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Darpa Project Seeks to Advance Privacy Tech
New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. B4 | Steve Lohr

The Pentagon's advanced research arm is pursing privacy technology. And this time, it is technology intended to protect individual privacy rather than compromise it.

The new emphasis is a very different path from the one taken after the Sept. 11 attacks, when the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or Darpa, embarked on the Total Information Awareness program. It was to be an all-seeing digital surveillance system to hunt for terrorists. The outcry from privacy advocates prompted Congress to shut it down. But the technologies developed by Darpa made their way into the intelligence agencies and the electronic-spying program that so disturbed Edward J. Snowden, who leaked tens of thousands of documents.

The new Darpa program is called Brandeis, a nod to the guiding principle of the research initiative. Louis Brandeis, a progressive lawyer who became a Supreme Court justice, was the co-author with Samuel D. Warren of an influential essay, "The Right to Privacy." Published in Harvard Law Review in 1890, it forcefully made the case that safeguarding privacy was essential to individual freedom.

The Brandeis manifesto was published two years after the introduction of the Kodak film camera, a privacy-threatening technology of its day. It could quickly capture images, recording people in normal poses and spontaneous moments. The previous wet-plate, lithographic cameras required their subjects to present themselves in frozen stillness. But with a hand-held Kodak camera, photo snappers were suddenly taking pictures of people in public places -- downtowns, ballrooms and beaches. The "camera fiends" were seen as a menace, and banned from beaches and from the Washington Monument for a while.

But while the times and the technology have changed, the fundamentals have not, according to John Launchbury, the Darpa program director for Brandeis. Privacy, he said, is a value at the heart of a free society, and an engine of progress.

"Privacy is a key enabler to things we care desperately about, like democracy and innovation," Dr. Launchbury, a computer scientist and cryptographer, said in an interview on Friday.

Brandeis was one of several emerging-technology programs highlighted at a three-day conference last week in St. Louis, where Darpa invited 1,200 scientists and technologists from academia, large companies and start-ups. The event was part of the agency's drive in recent years to woo leading researchers and entrepreneurs to collaborate with Darpa. That effort has been a hallmark of the tenure of Arati Prabhakar, a trained physicist and

former Silicon Valley venture capitalist, who became the head of Darpa in 2012.

Brandeis is just getting underway. The companies and universities joining the program have been selected. But most are still negotiating contract terms, with only a few announced, including SRI International and Stealth Software. The kickoff meeting for the participants will be in October. The program will run for four and a half years, and its budget will be "tens of millions of dollars," Dr. Launchbury said.

Many companies and university researchers are working on privacy-protecting technologies. Yet Darpa will support early stage research in areas like advanced cryptography, a field known as multiparty differential privacy, and machine-learning software that can learn and predict a person's privacy preferences -- a clever digital assistant for privacy protection. The latter would be a big change from the complex privacy settings on search engines and websites now, which is a major reason much of the online population just accepts the default settings.

The free flow of data, Dr. Launchbury noted, should be enormously valuable across every industry and scientific discipline. But that will only happen in an environment of trust, where, he said, the prevailing attitude is that "you feel so in control of your data that you enable greater sharing at your discretion."

Today, the data world is pretty much wide open, and entire industries rely on mining and marketing people's data. If people have the ability to limit which of their digital footprints can be seen or tracked, doesn't that undermine the business model of many ad-based Internet companies, including Google and Facebook?

Not necessarily, Dr. Launchbury replied. "It would be a matter of, You can use this data for these purposes in exchange for a set of free services," he said. "At least then it's a negotiation."

Naming the program Brandeis suggests a recognition that technology will be only a part of the answer to privacy challenges. So will an evolving legal framework and public attitudes.

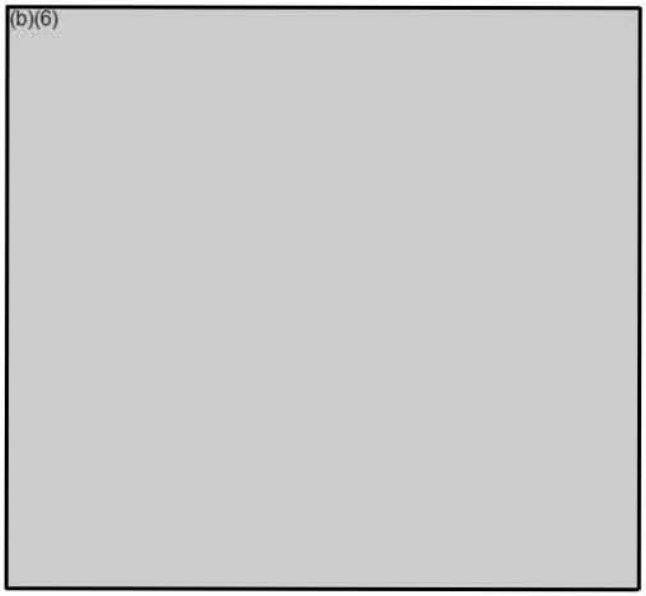
"Privacy is such a huge space," Dr. Launchbury said. "What we're working on here is not a solution. But we're hoping to develop a new technical capability and society can decide whether it wants to use it."
RETURN TO TOP

-----Original Message-----
From: Research Support Center
Sent: Monday, September 21, 2015 10:25 AM
Subject: OSD Morning News Updates 19-21 September

Good morning,

Attached are the OSD Morning News Updates for 9/19/15 - 9/21/15. Please let us know if we may provide any assistance to your research.

Kind regards,



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OVERVIEW

In the first military-to-military talks between the United States and Russia in over a year, Secretary Ash Carter opened a dialogue with Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu aimed at making sure that American and Russian forces avoid dangerous misunderstandings on the battlefield in Syria. In Army coverage, President Obama nominated Eric Fanning to lead the service, a move that would make him the first openly gay civilian secretary of a military branch. Also of note, the general who led the Army's investigation into Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl testified that he does not believe the soldier should be jailed for allegedly deserting his post in Afghanistan.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0430

- Police arrest suspect in string of Phoenix freeway shootings
- Biden edges closer to joining presidential race
- Tiger Woods done for year after latest back surgery
- Pope to witness impact of U.S.-Cuba detente he helped spur
- Egypt's Sisi swears in new government, keeps ministers in key posts
- Mexico detains 13 more in 'El Chapo' jailbreak case
- Death toll rises to 183 in South Sudan fuel tanker explosion

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Al Arabiya*: Israeli aircraft strike Gaza after rocket fire
- *Rudaw*: Germany starts training Peshmerga in WMD defense
- *Sputnik*: NATO chief to make first visit to Ukraine

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1356 – English forces led by Edward the Black Prince defeat a French army and capture John II, King of France, at the Battle of Poitiers during the Hundred Years' War

Table of Contents

TOP STORIES

3. General Wants No Jail Time For Bergdahl

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Richard A. Oppel Jr.

