with ISIS. Where do you see the troop level in three to five years, specifically with your partners in the region and in relation to the legal status and the relation to effectiveness moving forward.

I'm aware that you're more military other than sort of your political masters but here I would like to see from CENTCOM perspective what do you see and your confidence level?

GEN. VOTEL: Well, you know, again I think specific numbers and the details of those -- of those arrangements, Your Excellency, will certainly have to be -- will certainly have to be addressed and there will be a mechanism for -- for doing that. But my perspective is this is that when we stay partnered with -- with our partners on the ground when we stay with them we see -- we see better -- we see better performance, we see better results, we see more resolve in terms of it. You know it -- it's interesting to me that is we look at the Iraqi security forces, one of the elements of the Iraqi security forces that is been so successful is their counterterrorism service.

And the CTS, the counterterrorism services is -- is an organization that we did not break our partnership with and we kept it after 2011. And as a result I think we saw that that was a more -- it was a more proficient more capable force in the early days of the fighting, and they have borne an extraordinary, the burden of the fighting so far and perhaps as they should because it is the most capable element.

So from my perspective as the CENTCOM commander, I think where we are able to partner with people, we are able to develop long-term relationships, long-term systems is always best and so you know without getting out in front of my political leadership here, you know, as I look at it, my inclination is to kind of continue to make recommendations that allow us to do that at the right levels.

MR. ENGEL: There seemed to be almost a longing in his question which was is the US going to leave us again?

GEN. VOTEL: I think we've made an investment there with our people, with our lives. We certainly understand the importance of the area. So you know again from the perspective of the CENTCOM commander looking forward without the, you know, the -- the benefit of any, you know policy discussion on that, you know my inclination would be, yeah, we should stay. Yes these are our partners. We've expended a lot here.

MR. ENGEL: Kim Dozier.

MS. DOZIER: Thank You. General Votel, in terms of degrading ISIS, do you need to take out Omar al-Baghdadi or has the targeting of the mid-level commanders been more effective? I mean you've spent 15 years of your long professional career targeting various militants, and yet they keep coming back. So can you also give us a state of where is ISIS internally? Are they riven with infighting? Do you see further cuts to their salary, et cetera?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, I -- it's a great question. So on the first part of your question there, you know, I certainly think that it's -- it's important. You know, leadership matters and -- matters to us, it's certainly got to matter to them. So when you do remove leadership, it does create an impact. You know, they are an organization that is resilient just as we are an organization that is resilient. So when you -- one of the leader falls out somebody steps into it we should expect that that's going to take place and we should -- our operations have got to continue to put pressure on those leadership networks all the time so they don't have the ability to regenerate over time.

And you know as I think as we've seen in the past, we have an ability to do that. It takes time to do that. But the persistent pressured approach to those leadership networks I think makes a difference in the long run and certainly I think -- I think we -- we see that in a number of areas. To the other part of your question, I see a network that is under increasing pressure when I look at -- when I look at ISIL. Yes, I'll just take it back to my comments earlier here, I mean -- my broad -- the big idea here is multiple dilemmas.

We are coming after you in Anbar in multiple locations. We are coming after you in the Tigris River Valley. We are on top of you in northern Syria and we've got efforts in southern Syria and we're doing high-value strikes across both of those countries, and we've got a variety of other things going on with -- with respect to that. And

so what I see is I see a network that is having to deal with that. And so as we have addressed their resources, we've taken away significant portions of their financial resources, of their oil resources what they used to generate stuff it's not -- not solved, they're still able to do some of that and we'll continue to focus on that.

But we've put a lot of pressure on them. We've killed a lot of their -- lot of their fighters, their ability to regenerate that is more difficult. I think we've seen in -- in Fallujah, we've seen signs of infighting between foreign fighters and some of the other established ISIL leadership that is in there and disagreements over that. So you know we will continue to foment that. So I think the best way I would describe this is, this is a network under pressure and it's the one that we want to keep the pressure on.

MR. ENGEL: Multiple dilemmas.

GEN. VOTEL: Multiple dilemmas.

MR. ENGEL: Not operation Barbarossa heading toward Mosul. It's more of an insurgent type campaign.

GEN. VOTEL: No, this is -- well, I wouldn't --

MR. ENGEL: Lots of -- lots of attacks, in lots of different places.

MR. VOTE: Yeah, I think when you go -- one of the ways that you make this network have to over work is by giving it a lot of problems.

MR. ENGEL: Please.

SPEAKER: I am with the MIT seminar XXI. I want to ask about the knowledge of our own troops. When we went into Afghanistan, there were only six people at the CIA who knew Arabic well enough to be able to read the newspapers and talk. It seems to me understanding the cultures and the people we have to work with is absolutely key to what I'm going to call success but I don't know what success looks like anymore. So my question is, do

you ever make any requests from our educational system to start expanding the skills of understanding others, recognizing that we look -- that we live in a very complex world and so much of our education is so ones land -- one lands driven and leadership from someone like you would I think help make the changes that we need in our educational system.

