

Marine Corps General Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., Commander, U.S. Central Command Holds a Press Briefing on Defensive Strikes Against Iran

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GEN. KENNETH F. MCKENZIE JR.: Good morning, everybody. Thanks for coming in today.

First and foremost, I want to express my condolences to the family and friends of a number of recent casualties that we've lost in CENTCOM over the last few days. Two Marines were killed in mountainous terrain in northern Iraq, in an advise-and-accompany mission with our Iraqi partners during a mission against the remains of ISIS. A third Marine was killed in a vehicle accident in the United Arab Emirates during Exercise Native Fury.

Finally and most recently, a U.S. Army soldier and a U.S. Air Force airman and a medic from the United Kingdom were killed during a rocket attack by an Iranian-backed militia, Kata'ib Hizbollah, on Camp Taji, which is an Iraqi base that hosts coalition forces engaged in the fight against ISIS.

Beyond those killed, we want to recognize the 18 combat-wounded service members and civilians. We also want to recognize two additional service members who were injured in non-combat injuries involved in the -- in the vehicle rollover in Native Fury.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the friends and families of those killed and wounded, and we wish a speedy and full recovery to the wounded and the injured.

I'd like to brief you on last night's defensive strikes on five Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hizbollah advanced conventional weapons storage units in Iraq.

Up front, we have information that confirms that Kata'ib Hizbollah conducted the rocket attacks on Camp Taji on March the 11th that killed three coalition members and injured 14 others. We also assessed that Kata'ib Hizbollah has been involved in 12 rocket attacks against coalition forces in the last six months.

In response to this attack on an Iraqi base that hosts coalition forces supporting the Iraqi fight against ISIS, we carried out precision defensive strikes to degrade and destroy advanced conventional weapons that have been provided to Kata'ib Hizbollah by their Iranian backers.

Let's go to the first slide, please. So what you see on the graphic there are the five targets that we struck. I'll just briefly call them out for you. What we call target A1 is the Arab Nawar Ahmad Rocket Storage Facility. A2 is the Jurf Al Sakhar IRAM Storage Facility -- and of course, IRAM are the improved heavy rockets that are so lethal.

A3 is the Karbala Kh Advanced Conventional Weapons Storage Facility. A4 is the Al-Musayib Terrorist Weapon Storage Facility. And A5 is another Jurf Al Sakhar facility, it's the Propellant Production Facility and Storage sites.

So I'm going to hold those images for just a minute. We struck them at 6 p.m. Eastern Standard Time. We assessed that each location stored weapons that would enable lethal operations against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq. We also assessed that the destruction of these sites will degrade Kata'ib Hizbollah's ability to conduct future strikes.

While we faced significant weather issues and continue to face significant weather issues in the Baghdad area, it prevented clear photos and videos of -- that we would like -- at the level that we would like to share with you. We do have some images.

And we are confident that we have effectively destroyed these facilities and expect they will no longer be able to house the type of advanced Iranian-supplied weapons that were used in the Kata'ib Hizbollah attacks on the Iraqi base at Camp Taji.

So let's go to the next slide, please.

Same format, these are the after images. And I'm sure we're going to provide this to you in hard copy so that you can see them as well after the -- after the brief this morning. But we assess success at all sites, and we're very comfortable with the level of damage that we were able to -- that we were able to achieve. And you can see it -- I know it's a little hard to see from a distance, but we'll -- again, we'll make sure you actually get the slides.

The strikes were all conducted by manned fighter aircraft and they recovered safely at the completion of their mission. I'm not going to be able to give you any specific information about where the aircraft were based, and I'm not going to be able to provide any more details about the type of weapons that we employed.

But as you can see from the imagery, they were all precise weapons, carefully calibrated by our weaponeers to achieve maximum effect on the target and minimize collateral damage.

I also want to reiterate that these strikes -- these defensive strikes were designed to destroy Iranian-supplied advanced conventional weapons, and that the United States acted in self-defense in response to a direct and deliberate attack -- a direct and deliberate attack on an Iraqi base that hosts coalition service members.

We are in Iraq to support the people of Iraq in their fight against ISIS. However, we always reserve the right to defend our forces whenever they're attacked or threatened.