The general who led the Army's investigation into the disappearance of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl from his remote outpost in Afghanistan in 2009 said on Friday that sentencing the sergeant to prison would be "inappropriate."

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. Russia Moves Jet Fighters to Syria

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Dion Nissenbaum and Nathan Hodge

Russia has moved jet fighters to a base in Syria for the first time, U.S. defense officials said Friday, a major military escalation that heightens fears Moscow is set to play a more direct role in propping up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

5. Syrian army reversals spook Kremlin into hasty military build-up

Reuters, Sept. 18 | Andrew Osborn

For Vladimir Putin, Russia's military build-up in Syria is a potential diplomatic trump card and a handy way of diverting attention from Ukraine's frozen conflict. But it was a panicky realization that the Syrian government was being turned over on the battlefield that tipped the Kremlin's hand.

6. Activists: Syrian warplanes attack Islamic State-held Palmyra

Associated Press, Sept. 18 | Zeina Karam

Syrian warplanes unleashed a wave of deadly airstrikes on the Islamic State-held town of Palmyra in central Syria on Friday, killing at least 15 and wounding many more, activists said, in some of the heaviest bombardment since the extremist group seized the ancient town May 10. The Palmyra airstrikes come a day after the Syrian army carried out heavy air raids in the northern city of Raqqa, also held by the Islamic State group.

7. Qaeda in Syria executes 56 regime troops – monitor

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Maya Gebeily

Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate and its Islamist allies have executed at least 56 regime troops at a military airport they recently seized in the northwest, a monitoring group said Saturday.

8. U.S. Train-and-Equip Program, by the Numbers: Nine Fighting, 18 MIA, One Killed

DefenseOne.com, Sept. 18 | Molly O'Toole

This is the U.S. proxy force in Syria, by the numbers: of the first class of 54 to graduate the U.S. train-and-equip program, exactly nine are currently fighting in Syria, while 11 more members of the New Syrian Force — the Pentagon's name for the group it hoped would become an effective anti-ISIS unit — are waiting outside the border to join the fight. Fourteen have left the NSF to join some other moderate opposition group, while 18 more are somewhere in Syria, but missing. One has been reported killed, and one has been confirmed as kidnapped by Al Nusra Front, an al Qaeda affiliate.

9. Coalition united in impotence against Isis

Financial Times (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 6 | Sam Jones and Erika Solomon

As Major General Eizza Zawir, commander of the Kurdish Peshmerga's fourth division, gazed out over the flat plain from his position on the hills overlooking the Iraq-Syria border, he could see the busy supply lines of Isis less than 3km away. They would have been easy to hit, but his hands were tied. "We've spoken to the American team here, the British team, the French team. They see it every day. They can see with their aircraft very clearly. Why don't they do anything? I don't know," he says. The Kurdish troops are not alone in their frustration.

ASIA/PACIFIC

10. Japan Approves Law to Allow Broader Role for Military

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A10 | Jonathan Soble

In a middle-of-the night vote that capped a tumultuous struggle with opposition parties in Parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan secured final passage of legislation on Saturday authorizing overseas combat missions for his country's military, overturning a decades-old policy of reserving the use of force for self-defense.

11. U.S. monitoring North Korean facility

Los Angeles Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A6 | W.J. Hennigan and Brian Bennett

U.S. intelligence analysts are scrutinizing a newly modified North Korean satellite launch facility but see no imminent threat despite the reclusive government's latest threats of nuclear attack against the United States.

12. China to respond firmly to any North Korea nuke test

Associated Press, Sept. 18 | Christopher Bodeen

If North Korea launches a rocket into space or conducts a nuclear test in the coming weeks, as observers suspect it may, China is certain to respond angrily, and perhaps with an unprecedented level of economic punishment. The question is whether North Korea can be swayed even by its most important ally.

13. China 'extremely concerned' by proposed U.S. challenge to claims

Reuters, Sept. 18 | Ben Blanchard

China said on Friday it was "extremely concerned" about a suggestion from a top U.S. commander that U.S. ships and aircraft should challenge China's claims in the South China Sea by patrolling close to artificial islands it has built.

MIDEAST

14. Yemeni tribesmen's loyalty crucial as Saudi-led forces push for Sanaa

Reuters, Sept. 18 | Noah Browning

As Gulf Arab troops push through Yemen's central desert into the mountains that lead to the capital held by the Houthis, their Iran-allied foe, winning the hearts and minds of the heavily armed tribes who rule in this area is essential.

15. Houthis, Divided

Foreign Affairs Online, Sept. 18 | Michelle Ghabrial

In Yemen's tattered capital city, Sanaa, the fortified walls around the sprawling, now vacant Saudi embassy have become one of the favorite hangout spots for the Houthi militia group that seized the capital in September. The rebel group's supporters have covered the steel gates with graffiti. A large white skull floats forebodingly next to the head of a black snake—mouth open, fangs bared. The combination is meant to send a message to Yemen's oil-rich neighbor, Saudi Arabia, to keep out.

AFRICA

16. ISIS Group Attacks Prison in Libya

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A10 | Suliman Ali Zway

Four militants loyal to the Islamic State attacked a prison on Friday inside the air base that serves as the only working airport for Tripoli, the Libyan capital, according to statements by the group and by the political faction that controls the city. It was one of the group's most aggressive forays into the capital.

EUROPE

17. The Pentagon Is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia

ForeignPolicy.com (Exclusive), Sept. 18 | Julia Ioffe

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Department of Defense is reviewing and updating its contingency plans for armed conflict with Russia.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

18. Pentagon official calls for cyber war rules

TheHill.com, Sept. 18 | Katie Bo Williams

The Pentagon's chief information officer is calling for an international set of "rules of engagement" for cyber warfare.

19. Army CYBERCOM Conducts 'Experiments,' While Navy Cyber Fleet Faces 'Real' Deal

NextGov.com, Sept. 18 | Aliya Sternstein

Army leaders deployed in foreign territory have a lot of data at their fingertips to help avoid surprise attacks, such as digital maps of minefield locations. But the man in charge of shielding those information flows has questions about the tools and training that will be needed as cyber threats mutate. Right now, trial and error is providing the answers.

AIR FORCE

20. U.S. Air Force Secretary Could Take on Expanded Space Duties

SpaceNews.com, Sept. 18 | Mike Gruss

The secretary of the U.S. Air Force would have a greater level of oversight over all Defense Department space programs, according to a draft memo from Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work obtained by SpaceNews.