MR. VOTEL Yeah, thanks for -- thanks for your question. First of all, to answer your question directly, I probably don't make that demand as -- as clear as I should, but I will tell you I absolutely agree with what you are saying. We have a lot of expertise that's been developed because we've had people in the area. We had Secretary Carter's defense innovation board was down visiting us earlier this week, and this was -- this was a specific discussion right here that is we look at innovation within the Department of Defense. Part of that is it's probably about technologies, probably about ideas but it's also about bringing the -- bringing the right talent, the human talent into this and reaching out and developing people that have -- have what she just talked about, have better understanding of the culture, they've come from that area for example.

So, I absolutely agree with you and I think that's definitely something we ought to -- we ought to be doing here as we move forward.

MR. ENGEL: Jane (phonetic). You're micless. While they get a mic over to you can we get a quick question over there, you're holding a mic and Jane will get right after you. Go ahead.

MR. FUERY: Thank You. Evan Fuery, I'm with Statoil. General, when you think about the campaign against Al Qaeda, now ISIS so, I think we're on Al Qaeda 4.0 or 5.0 since it really came to global attention in -- after 9/11. How do you see this evolving? Can you give us a glimpse behind your sort of longer term thinking about how to anticipate the defeat of ISIS militarily and what it's going to become in the next iteration of this long war?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, that's a -- that's a great -- that's a great question and you know sometimes we get so caught up and currently what we're doing we don't put enough thought into that but, you know, I think as I mentioned to you a little bit earlier, I think we recognize this is going to be a protracted approach here. And so what we have to expect is that they are going to adapt and as we remove their ability to govern in the own -- own terrain, they're going to continue to move to more innovative ways of trying to conduct their operations.

You know I think -- you know, unfortunately whether the attack in Nice was inspired or what the relationship is there, I mean I'm not completely certain on it. But I think it's a reminder for us of just how adaptive this can be, where our focus is on their use of explosives but then they use something like a semi truck to -- a semi truck can be used to create the similar effects.

So what I think is I think what we have to do is we have to better understand the ideology, I think we have to be more focused in terms of going into the areas that are most vulnerable and beginning to shape and work with those populations and our partners in those areas to begin to address some of the underlying issues at the beginning of this. So, you know, I think ultimately that's where we have to -- where we have to go with this.

We do have to address the underlying issues that are -- that continue to feed this ideology and feed this sense of despair, that leads people to adopt this approach.

MR. ENGEL: So, we only have two minutes left, so Jane and then I'll see if I can squeeze in one, one more this time.

SPEAKER: Well, Richard, first thank you for your extraordinary insights and bravery. I think a lot of us have learned so much from you. To you, General, we've learned sadly that in this quest for a two-state solution we seem to want it more than the parties want it. And my question to you is, do the parties in the region, the



leaders of the country and the -- countries and the people in the countries want stability and pluralism as much as we do?

GEN. VOTEL: Yeah, that's a great -- that's a great question and you know and I think it's -- why it's so important that this you know as I talk about this discussion of governance, the discussion of the political you know solution here is such an important one to our military operations we've got to go with it. I see two different things. I see in some cases people who aspirationally think for their own sovereignty that we need to be a separate part here. We, you know, we have a separate part of the country for the Kurds or whoever it happens to be here.

But I also see the reality that sometimes seeps into that that their ability to economically support that to do that type of stuff may be challenged. So you know I see a little bit of both sides of that as I talk to people in the region that there is you know certainly some aspirational aspect to this that certainly continues come up but I also see the reality of that being effectively implemented. And I don't -- certainly don't think there's a military solution to that but it's certainly something that I think has to be addressed.

MR. ENGEL: And last question. It's often been said that you can't win a war if you don't know how it ends, you don't know what victory looks like. What does victory look like here? There's this disruption campaign, multiple dilemmas against ISIS. But the behavior of Turkey, as you said, is concerning and unclear. The alliance between Russia and Assad is at a strictly de-conflicting level, you said. So aside from bothering ISIS and killing its fighters, how do you see the endgame? How do you see the victory?

GEN. VOTEL: That's a question hard to answer like in 30 seconds.

MR. ENGEL: You take two minutes.

GEN. VOTEL: Okay. So let me just say, I mean,

I think you know the success to me, victory in your term here, I think what it looks like, I think it looks like holding our coalition together and being able to prevent ISIL from doing the things that it is doing right now, that is controlling terrain, you know continuing with their very toxic ideology, and preventing them from perpetrating the tax outside of the areas in which they are. I -- that to me is success. I think success for us is also continuing to preserve our influence in the area, continuing to support our objectives in the area of not allowing that area to be used as a platform for attacks on our capital or on the capitals of other -- of our other coalition partners here.

And I think it, you know, continuing to kind of preserve our decision space as we kind of move forward. So we can continue to address the bigger, longer term issues of this. So I'm summarizing here but I mean I think to me you know I don't think there's going to be a big victory parade in this, I think it's about, it's about prevailing, staying one step higher. I think of this very much as a wrestling match. We wrestle, we score a point and then we move on to the next moves in this thing. And if you do that enough eventually you end up prevailing, and that's kind of how I think we have to look at this.

MR. ENGEL: All right. Well, thank you very much. I appreciate your time.

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