Finally, I would caution Iran and its proxies from attempting a response that would endanger U.S. and coalition forces or our partners. U.S. Central Command is well-postured to defend our forces around the region, and to respond to any further aggression against our forces.

In fact, I have asked, and the Secretary has granted my request, to continue to operate two aircraft carrier strikes groups in the region, which is the first period of extended dual U.S. carrier operations in U.S. Central Command since, we believe, around 2012.

We have the flexibility, the capability and the will to respond to any threat. And with that, I'll be happy to take your questions.

Q: General thank you. Can you tell us what your assessment is of any casualties in the strikes?

And secondly, more broadly, can you talk about whether or not you think this does escalate tensions with Iran and whether Iran directed these strikes?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So we're still assessing damage on the target sites. As I noted earlier, weather in the Baghdad area has prevented us from really following up. So I don't have any numbers for you right now.

But we believe that the -- the collateral damage is going to be very low. We expect there are going to be fatalities on the objective. But I don't have those numbers for you right now. We'll work to get those out here in the -- in the future, in the near future, as we continue.

We believe that this is going to have an effect on deterring -- on deterring future strikes of this nature. We've seen in the past what happens when you don't respond. Now people know that we're not going to -- we're not going to tolerate these direct attacks on American or coalition service members, and we're willing and able to respond.

Kata'ib Hizbollah is closely linked to Iran. I couldn't tell you the details of the particular connection on this strike because I just don't know those -- I don't know those yet. But we know, morally, there's a very strong connection between the two.

Q: But you can't -- you can't at this moment or you don't think you have enough evidence to directly tie this to --

GEN. MCKENZIE: I'm not going to -- this is as far as I'll go on that.

Q: General McKenzie, is there any evidence that you killed General Siamand Mashhadani, who's a top IRGC commander, in the strikes?

And has there been any response from the PMU?

There were reports of some rockets being fired at K-1 Base. Have you seen any response so far?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So I'll start on the back end of that question. We've seen no response yet. And of course we track that very closely. Something may have happened in just the few minutes before I walked in. But as of a little while ago when I talked to General White, we had no information on that.

I have no information on any IRGC general being killed or injured.

Q: General, presumably you knew about these sites before last night. So the question is why wait until after American service members are killed to strike them?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So we are in Iraq at the invitation of the Iraqi government. We always want to work with the Iraqi government to minimize these types of attacks. We believe that Iraqi security forces have actually been active trying to reduce these -- this level of attack.

We don't seek to -- we don't look for opportunities to attack, to cause casualties. But if we're struck, we're going to strike back. So that's probably the reason this occurred at this time, rather than earlier.

Q: Did you ask the Iraqi government to do something about those particular sites earlier?

GEN. MCKENZIE: We're in constant communication with the Iraqi government about intelligence that we have and that they have about Kata'ib Hezbollah and their locations.

Q: General McKenzie, I actually want to follow up on David's question, just to make clear -- I understand what you're saying, but are you saying that U.S. military -- U.S. policy is that you have to wait to be attacked? If you could just explain that a little bit more?

And then I wanted to also ask you, now that several weeks have gone by since Soleimani's killing, his loyalists have made a number of statements right afterwards that they were going to try and enact revenge, possibly against U.S. officials. They had a lot of very hot rhetoric. Have you seen any evidence of Soleimani's loyalists trying to carry out any of that?

But could you clarify --

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So, Barbara, we never have to wait to be struck. If we -- if we believe that an attack is imminent or that we can prevent a blow from being landed by taking action, I and my commanders have full authority to do that.

Q: So, again, why -- could you help us understand, in two cases now, the -- the ones back in December and these, you only did it after the U.S. was attacked?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Well, so the missiles, the rockets, the 107s that struck Camp Taji were not fired from these locations. They were fired from another location. So we actually, in concert with our Iraqi partners, helped us recover the vehicle and the launch site for this. So we acted against that.

These -- the strikes that you see now are designed to send a clear, unambiguous signal that we will not tolerate this behavior in the future, going forward.

Q: And on Soleimani?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So, to talk, a little bit, about Soleimani. Let me just observe, first of all, they miss Soleimani. He was -- he was -- he was one who held a lot of things together for them. And over time he had grown to -- to dominate a lot of their decision-making. In the wake of his death, I think they're still struggling to find a way to come together and make good and effective decisions. And they're still trying to find a way to actually have effective command-and-control over the sum of the groups in Iraq, going forward.