21. Military operations begin at expanded bomber training area

Associated Press, Sept. 18 | James Nord

The first military flying operations took to the air Friday at an enormous bomber training area over the northern Plains that was approved this spring after years of consideration.

ARMY

22. Ranger School: Many do-overs rare, not unprecedented

ArmyTimes.com, Sept. 18 | Michelle Tan

News that the final female student from the Army's gender-integrated assessment of Ranger School will again be allowed to recycle part of the course was greeted by a chorus of online critics accusing the service of giving her an unfair advantage. However, it is not unprecedented for students to recycle the famously grueling course several times, officials said.

MARINE CORPS

23. Gender Integration of Marines Brings Out Unusually Public Discord

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A11 | Dave Phillips

The Marine Corps and its civilian leadership at the Pentagon are squaring off in an unusually public dispute over whether integrating women into the corps's all-male combat units will undermine the units' effectiveness, or whether the male-dominated Marine leadership is cherry-picking justifications to keep women out.

NAVY

24. Richardson Becomes New Chief of Naval Operations; Greenert Retires After 40 Years

U.S. Naval Institute News, Sept. 18 | Megan Eckstein

Adm. John Richardson took the helm of the U.S. Navy from former chief of naval operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert in a change of command and retirement ceremony at the U.S. Naval Academy Friday.

25. Johnson Tapped For Top Navy Uniformed Acquisition Officer

BreakingDefense.com, Sept. 18 | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

When the Navy named its next top sub-builder, Rear Adm. Michael Jabaley, back in July, I wondered where the submariner he was replacing would surface. Now we know: The Pentagon announced late Thursday that Rear Adm. David Johnson will pin on his third star and become the top uniformed acquisition official in the Navy Department.

VETERANS

26. Report Urges Overhaul of VA Health Care

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A3 | Ben Kesling

A sweeping independent review of the Department of Veterans Affairs health-care system made public Friday shows the multibillion-dollar agency has significant flaws, including a bloated bureaucracy, problems with leadership and a potentially unsustainable budget.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

27. Centcom's Intel Massage

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A12 | Editorial

President Obama has spent most of the past year talking up the success of his military campaign against Islamic State. "Our coalition is on the offensive, ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose," the President said in February. He hasn't changed his tune, despite a string of battlefield reversals, from Ramadi in Iraq to Palmyra in Syria to Sirte in Libya. Whence the happy pills?

28. Ruin of Damascus

The Times (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 27 | Editorial

The dogged persistence of President Bashar al-Assad in retaining power is a catastrophe for Syria. It is also a heavy defeat for the strategy of the United States and its allies. Assad's four-year assault against a captive population has reaped the emergence of a brutal jihadist force across great tracts of Syrian and Iraqi territory. This in turn has given a pretext for Russia to give support to Assad, under the guise of countering the forces of Islamic State.

29. Let's not be suckered into playing Putin's game in Syria. That way disaster lies

The Guardian (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 37 | Natalie Nougayrède

"How many did [the Khmer Rouge] kill? Tens of thousands?" asked Henry Kissinger in 1975 when he sat down with Thailand's foreign minister to discuss the genocide in Cambodia. "You should tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them," Kissinger went on. "They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in the way." That is roughly the message that Vladimir Putin has been sending out as he prepares to take the stage at the UN general assembly later this month: let's all ally ourselves with Bashar al-Assad – the Syrian president may be a murderous thug, but we shouldn't let that stand in our way. The Russian leader's message encapsulates the biggest dilemma western policymakers now face as they confront the spillover from the war in Syria.

30. Freedom Fighter

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. C1 | Niall Ferguson

Surely no statesman in modern times, and certainly no American secretary of state, has been as revered and then as reviled as Henry Kissinger. At the height of his fame, Kissinger appeared as a cartoon "Super K" on the cover of Newsweek, complete with tights and cape. Time magazine called him "the world's indispensable man." In 1974, his approval rating, according to the regular Harris survey, was an astounding 85%. Since then, however, heaping opprobrium on Kissinger has become a thriving industry.

TOP STORIES

1. U.S., Russia discuss Syria

Moscow's military moves fuel alarm; Common ground on ISIS, civil war sought

Washington Post, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Carol Morello and Missy Ryan

LONDON - Defense chiefs from the United States and Russia held their first direct talks in more than a year Friday, reflecting Washington's mounting alarm about Russian military escalation in Syria and how it might affect the fight against the Islamic State.

The 50-minute phone call between Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter and Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu caps weeks of concern about Moscow's moves to make its military support to Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad more effective.

The talks took place as the first Russian fighter jets appeared at a military base on Syria's coast, adding to a growing arsenal of artillery and tanks as well as military personnel that Moscow has provided in recent weeks to its key ally on the Mediterranean.

Secretary of State John F. Kerry said military talks with Russia would "help to define some of the different options that are available to us as we consider next steps in Syria."

"Obviously, our focus remains on destroying ISIL," Kerry told reporters during a visit to London, "and also on a political settlement with respect to Syria, which we believe cannot be achieved with the long-term presence of Assad. We are looking for ways in which to try and find a common ground." ISIL is an acronym for the Islamic State.

The military buildup by Russia, already at odds with Washington over the war in Ukraine, adds a new layer of complexity to the crisis in Syria, a foreign policy challenge President Obama has struggled to address for more than four years. It comes as Europe is confronting a massive wave of Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict.

In a statement, Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook said Carter and Shoigu agreed to discuss means for ensuring that the two countries' military activities in Syria don't come into conflict - an especially important goal as the United States continues a year-old air campaign against Islamic State militants there.

The conversation marked the first time Carter has spoken with Shoigu since the U.S. defense chief took office in February, and it was the first call between any U.S. defense secretary and the Russian minister since August 2014. It comes 18 months after the United States halted military engagement with Russia, including exercises and bilateral meetings, because of Moscow's activities in Ukraine.

It's still unclear whether the two countries could engage in any direct military cooperation against the Islamic State.

"We have two big jobs in Syria: One is to broker a diplomatic settlement, and the other is to defeat the Islamic State," said Julianne Smith, a former White House official who is now a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. "Both of those take us to Russia."

"The administration has no choice but to engage with the Russians at this point, however unsavory that might feel," she added.

But the unusual talks probably do not indicate a near-term shift in the administration's stance on the other issues that have pitted it against Moscow: the war in Ukraine and the future of the Assad regime, increasingly under pressure from a variety of armed opponents.

While Russia says that escalation of its longtime military support aims to help the Syrian army battle the Islamic State, administration officials fear that the recent deployment of Russian troops and hardware is meant to bolster Assad's fragile position.