Q: Any evidence they're trying to carry out?

GEN. MCKENZIE: I think -- I think -- we saw an attack a couple of days ago right here. I don't -- I would not be prepared to ascribe it directly to a revenge for that, but I think, clearly, we're going to continue to see a reaction to that.

Q: Thank you. It's been pointed out that the Camp Taji attack coincided with Soleimani's 63rd birthday. Is it CENTCOM's opinion that that's coincidence, or that could have been a -- a motive for the attack?

GEN. MCKENZIE: We -- I don't have enough information to -- to do anything other than acknowledge that it happened on that day.

Q: And the -- CENTCOM continues to describe these attacks as defensive. With respect, aren't you stretching the definition of "defensive?"

GEN. MCKENZIE: Actually, no, I don't think so at all. I think these attacks are designed to prevent future attacks on us, which would be the definition of a defensive action. Clearly, dropping a bomb is, in and of itself, an offensive tactical action. But in a broader context, these are designed to be defensive strikes.

Q: Sir, you talked about two -- keeping two carrier strike groups in the region. Can you tell us which ones?

And we know the Eisenhower and the Truman are there now. Will the Truman extend its stay?

And what's their mission as you see it? Is it, again, as a defensive measure, or do you see it -- and any of the way -- should we be thinking about it in terms of --

(CROSSTALK)

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So the two carriers, right now, that are in the CENTCOM AOR, the Ike, the Eisenhower -- she just came in -- and the Truman. So we're going to keep them for a while. And I'm not going to comment on exactly how long that will be, because we typically try to avoid talking about tactical operations.

The beauty of the aircraft carrier is this. It has enormous offensive capability. It has enormous defensive capability. It has mobility. We can move it around. Additionally, there are no access, basing, and overflight issues associated with an aircraft carrier. It's a floating piece of American sovereignty. So I can employ it in a variety of different ways.

So we can move it around to present a completely changing potential threat to an adversary. So the carriers are very -- they're very important to us. And we know the -- that the Iranians watch them very closely, too.

Q: I'm sorry, just to clarify, you moved some of the 82nd out. Are we to take from this that, rather than depending on ground troops, we'll see an increased security presence through -- through the carriers, through the Navy, rather than through ground forces?

GEN. MCKENZIE: No, we -- we -- when I think about what's going on in the region, I think in a completely integrated fashion about the joint force. All elements of the joint force provide capabilities.

You know, a battalion of the 82nd provides a unique capability. The carrier provides a unique capability. Land-based air, you know, Marine aviation, a Marine expeditionary unit, all are -- all are capabilities that we, sort of, stitch together in a mosaic.

Q: Thank you. Sir, some of these pro-Iranian groups are integrated into the Iraqi army. So, first, did you consult with the Iraqi army before launching the strikes?

And second, do you think it will hamper your negotiations with the Iraqi government to stay in Iraq?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So we -- we talk constantly at all -- the variety of levels with the Iraqis. My level is the mil-to-mil level, the chief of defense level. General White, our commander on the ground, also engages at that level. So we have a continual dialogue about our presence going forward. And -- and I believe when it's all said and done the Iraqis are going to recognize the value that we bring by being there in the counter-ISIS fight and for -- and for other things, as well. So my -- my -- my belief is that we're going to be able to negotiate this, and we're going to be able to go forward and maintain a presence there.

As -- so as to whether we consulted with the Iraqis on this, we consulted with them in the wake of the attack. They knew that a response was coming. And I'll just leave it at that.

Q: And do you think that they are going to keep these groups inside their armed forces, with all the problems it creates for you?

GEN. MCKENZIE: We would certainly urge them that -- to not do that, and to minimize that to the maximum extent possible.

Q: General, thanks for doing this. First of all, you said you consulted with the Iraqis. However, the official account of the security media cell that -- that is associated with the prime minister of Iraq described what happened, the U.S. attack, as an assault. And in the tweet yesterday they mentioned, I guess, a contingency within their special forces there is -- belongs to the military that was hit. That's the first question. When you say you consulted with them, it seems they were not happy with what happened.