"If they're serious about really wanting to fight ISIS, and they want to work with us on a political solution, there's a way to parlay this that could be constructive. If they're coming in to do the regime's bidding . . . that's not going to be good," said an administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive bilateral issues. "The jury is still out."

In Moscow, Russian officials raised the prospect of sending troops into combat in Syria if Assad wants them.

"If there is a request, it will be discussed as part of bilateral contacts," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters Friday. "Of course it will be discussed and considered."

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem said Thursday that "there's no joint fight on the ground with Russian forces, but if we sense the need for it, we will consider and ask," the official Syrian Arab News Agency reported.

Syria's civil war threatens Moscow's foreign policy interests, notably the future of a Russian naval facility in the Syrian port of Tartus. It also poses domestic concerns.

In an interview with Britain's Channel 4, Kerry said the Russians are increasingly concerned about the rising number of fighters from their region in combat alongside the Islamic State in Syria - 2,000 from Chechnya alone.

He said the U.S.-Russian dialogue so far has been about de-confliction, a term that refers to making sure U.S. and Russian military efforts don't interfere with each other. But he held out the possibility that it could expand.

"It is possible now that there may yet be a meeting or some other follow-up on it," Kerry said. "We will stay very closely in communication, because that's very important. We share the same goal. We share the goal of ridding the region of ISIL."

But Kerry also voiced wariness about Russia's support for Assad.

"Well, they allege that they also share the goal of a political transition that leads to a stable, whole, united, secular Syria," he said. "The question always remains: Where is Assad's place and role within that, and that's what we need to have more conversation on."

On Friday, the Kremlin said that Russian President Vladimir Putin will meet with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu next week in Moscow for talks that will cover the "Middle East peace process and war with the global terrorist threat."

Putin has called for a coalition with the West to fight Middle Eastern terrorism, an initiative that analysts say could help improve Russia's relations with the West, damaged by the crisis in Ukraine between Moscow-backed rebels and the Western-supported Kiev government.

Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, said Russia's actions in Syria are "not just a token initiative." A Russian intervention in the Syrian war could also lead to an accidental clash between Russia and the

United States, he said, but the Russian government could treat even that as a chance to reopen dialogue with the West.

"Russia's strategy is to bolster Bashar al-Assad's army right now, to keep the strongholds that it has now, particularly Damascus," he said.

"Failing that, Plan B is to help the Alawites hold the strongholds in western Syria. That's where the Russian military aid is coming. That's where the Russian military presence is today and will be tomorrow," he added, referring to Assad's minority sect.

Vladimir Frolov, a Moscow-based political analyst, said that Russia would face daunting logistical hurdles to bring a large ground force to Syria but that Russia could deploy warplanes. Whether Putin would make further moves into Syria would depend heavily on the result of talks with the United States, he said.

Kerry had lunch Friday with Israeli opposition leader Isaac Herzog, a co-founder of the center-left Zionist Union and Netanyahu's chief political rival.

According to a senior State Department official who spoke on the condition of anonymity under the agency's ground rules, the two men discussed the need to work toward a two-state solution to resolve the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. With the Iran nuclear agreement now secured, Kerry has said he wants to see whether it is possible to revive peace talks.

--Ryan reported from Washington. Andrew Roth in Moscow and Thomas Gibbons-Neff and William Branigin in Washington contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

2. Pentagon insider tapped to lead Army

Eric Fanning would be first openly gay service secretary

Washington Post, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Greg Jaffe

President Obama, in a historic first for the Pentagon, has chosen to nominate Eric Fanning to lead the Army, a move that would make him the first openly gay civilian secretary of one of the military services.

Fanning, 47, has been a specialist on national security issues for more than two decades and has played a key role in overseeing some of the Pentagon's biggest shipbuilding and fighter jet programs. Now he will oversee an Army that has been battered by the longest stretch of continuous combat in U.S. history and is facing potentially severe budget cuts. It's also an Army that after a long stretch of patrolling Iraqi and Afghan villages is searching for its postwar role in protecting the nation.

Fanning's nomination, which must go to the Senate for confirmation, reflects a major shift for the Pentagon, which only four years ago prevented openly gay troops from serving in the military. The policy didn't extend to civilian leaders, such as Fanning.

His long tenure in the Pentagon and his breadth of experience in shepherding some of the department's most complex and sensitive weapons programs was a key factor in his nomination for the Army's top job, administration officials said.

"Eric brings many years of proven experience and exceptional leadership to this new role," Obama said in a statement.

Fanning's rise to one of the Pentagon's toughest and most prominent jobs also reflects Obama's commitment to diversity at the highest levels of his administration. During his time in office, Obama has overhauled internal policies to provide federal benefits to same-sex partners, appointed gay men and lesbians to the executive branch and the federal courts and ended the 18-year ban on gays serving openly in the military.

As Army secretary, Fanning will be teamed with Gen. Mark Milley, who took over in August as the Army's top general, the chief of staff. The two men will assume responsibility for the Pentagon's largest and most troubled service.

The Army, which swelled to about 570,000 active-duty troops during the height of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, has shed about 80,000 soldiers in recent years and plans to cut 40,000 more over the next few years. The planned cuts would shrink the service to its smallest size of the post-World War II era.

Battered by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Army has had to deal with a spike in suicides as the wars drew to an end. Recently, the Army's outgoing chief of staff, Gen. Ray Odierno, said that tight budgets and the ongoing strain of 14 years of war had badly degraded the Army's readiness to fight and that only one-third of its brigades were prepared to deploy to a war zone, the lowest readiness rate in decades.

In a sign of how much the country has changed in the past decade, Fanning's sexual orientation seemed a nonissue among Republicans and Democrats in Congress, who were far more worried about the state of the Army.

"There is a real crisis in morale and retention that has developed for the Army over the last several years," said Joe Kasper, chief of staff to Rep. Duncan D. Hunter (R-Calif.). "The Army needs a leader who will stand up for soldiers, who recognizes war can get ugly and who won't shy away from the tough issues. If Fanning is that type of person, he'll be embraced."

Fanning's historic appointment didn't seem to cause a stir in the Army, either.

"My sense is that the Army is over this and has been over it for some time," said Phil Carter, a veteran of the war in Iraq and senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security. "The Army cares whether you can shoot straight, not whether you are straight."

Fanning's role as Army secretary would give him influence over the selection of the generation of generals who will rebuild the service after the wars. One big question for the Army is whether, in an era of tight budgets, it will return primarily to preparing for heavy combat missions against a big, conventional military, such as the Russians, or experiment with new formations that are better suited to training and working alongside indigenous partners.