The second question: On -- on the Hill you described the type of deterrence you have against Iran as 'rough' or 'contested.' I believe that -- these were your words. Does that mean we're going to see this cycle of attacks by a group associated with Iran, and then the U.S. strike back? What does contested deterrence mean, exactly?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure, so let me take the first part of your question. I -- I don't know whether the Iraqis are happy or unhappy. We -- we talked to them, expressed our concern after the attack. These -- these locations that we struck are clear locations of terrorist bases. If -- if Iraqis were there and if Iraqi military forces were there, I would say it's probably not a good idea to position yourself with Kata'ib Hizbollah in the wake of a strike that killed Americans and coalition members.

So to the second part of your question, we use the phrase "contested deterrence" to describe where we are now with -- with Iran. We believe that we have established a level of state-to-state deterrence in that Iran does not seek a large-scale military exchange with the United States. However, as the maximum pressure campaign continues, Iran still seeks ways to reduce the diplomatic and economic effects of that campaign by military action, and military action in two domains: either direct or indirect. Direct would be state-on-state, and we don't -- we think that's unlikely. Indirect would be through continued proxy actions, and that's continuing engagement that we're just going to have to -- we're going to have to deal with in the theater, going forward.

I believe the actions that we took today -- or, yesterday are going to send a signal that we're not going to tolerate that continued indirect approach, particularly when it causes loss -- loss of life.

STAFF: (inaudible)

Q: Can you -- General McKenzie, can you update us on the -- the Patriot and C-RAMs if the Iraqi government has approved that or what the -- where in the process that is? And then just following on that, where would you characterize this -- the continued asymmetric threat? Is it -- is the level of tension or threat as high as it was right after the Soleimani death, or is it down? I mean, can you just give us, like, your overall assessment of -- of where that threat lies now?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure, so let me actually start with that, because it sort of leads in. It's a broad -- it's a broader question.

So I think the threat remains very high. I think the tensions have actually not gone down. I think that Iran has learned some lessons from the Soleimani exchange because they have always respected our capability, but they have had doubts about our will, and so our will is now a little more obvious to them about what we're going to be -- what we're going to -- what we're going to do. So I think that has had an effect on their calculus.

I still think they are actively seeking ways to achieve destabilization that would allow them to escape the strictures of the maximum pressure campaign. So I believe that is

still very much alive and well, and I think I said in my -- in my testimony that the illusion of normality is just that: It's the illusion of normality. The stress and the pressure is there. It's very real.

Perhaps coronavirus even increases that on them because they have really -- I think first of all, the -- the depth of the infection in Iran is under-reported. That is our judgment. It has affected senior leaders, and so that produces an effect on decision-making. And in -- in authoritarian states they can react to an internal crisis by one of two ways: they can turn inward or they can turn outward. History typically tells us authoritarian states turn outward in order to martial the people behind them against a common foe external, either manufactured or real. So I think it's very -- very possible that that's what we're seeing right now.

So the bottom line is I think the tension is still very high. I think the risk is still significant in the theater. And even though we may go days or a period of time without anything happening, I think we're still at -- at a period of significant risk.

So the second part of your question was what about moving -- we are Patriots into the -- into Iraq now. We've begun the preparatory. We have put the preparatory material in place that will allow us to establish Patriot positions inside Iraq. In terms of C-RAM and other close-in weapon systems that are used to defend those systems as they come in, we're still some days away from those systems being ready.

But the one thing I would point out to you -- and I -- and I know that -- that you realize this, Courtney -- is the Patriot does not protect against a 107 mm rocket, and we should be very clear on that. The Patriot is something that you would use against the types of rockets that Iran used in their state-on-state attack of early January, when they struck al-Asad.

Q: But the C-RAMs could protect you, right?

GEN. MCKENZIE: The C -- the C-RAMs can, but they're not -- they are not a panacea. And the C-RAMs are actually linked to protection of the Patriots, because once the Patriots come in, they become a very high-value target without the ability to defend themselves. So typically, we associate C-RAMs and the close-in protective weapon systems with the ability to protect the Patriots.

Q: Thanks.

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure.

STAFF: (inaudible)

Q: (inaudible).

So just one clarification on Courtney's question. So why were -- did we not have C-RAM in place to protect against this kind of attack? That's my first question. And then my second question is that there's been reporting that you're sending some troops home from Kuwait. Are -- are these orders on hold now? Are you reevaluating in light of this decision? And are -- are the guys who were already sent home going to have to turn around and come back?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So the fact of the matter is we have more locations in the theater where we have soldiers, sailors, airmen and Marines than we have the ability to protect. So we have to ruthlessly prioritize, and we can't have C-RAM everywhere we want it -- everywhere we want it to be. And it's just a -- that's just a fact. It's an unpleasant fact, but it's one we deal with all the time. I'm typically the person in concert with my three-star subordinate commanders who makes the decisions about where to put -- where to put close-in protective defensive systems. They just can't be everywhere, so that's the reason that there wasn't one at Taji.

And we -- we -- look, we continually evaluate the tactical situation, but if I were to -- but if I were, for example, to put one at Taji it would have to come from another defended location, a defended location that we made a conscious decision was important enough to be defended. So that's just a constant -- it's a zero-sum game, and we balance that all the time as we -- as we take -- as we take a look at that.

So in terms of forces flowing in and out of the theater -- occurs all the time. You know, we -- we -- we brought some of the 82nd forward. We sent some of it home. We've retained some of it in the theater. I'm actually not aware of any particular move, because I don't track those closely unless there's something significant about it. So I'm really not - - not tracking anything large fixing to happen.

Q: Are you evaluating a new package of forces to come forward now that this has happened?

GEN. MCKENZIE: I'm in constant dialogue with the Secretary of Defense about this -- the situation in the theater. I'll give you an example where the Secretary, I think, made a very -- a very good call: He allowed me to keep a second carrier for a period of time. So that's an example of me talking to the chairman, and the chairman's secretary weighing it and the secretary making a decision.

And as we -- one final thing. I'm keenly aware of how valuable aircraft carriers are. They do great things in other parts of the world. I did not spend my whole life in CENTCOM, I was up here on the Joint Staff in a prior life, and I know the costs we pay when we keep two carriers in the CENTCOM AOR.

Q: The Iraqis said that the -- that a civilian airport was hit. Do you know anything about that accusation?

And do you expect -- I mean, obviously, there was a British soldier killed as well. Do you expect to be working with your colleagues in Britain on any kind of follow-on action after

this? And are you -- is this -- is this it? Is this the response in its entirety for the -- for the attack that killed these --

GEN. MCKENZIE: So there was a structure near the Karbala Airfield where weapons were being stored. You can look on the graphic, it's actually a pretty good -- I think it's

STAFF: (inaudible), looks like it's --

GEN. MCKENZIE: Yeah, A3. It's -- it's over there, and you can take a look at it. But the fact of the matter is, that was a -- that was a very -- that was a clear target. It may have been on the airfield, I can't tell you what else was in there but I know it was being used for purposes to target us, so that's the reason that we struck it.

As to whether this is over, I'll just leave that one alone. We'll continue to evaluate the situation, going forward, without making a judgment one way or another on that. I know the British took a casualty in this. We continue to work with them on a way forward.

Q: Sir, I think you described this as being -- restoring deterrence with K.H. But how would you describe the impact of these strikes? Are they significant? Are they going to reduce their capability to launch these kinds of strikes in the future? And what exactly do you think is the universe of the -- you know, the capability of 107 missiles, like (inaudible) rockets that have been used in the past?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure, so sometimes it's hard to establish deterrence with a non-state entity. A better way to phrase it might be, they know there's going to be a significant cost if they persist in this behavior in the future, and we're prepared to -- we're prepared to make them pay that cost and it should be very obvious to them as a result of that.

You know, any time we conduct these operations, though, we're very careful to balance what we do to Kata'ib Hizbollah against the potential collateral effects of what we do to the wider Iraqi community. So the weaponeers look very hard at these targets and we try to do our very best to achieve precise effects against those that we want to go against.

So, look, the 107 is an old tried and trusty weapon. There are a lot of them in Iraq, there are better and more precise weapons in Iraq as well. There's a broad universe of choices. But what should now be obvious to everyone is, you're not going to be able to fire those at a U.S. or coalition base, hurt or kill our people and escape unscathed.