"The biggest problem the Army faces is finding its mission, relevance and purpose after the Iraq and Afghanistan wars," Carter said. "All of the services face it, but the Army faces it most acutely."

Fanning has been a trusted ally of Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter, who tapped Fanning last year to oversee his transition team as he moved into the Pentagon's top job. He also served briefly as acting Air Force secretary and a deputy undersecretary of the Navy and has been acting undersecretary of the Army since June 2015.

Fanning's new boss in the Pentagon described him as "one of our country's most knowledgeable, dedicated, and experienced public servants."

Defense officials said Fanning might be the only person in history to serve at senior levels in all three services. "He understands how the Pentagon works and how to get things done in the Pentagon," said Rudy de Leon, who was deputy defense secretary in the Clinton administration. "He knows what works and what doesn't work."

Fanning's knowledge of the costly and complicated world of weapons development is needed in the Army, which has struggled to field new combat systems in recent decades. Since 2000, the Army has been forced to cancel virtually all of its major new weapons programs because they ran over budget or didn't perform as expected.

New battlefield equipment for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as special armored vehicles designed to resist blasts from roadside bombs, had to be developed outside the Army's traditional procurement channels.

The net result is that many of the Army's most sophisticated helicopters, tanks and artillery were developed more than 30 years ago.

"The Army is still living off equipment from the Reagan years," de Leon said. With budgets tight, Fanning's challenge will be to upgrade and modernize the aging fleet using modern information technology.

RETURN TO TOP

3. General Wants No Jail Time For Bergdahl

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Richard A. Oppel Jr.

SAN ANTONIO -- The general who led the Army's investigation into the disappearance of Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl from his remote outpost in Afghanistan in 2009 said on Friday that sentencing the sergeant to prison would be "inappropriate."

Maj. Gen. Kenneth R. Dahl, who interviewed 57 witnesses during his 59-day investigation, testified that Sergeant Bergdahl had unreasonable, or even delusional, expectations about his deployment to Afghanistan and about the soldiers in his unit and his command.

But General Dahl testified that he found Sergeant Bergdahl truthful during the day and a half he spent interviewing him as part of the investigation. General Dahl also said that Sergeant Bergdahl had shown remorse about how his decision to leave his base could have endangered others in his platoon.

"I do not believe there is a jail sentence at the end of this procedure," General Dahl said. "I think it would be inappropriate."

His testimony came on the second day of a preliminary hearing here. Another defense witness, one of the military's top debriefers of prisoners of war, suggested that Sergeant Bergdahl's captivity was the worst any American had endured since the Vietnam War.

The hearing will help determine whether Sergeant Bergdahl will be court-martialed for desertion and for endangering the troops who searched for him. Sergeant Bergdahl, now 29, faces the possibility of life imprisonment on the endangerment charge -- formally known as misbehavior before the enemy -- and a maximum five-year sentence if convicted of desertion.

Held in a windowless basement room at Joint Base San Antonio-Fort Sam Houston, the hearing was adjourned Friday afternoon. The hearing officer, Lt. Col. Mark Visger, will now make a recommendation on whether there is probable cause for a court-martial, the most serious option available to the Army officers who will decide how to pursue the case.

But the unequivocal statement by General Dahl, which was elicited during questioning by Sergeant Bergdahl's lead defense lawyer, Eugene R. Fidell, could play a significant role going forward. If the Army officers responsible for prosecuting Sergeant Bergdahl were to decide later to seek prison time, they would contradict General Dahl, whose investigation forms the basis for the case.

In his testimony, the first time he has spoken publicly about his investigation, General Dahl also impeached much of the news coverage of Sergeant Bergdahl since President Obama approved exchanging him for five Taliban detainees at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, in May 2014.

For example, despite claims that a half-dozen soldiers died in the search for Sergeant Bergdahl, General Dahl testified that he had found no evidence that any soldiers had been killed while specifically engaged in the effort. And Sergeant Bergdahl did not intend to walk to China or India, as some other soldiers had suggested. Instead, the general said that while Sergeant Bergdahl might have made the comment, it was simply typical idle chatter among privates with time to kill on a lonely combat outpost.

Nor, he said, did Sergeant Bergdahl ever intend to desert and join the Taliban. When he mailed his computer home, it was not because he intended to permanently flee, the general said, but because he knew that he might be imprisoned once he left his post, and he wanted his personal items to be in good hands.

The general, who was not cross-examined, laid out the reasons that he said Sergeant Bergdahl -- who was then a private first class -- decided to leave his base, leading to a manhunt involving thousands of troops across thousands of square miles of rugged eastern Afghanistan.

General Dahl testified that Sergeant Bergdahl had grossly unrealistic and idealistic expectations of others, and even identified with John Galt, the hero in Ayn Rand's novel "Atlas Shrugged." From the earliest stages of his Army career, General Dahl said, Sergeant Bergdahl felt that nearly everyone he came into contact with fell far short of his expectations. He said, Sergeant Bergdahl often found nefarious intent in the actions taken by his commanders, decisions that other soldiers viewed differently.

"He absolutely believed that the things he was perceiving were true," General Dahl said of Sergeant Bergdahl, describing those beliefs as "unwarranted but genuinely held."

So, at the end of June 2009, Sergeant Bergdahl left his base between 10 p.m. and midnight, with the intention of walking about 18 miles to a larger American base, known as Forward Operating Base Sharana. There, he planned to

tell a general about what he believed were serious leadership problems within his unit, General Dahl testified. He believed the "problems were so severe that his platoon was in danger," General Dahl said.

Sergeant Bergdahl realized that simply showing up at the other base as part of a scheduled rotation would not get him a meeting with such a senior officer. But he knew that leaving his outpost without permission, and setting off a huge reaction, would probably get him that meeting, General Dahl testified.

"He wanted to create that event," General Dahl testified in explaining why Sergeant Bergdahl set off alone.

General Dahl said that he believed that Sergeant Bergdahl walked for 10 to 12 hours before he was captured, and that he had also tried to escape on the first day of captivity.

"He probably could have gotten to speak to a general, if he had made it to F.O.B. Sharana," General Dahl added.

After his capture, Sergeant Bergdahl endured the worst time in captivity of any American since the Vietnam War, said Terrence Russell, who debriefed him as a senior official at the Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, the principal Defense Department agency responsible for recovering service members.

"His conditions in captivity were as horrible as you could imagine," Mr. Russell said, including beatings with rubber hoses and copper cables. He also said Sergeant Bergdahl suffered from uncontrollable diarrhea for more than three of the five years he was held captive.

Anyone who treated a dog the way Sergeant Bergdahl was treated, he said, "would be thrown in jail for pet abuse."

Mr. Russell, whom prosecutors declined to cross-examine, also condemned much of the criticism of Sergeant Bergdahl since his release last year, saying "the level of wildly inaccurate speculation is outrageous."

In captivity, "He did the best job he could do, and I respect him for it," Mr. Russell added, pausing as he choked up.

RETURN TO TOP

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. Russia Moves Jet Fighters to Syria

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A1 | Dion Nissenbaum and Nathan Hodge

WASHINGTON/MOSCOW -- Russia has moved jet fighters to a base in Syria for the first time, U.S. defense officials said Friday, a major military escalation that heightens fears Moscow is set to play a more direct role in propping up Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

The deployment of a small number of tactical jets came just hours before U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter spoke to his Russian counterpart about Moscow's deepening role in Syria, a call that ended a long pause in high-level military communication between the U.S. and Russia.

U.S. defense officials said the nearly hourlong conversation was designed in part to help avert a confrontation in Syria between the U.S. and Russia, which have long been on opposite sides of the 4 1/2-year-old civil war.

Russia's decision to send in jets, however, is the clearest indication Moscow is preparing to use military might to help Mr. Assad as he clings to power.

U.S. policy in Syria, which has for years sought to avoid getting drawn into the protracted and bloody conflict, is at a turning point, prompted by the flood of refugees into Europe and the surprising Russian escalation.

In addition, the Obama administration is considering whether to scrap its troubled plan to arm moderate Syrians to battle the extremists of Islamic State, which controls much of Syria.

The direct involvement of Russian forces in the Syrian civil war on behalf of Mr. Assad would mark a new twist that could put American pilots, who regularly fly surveillance flights and airstrike missions, in greater danger.

Russian officials have sought to play down the buildup at the coastal Syrian airfield as routine military support for Syria that should not be alarming to the U.S. and its allies, however.

During their call, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoygu told the Pentagon chief that Russia's military buildup in Syria is "defensive in nature" and "designed to honor commitments made to the Syrian government," according to a senior U.S. defense official.

Even though Russian support would be aimed also at subduing Islamic State, it runs counter to current U.S. policy, which calls for Mr. Assad's ouster. And it opens up the possibility that Russian jets could attack U.S.-backed Syrian forces battling Mr. Assad.

Defense officials said over the past two weeks Russia has stepped up development of an airfield near the port city of Latakia by sending in housing for up to 2,000 people, attack and transport helicopters, artillery, tanks and armored personnel carriers.

The jets, believed to be Sukhoi Su-27s, which are designed for air-to-air combat, could be used to challenge U.S. planes flying over Syria or to help Syrian forces defending the Assad regime.

Last year, to protest Russia's intervention in Ukraine, the Pentagon suspended military cooperation with Moscow, a move that cut off bilateral talks, joint exercises and planning sessions.

The Obama administration decided in recent days the time was right to resume high-level military ties, despite the implication that Russia was being forgiven.

"It will help to define some of the different options that are available to us as we consider next steps in Syria," Secretary of State John Kerry said in London. "Clearly, if you're going to have a political settlement, which we've always argued is the best and only way to resolve Syria, you need to have conversations with people and you need to find a common ground."

Friday's call between Mr. Carter and Mr. Shoygu marked the first time the two officials have spoken, and it gave the U.S. a chance to press Moscow on its intentions in Syria, which remain opaque to Washington. U.S. defense officials wouldn't say whether or not Mr. Carter was informed of the jets' arrival in Syria before his call with Mr. Shoygu.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest sought to play down potential military cooperation with Russia as limited, saying it would only be on "a practical, tactical level" in Syria, designed to avoid any inadvertent conflict between U.S. and Russian forces.

"That's obviously different than the kind of military-to-military cooperation between our two countries that was in place prior to Russia's inappropriate and unjust interference in eastern Ukraine," Mr. Earnest said.

The U.S. has said it would welcome Russian airstrikes against Islamic State militants, but not if they were in support of Mr. Assad. It seems unlikely that Russia would join the U.S.-led coalition carrying out attacks on Islamic State forces, which means the U.S. could be forced to coordinate with Russia if both countries are flying missions over Syria.

In Iraq, Iran has carried out a limited number of airstrikes, but they have not created a serious risk of confrontation with U.S. planes.

Russia, one of Mr. Assad's most important allies, stepped up its military role in Syria after Mr. Assad admitted in July that his forces had lost control of more than half of the country to militants.

Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov, a spokesman for Russia's ministry of defense, confirmed the conversation between Messrs. Carter and Shoygu.

"In the course of an hourlong discussion, the two held a detailed discussion on both the situation in the Middle East in general, and in Syria in Iraq in particular," Gen. Konashenkov said. "The ministers confirmed the re-establishment of direct military-to-military contacts between both countries and agreed to continue consultations."

RETURN TO TOP

5. Syrian army reversals spook Kremlin into hasty military build-up

Reuters, Sept. 18 | Andrew Osborn

MOSCOW -- For Vladimir Putin, Russia's military build-up in Syria is a potential diplomatic trump card and a handy way of diverting attention from Ukraine's frozen conflict. But it was a panicky realization that the Syrian government was being turned over on the battlefield that tipped the Kremlin's hand.

When it saw several months ago that Syrian government forces were retreating on several fronts at a rate that threatened President Bashar al-Assad, its closest Middle East ally, the Kremlin quietly decided to despatch more men, weaponry and armor, diplomats and analysts told Reuters.

"The situation at the front was pretty serious if not critical," said Ivan Konovalov, director of the Center for Strategic Trend Studies in Moscow. "Military assistance was needed on a larger scale; Russia responded."

Two diplomats who track Syria closely agreed, saying the Kremlin had watched government reversals against militant groups such as Islamic State with growing alarm.

"The Russians are seeking to limit the damage," said one.

Andrew Weiss, a Russia expert in two previous U.S. administrations, said the Kremlin had feared "the regime was on the ropes."

Russia sees Assad, someone Putin has staunchly supported throughout a conflict that has lasted over four years and killed more than 250,000 people, as a long-standing Kremlin ally and a bulwark against radical Islam.

If he were toppled, Moscow worries many of the same militants fighting against him -- thousands of whom hail from Russia and the former Soviet Union -- would return home to stir up problems on Russia's southern flank in the predominantly Muslim Caucasus.

"Perhaps Bashar Assad is a son of a bitch in the eyes of the global community," wrote commentator Oleg Odnokolenko in the Nezavisimaya Gazeta daily this week. "But ... for as long as his troops stand up to IS, (Russian) military support is guaranteed."