Q: So you think this is, like, the breadth of their capability or is it much larger and this is just a (inaudible) --

GEN. MCKENZIE: I think Kata'ib Hizbollah is an organization that from its patron, Iran, has received a lot of advanced conventional weapons. And this is only one element of it.

Q: Hi, sir, Tara Copp with McClatchy.

These five sites, do you assess that there are other Kata'ib Hizbollah weapons storage facilities around the area that should be targeted or could be targeted and could be a

threat to U.S. forces?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Yes, there are a variety of other sites.

Q: So why choose just these five, I guess?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Restraint.

Q: Restraint?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Restraint. Attempting to send a strong enough message. If it doesn't work, we got -- we got plenty more places we can go and go to work, and I'm confident we'll do that.

Q: To the extent that you can, can you quantify plenty? Is it dozens, is it hundreds of weapons storage sites throughout the country?

GEN. MCKENZIE: There are a lot of storage sites across the country. We think we know where most of them are.

Q: Thank you.

Q: Hi General, Carla Babb with Voice of America.

I just wanted to follow up really quickly. You'd said that the fact of the matter is, the U.S. has more locations in-theater than we have the ability to protect. Isn't that kind of an argument for less troops in the region?

And then I wanted to follow up on your testimony on Capitol Hill. You said you really have to look to Iran because Iran needs to understand that we hold them ultimately accountable for these Shia militia group attacks. So how is attacking these sites on K.H. ultimately getting Iran to understand that they're accountable?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So you know, the logical -- if we really want to -- if the object were to allow no one to come at risk, we should bring everybody back to the United States. The fact of the matter is, we have national objectives in the region that require us to be there. So we're probably not going to be able to bring people out or collapse the basing structure.

The basing structure that we have is designed to allow us to go after our objectives in the region, and we bow -- and so as we lay that out and we look at the defensive capabilities that we have, we constantly balance those to put defensive capabilities where we are -- where we feel we're most threatened. And that evolves as the -- as you would expect, as the threat evolves as well.

So they're always going to be more locations than we're going to have the capability to protect. In a perfect world, we'd be able to protect everybody. We just can't do that all the time. But we're very careful and we have a very good intelligence-driven process to

put resources where we think we're the most threatened.

Now, the second half of your question. So we do believe that -- behind Kata'ib Hizbollah ultimately is the state of Iran. And the state of Iran is very much aware that we hold them responsible for what Kata'ib Hizbollah does. And I would just leave that at that level right there.

Q: But how does it -- how does the strikes on K.H. ultimately pressure Iran?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So I think in this case, we went after the proximate entity that conducted the attack. I would not give you an opinion about what we might or might not do in the future.

Q: I have a follow-up, just to go back to what several of us have asked. So you know there's other sites out there, there's other Kata'ib Hizbollah sites. You know it's a threat to U.S. forces and you describe this as restraint if the message is sent.

But my two questions, I still don't get it. Is -- when it came to ISIS, there was no question of not attacking ISIS targets. You went after everything, I think, you saw that you could find, that you could prosecute.

Why restrain, why wait if you know there's sites where people want to attack and kill U.S. troops? And is that something that is being put upon you from other levels? From the Secretary of Defense or the White House? Do you have a different view about how you would do this if you -- if you were able to solely make that decision yourself?

It's not clear to me why, if you know there are sites out there, trying to kill American troops, you wouldn't go after them?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So first of all, we work with the government of Iraq to go after these sites all the time with varying degrees of success. If we have information on a site, we share it with our Iraqi partners. And they'll go after those sites. Sometimes effectively, sometimes not effectively. I'm not going to say that it always works, but that's -- it's their country, we need to give them the opportunity to do it.

The second point is, when we look at sites, often, they're co-mingled with civilian activities and there's a very high probability of civilian damage if we strike those sites. The United States is not going to do that. If we strike a site, we're going to find a site that provides collateral damage consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict and our values.

So there are a lot of sites I could strike, but I would kill a lot of innocent people if we did that. We're just going to take that risk because that's the way we fight, and we're not prepared to go out there and do it that way. Even if that place has a higher degree of risk on us.