A Western security source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Moscow was making clear it is not prepared to allow Assad to fall.

"The Russians are sending a signal: Assad will remain in power for the time being."

BUILD-UP

That position puts Moscow at odds with the United States, which has been leading an air war against Islamic State fighters in Syria and Iraq since last year, but which says Assad's presence makes the situation worse. Washington's allies back groups fighting against both Islamic State and Assad.

The U.S. and Russian defense chiefs spoke on Friday for the first time in over a year, discussing the crisis in Syria as Moscow's build-up raised the prospect of the former Cold War foes encountering each other on the battlefield.

Evidence of the Kremlin's push grows by the day, with U.S. officials spotting tanks, artillery pieces, helicopters and more frequent and larger deliveries of military hardware.

Putin, who remains popular at home despite a deepening economic crisis, will have to tread carefully on Syria though. Polls suggest ordinary Russians are fed up of hearing about the relatively becalmed Ukraine conflict and are unlikely to want to see a major intervention in the Middle East.

So far, the build-up, which has not generated any Russian body bags, has caused few ripples among voters more focused on the weakness of the rouble and rising prices. Nor are there signs that the Russian army is over-stretching itself.

For Moscow, Syria is of vital strategic importance.

Its naval base at Tartous is its sole installation in the Mediterranean, and protecting it is a strategic objective. Assad's government has historically been one of its best clients for arms sales, and its military presence there underpins its influence in the region.

If Assad fell, that influence could vanish overnight and Putin's authority on the world stage, already weakened by his country's actions in Ukraine, would be further dented.

"The Russians are also afraid that if they are not on the spot in Syria and the regime falls, they will not be part of the solution," said one of the two diplomats.

The Kremlin has played down the build-up in Syria, saying only that it continues to honor its longstanding policy of supplying Assad with arms and advisers to help him defeat Islamist militants. It has denied reports its forces are taking part in combat operations alongside Syrian troops, but has said it would consider any request if it was made.

PLAN B

An airfield near the Assad stronghold of Latakia appears to be at the heart of the Kremlin's plans.

According to the White House, the Russians have recently widened the runways and brought in new air traffic control systems and components for air defense systems.

The air defenses in particular have raised eyebrows in the United States, since Islamic State and other militants have no aircraft, so the only potential enemy planes flying overhead are those of Washington and its allies.

The airfield could in time be converted into a fully-fledged airbase, something Russian military commanders have not ruled out. It has been receiving about two military cargo planes a day for some time, say U.S. officials. The planes use Iranian and Iraqi airspace to get there.

U.S. officials say Russia has sent battle tanks, artillery and other equipment to reinforce the airfield along with around 200 marines.

Russia's close ties to the Syrian government date back to the Soviet era when it counted Bashar's father, Hafez al-Assad, as one of its allies. Even before the latest build-up, it had teams of military advisers and trainers on the ground.

Analysts say Russian personnel are now thought to be deployed at six separate locations, including in Damascus.

There are signs that Moscow's stepped-up assistance is having an effect.

The Syrian military has recently started using new types of air and ground weapons supplied by Russia, a Syrian military source told Reuters on Thursday, and there have been unconfirmed reports of the Syrian airforce striking targets with greater force and precision than previously.

Moscow's plan, say a number of Syria-watchers, is to help forces loyal to Assad hold and retake ground and to reinforce the heartland of members of his Alawite sect, so that if he is pushed from Damascus Russia can help him dig in there.

"Moscow's Plan A I think is to help Bashar to hold out in Damascus," said Dmitry Trenin, a former colonel in the Russian army and director of the Carnegie Moscow Center.

"Plan B would be if Damascus was lost to IS and Assad had to redeploy to Latakia. Then the Russians would help him there. They would be playing for the future composition of Syria."

--Additional reporting by Sylvia Westall and Tom Perry in Beirut and Paul Taylor in Brussels

RETURN TO TOP

6. Activists: Syrian warplanes attack Islamic State-held Palmyra
Associated Press, Sept. 18 | Zeina Karam

BEIRUT — Syrian warplanes unleashed a wave of deadly airstrikes on the Islamic State-held town of Palmyra in central Syria on Friday, killing at least 15 and wounding many more, activists said, in some of the heaviest bombardment since the extremist group seized the ancient town May 10.

The Palmyra airstrikes come a day after the Syrian army carried out heavy air raids in the northern city of Raqqa, also held by the Islamic State group.

A local activist who spoke on condition of anonymity for security reasons reported at least 30 air raids on Palmyra Friday. A local media collective called the strikes a "massacre" and said 15 people were killed and more than 120 wounded. It said Palmyra's only hospital was suffering severe shortages in staff and equipment, and some of the wounded had to be taken to Raqqa, more than 200 kilometers (125 miles) away.

It did not say if those killed were civilians or IS fighters. However the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said a number of IS militants were among those killed.

The Syrian government says it is the leading force fighting IS in Syria and Russia, a key ally of President Bashar Assad, is trying to convince the West of the need to work with Syria in this effort.

Meanwhile, a coalition of rebel groups launched a major ground offensive on two predominantly Shiite villages in the northern province of Idlib, firing dozens of rockets and detonating at least seven booby-trapped vehicles on their outskirts.

The coalition, known as Jaysh al-Fateh, or "Army of Conquest," attacked Foua and Kfarya villages earlier Friday. Both are held by pro-government forces in an otherwise rebel-controlled province.

Syrian TV and Manar, a station owned by Lebanon's Hezbollah group, said popular defense forces — a term used to refer to Shiite militias — foiled attempts by "terrorists" to attack Foua and destroyed five armored vehicles. Hezbollah fighters are also fighting to defend the two villages.

Syrian government forces have pulled out from Idlib province over the past year following major gains by the rebel coalition. The two villages are the only remaining pro-government posts in the region.

The Army of Conquest alliance, which includes Syria's al-Qaida branch, the Nusra Front, and the extremist Jund al-Aqsa group, is backed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia.

More than 250,000 people have died in Syria's civil war, according to U.N. officials.

RETURN TO TOP

7. Qaeda in Syria executes 56 regime troops – monitor
Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Maya Gebeily

Al-Qaeda's Syria affiliate and its Islamist allies have executed at least 56 regime troops at a military airport they recently seized in the northwest, a monitoring group said Saturday.

Al-Nusra Front and the Islamists shot dead the regime fighters, who were being held as prisoners, "execution-style" inside the Abu Duhur airport, said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

He said the killings in Idlib province had occurred earlier this week but his monitoring group -- which gathers news from sources on the ground -- confirmed them on Saturday.

Al-Nusra is a leading member of an alliance of jihadist and Islamist forces called the "Army of Conquest" that overran the Abu Duhur military airport on September 9.