And the last point is, nobody puts any pressure on me to -- you know, to modify this or to do it one way or another. I have a very good direct exchange with the Chairman and the Secretary of Defense on this. We are completely aligned in the way we look at the -- look at the problem here.

Q: Do you think there's prosecutable sites out there today? Again, no -- minimum civilian casualty, minimum other problems. Are there prosecutable targets out there today?

GEN. MCKENZIE: There are always prosecutable targets out there. But we balance what we do in prosecuting these targets against our respect for the government of Iraq and their sovereignty. As always, it's a multi-variable problem. And so there might be targets that I would strike.

The cost of doing that with the government of Iraq is very high, and I have to respect -- we have to respect, to some degree, the government of Iraq's wishes. It is, after all, their country. We are there at their request. And so -- and so if we do that, I would expect them to do more to help us as well.

So in the middle of that, that is an ongoing negotiation and we're in the middle of it right now.

Q: Thank you.

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure.

Q: Sir, I wonder if you could just expand a little bit more on the post-Soleimani world in the region. Because on the one hand, I think you're saying they miss Soleimani, I think you said, but the risk remains significant. In the -- kind of what's the net result, do you think, where you sit now, in removing General Soleimani in terms of lowering the risk of danger there?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So I think Soleimani was an effective, able, terrorist commander. I think he'd been at the game for a long time, I think he drew all the threads together. There's a danger when you do that because if you go away, nobody can step in.

So I think the malign aspirations that lie with Iran to eject the United States from the theater, to assert its brand of theology elsewhere in the theater, all of those remain alive. What is different now in the wake of Soleimani is, he's not there. And they miss him.

Their ability to exercise effective command and control has been damaged because of that. The intent is still there, they're just not as good at carrying out as they were while he was still alive. And so -- and so someone has replaced him. I don't think that someone is going to be as good as him in the short term, we'll see how it works out in the long term.

But in the -- the principal thing I would draw from the wake of -- of his -- of his death is, it's harder for them to make effective decisions, it's harder sometimes for them to convey their will to their proxies. And so that coupled with the -- with the shoot-down of the -- of the jetliner over Tehran has induced singular pressure on Iranian leadership, and we're still seeing that manifested right now.

None of their core objectives have changed, none of that has changed. It's merely their ability to execute, and their ability to make decisions within their national defense security-making process.

Q: Good. And -- but if I could just clarify, so of the danger and the peril and the threat posed by Tehran to the U.S. and to the regions, how much of it do you assess is potential retaliatory actions by Tehran because of the Soleimani strike?

GEN. MCKENZIE: You know, it's hard to know -- it's hard to know, Gordon, just how much. I think they -- they feel that -- his loss very keenly. I don't know if they're finished with it yet. You know, a theory would be, the attack on al-Assad, you know, finished that. I'm not sure that we would agree completely that that's the case. I think it's still too soon to tell, to be -- very candidly.

Sure.

Q: Sir, a couple questions on the rocket strike. You said K.H. had launched about a dozen in the last several months. How did this one compare in size and scope beyond casualties?

And second, you were -- you captured the vehicle, but how were you able to capture that -- did you capture any K.H. members or anything like that as well?

GEN. MCKENZIE: So we assessed -- the intent was to fire 33 rockets. They fired 30, three were left in the vehicle and failed to ignite. Of the 30 that were fired, between eight and 12 or eight and 15 landed in Taji. That's a large strike. I mean, that's an intent to -- that's an intent to produce a lot of casualties. So -- and we're certain of that, we're certain of the data.

We also get very good point-of-origin data that we're able to look at from our radars, and the Iraqis actually went out and got the vehicle for us, which was very much appreciated. But as usual, typically, the vehicle's left with a timer, there's nobody there when the rockets are fired, which is why the remaining three probably couldn't be ignited because they -- they set a timer on it and run away. A particularly cowardly way to fight, but there you go. And -- and so that's how we get to that.

So, you know, we're processing that vehicle, we'll process the three remaining rockets and we'll gain a lot of -- we'll gain a lot of information out of that that will allow us to further particularize and work on the origins of this attack.

Q: Sir, just to follow up, why weren't you able to see these missiles in advance? What -- if you knew the -- where the warehouses were, why weren't you able to track them and see before they were fired?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure. So vehicles -- rockets are loaded in these trucks. That truck may have moved around for a month before it's taken to the -- because they know we're looking. And actually, I don't have enough ISR to be everywhere all the time. You know, there's a common misconception that we see everything.

We see some things really well. But when we see some things really well, that means we pay an opportunity cost and I see -- I see nowhere -- I see nothing somewhere else. Just the nature of the business, we juggle that all the time.

So possibly, this truck was loaded, it may have been hidden around, it was moved around. They are very good at doing this because they know -- look, for example, had we seen that truck, we would have taken action. (That's -- an ?) earlier question about, do you have to wait to be hit? No. If we see the truck, we'll take that truck out immediately.

They know that as well, so they're very cautious. The truck was probably covered until seconds before they set the timer and ran away, so you've got a very limited period of time when it appears as a -- as a missile-loaded truck.

Q: (inaudible) can you just give us an update on Afghanistan and where things are with the beginning of the intra-Afghan dialogue and talks and the prisoner exchange, anything you can share?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Sure.

So did a lot of testimony on that this week, so I'll just sort of draw on that. For -- and I'm going to talk, really, the military lane because that's what I know the best.

Taliban attacks are still too high. Taliban attacks are not occurring against coalition forces, they're not typically occurring in the cities and they're not occurring against bases. They're occurring against checkpoints and isolated locations across Afghanistan. But the level of attacks, in my judgment, is not consistent with a group that wants to pursue and be a -- be a fair and faithful partner, going forward.

So those attacks are too high. And we have noted -- I've seen what the Afghans have said, if they don't knock them off here in another two or three days, they're going to begin to respond. So I think actually, the Afghan government has been remarkably restrained in responding to the Taliban attacks.

So the question is, do the Taliban attacks represent a core strategy of the group, they're going to continue the attacks? Or is it a splinter of the group and are they not monolithic? We're still assessing that. If it's directed from the top, then obviously that's not a good thing. Because it shows that they're not -- they not acting in good faith.

We are in the process of drawing down to a level of 8,600. I anticipate that we'll arrive at that level by the middle of the summer. We believe that any further -- as we go beyond this, it's going to be a conditions-based approach. We have an aspiration to go to a zero level in Afghanistan, but that is very clearly going to be conditions-driven.

We'll have an opportunity to take a look at conditions as we go forward. And I -- my job and General Miller's job will be to evaluate the military component of that.

The intra-Afghan dialogue, as an observer, clearly, that has to happen. Clearly, our ability to go down below that level, balanced against our commitment to our key interests in the region, which is preventing the generation of attacks from ISIS and al-Qaida against the United States' homeland and the homelands of our allies and partners, that's what drives our decision on what that force level needs to be. If you have a permissive environment in Afghanistan, you can go much lower. If you have a non-permissive environment where the Taliban is actively pursuing operations against at least the -- at least the Afghans and possibly us, then you're going to need -- you're going to need to recommend a larger force structure.

I'll have an opportunity to make that recommendation as the process goes forward. Ultimately, it's not a military decision.

Q: Can I follow up on Courtney's question on the Taliban?

STAFF: Last one.

Q: Sir, you said that coronavirus has had some impact on Iran's senior leadership, potentially made them more aggressive. I'm curious if you can characterize how permanent that might be and just what impact you've seen, if you could provide more details?

GEN. MCKENZIE: Well, sure. Of course, death is permanent. And -- and a number of people have died as a result of that, in the -- in the Iranian senior leadership cadre. So I think it's going to have -- in the short term, it's going to make -- it's going to make it a lot harder to make decisions. People are separated. They're distrustful. And then there's a lot of -- I think there's a lot of public anger in Afghanistan* about the mishandling of the coronavirus, coming on the heels on the shoot-down of the jet liner.

So I think those all represent pressures that act on Iranian leadership right now. And that's going to be presumably passing, but -- but, again, leaders have died, and those leaders are not going to come back as a result of that.

So it's a combination of the two. I think it -- I think the net effect of the coronavirus and the COVID-19 is that it has increased pressure on Iran's strategic decision-makers.

Thanks very much. Thank you.

*[Eds. Note: Iran - Gen. McKenzie was discussing Iran, not Afghanistan.]