When it overran the airbase, the Army of Conquest killed dozens of regime loyalists and took others captive.

The powerful coalition has seized almost all of Idlib province except for Fuaa and Kafraya, two regime-controlled villages inhabited by Shiite Muslims.

The Army of Conquest ramped up its assault on the two villages on Friday, detonating at least nine car bombs, seven of which were suicide bombers, the Observatory said.

The attack left at least 21 regime loyalists and 17 Army of Conquest militants dead.

One of the suicide bombers managed to enter Fuaa itself and killed seven civilians, including two children, Abdel Rahman said.

Fierce clashes and heavy shelling on the two villages continued on Saturday.

Fuaa, Kafraya and the rebel stronghold of Zabadani in Damascus province were at the centre of two failed attempts last month to secure broad ceasefire deals.

RETURN TO TOP

8. U.S. Train-and-Equip Program, by the Numbers: Nine Fighting, 18 MIA, One Killed
Pentagon updates the tally just days after CENTCOM shocked senators by reporting that only 'four or five' Syrians remained in the fight
DefenseOne.com, Sept. 18 | Molly O'Toole

This is the U.S. proxy force in Syria, by the numbers: of the first class of 54 to graduate the U.S. train-and-equip program, exactly nine are currently fighting in Syria, while 11 more members of the New Syrian Force — the Pentagon's name for the group it hoped would become an effective anti-ISIS unit — are waiting outside the border to join the fight.

Fourteen have left the NSF to join some other moderate opposition group, while 18 more are somewhere in Syria, but missing. One has been reported killed, and one has been confirmed as kidnapped by Al Nusra Front, an al Qaeda affiliate.

On the bright side, all of their sophisticated equipment is accounted for and being held by another moderate opposition group, according to Col. Pat Ryder, spokesman for U.S. Central Command.

"Since Gen. Austin spoke, we went back and looked at this, and right now an additional four NSF fighters are in Syria, so there's actually nine — in addition to the five that he mentioned — there's actually a total of nine now currently active in Syria," Ryder told reporters at the Pentagon Friday. "We also have 11 NSF fighters who are not yet in Syria, and I'm not gonna talk to where they're located outside of Syria, but that's an additional 11, so — 20 NSF fighters part of the program.

"We have 14 who are in Syria with their parent opposition unit, but they've left the NSF program. We have 18 that are in Syria, but their whereabouts are unknown," he continued. "We have one that was reported as killed in action during the defense of the NSF compound, but there's no evidence to substantiate whether he's dead or alive, and we have one who is in [Al-Nusra Front] captivity."

On Wednesday, Gen. Lloyd Austin, the commander of CENTCOM, shocked senators when he reported that of the original class who graduated the U.S. program and were reinserted back into Syria, only "four or five" remained in the fight.

"It's a small number," Austin allowed.

Both he and Defense Undersecretary for Policy Christine Wormuth acknowledged there had been setbacks in the U.S. strategy for the fight against ISIS in Syria.

Ryder said Friday that since Austin spoke, four more fighters returned to Syria. "They went in after he made his statement, so the situation changed," he said.

Though Ryder said the 18 are unaccounted for, he said to the Defense Department's knowledge they have not joined groups on the other side of the fight, such as Al Nusra or ISIS.

"What I would tell you is that to our knowledge that is not the case, but again their whereabouts are unknown," he said. "We do not command and control these forces."

Ryder also explained that one reason for the disappointing pace of the program — initially intended to train 3,000 fighters by the end of this year and some 15,000 over three years — is an emphasis on security and quality, due to the sophistication of training and equipment provided to the fighters. But he assured that that equipment provided to the first group was accounted for.

"That equipment is currently in control of a moderate opposition group and we continue to coordinate with them," Ryder said.

As for why the numbers had changed since Austin's testimony on Wednesday, Ryder said, "I think you've seen, and are very aware of the fact, that this initial group was scattered to a certain degree. So that gives you a little insight into why the numbers would be like that."

The first group of 54 was scattered with many of its members kidnapped and some killed almost immediately after re-entering Syria. Until Austin's testimony, the Pentagon had refused for weeks to say how many fighters remained, and even after, declined to give information about the "individual disposition" of the other 49 or 50 fighters, citing operational security and their safety. Ryder said they are now doing so now to combat "misinformation," but that such a delineation shouldn't be expected in the future.

"I'm providing this information to clarify and set the record straight, but as for the disposition of those forces for future classes, future members of this program, please don't expect we will provide this level of detail," Ryder said. "We will continue to try and be as transparent as possible, but we don't want to ever do or say anything to jeopardize them … and their ability to do their mission."

According to reports Friday morning, the White House is considering abandoning the program altogether, while Pentagon spokesman Peter Cook said Thursday the department is asking the "tough questions" about how the program can be improved or amended. Member of Congress vowed to keep up their scrutiny of the $500 million program on Wednesday.

"Let's not kid ourselves," Sen. Kelly Ayotte, R-N.H. said of the small number remaining in the fight. "That's a joke."

RETURN TO TOP

9. Coalition united in impotence against Isis

Criticism is mounting over US leadership of alliance formed to destroy 'caliphate'

Financial Times (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 6 | Sam Jones and Erika Solomon

LONDON/SINJAR -- As Major General Eizza Zawir, commander of the Kurdish Peshmerga's fourth division, gazed out over the flat plain from his position on the hills overlooking the Iraq-Syria border, he could see the busy supply lines of Isis less than 3km away. They would have been easy to hit, but his hands were tied.

"We've spoken to the American team here, the British team, the French team. They see it every day. They can see with their aircraft very clearly. Why don't they do anything? I don't know," he says.

The Kurdish troops are not alone in their frustration.

The military fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, known as Isis, is locked in a stalemate, and criticism is mounting across the 60-nation coalition pledged to combat the group that Washington's strategy to defeat the jihadis is failing.

The chorus of dissent is being heard outside military circles: the Atlantic intelligence community has in recent weeks begun to significantly change its assessment of Isis's resilience and the magnitude of the struggle against it, three senior intelligence officials said.

One year since Barack Obama, US president, declared a campaign to "degrade and ultimately destroy" Isis, evidence of its shortcomings is clear enough: 6,800 air strikes have shrunk the size of the self-declared caliphate by 25 per cent, according to the Pentagon, but almost all of that area is sparsely populated and strategically unimportant.

Successes, such as the recapture of Tikrit, have been overshadowed by losses, including the fall of Ramadi. About 400 Isis vehicles and tanks have been destroyed, but Isis has captured well over 2,000, if not considerably more, analysts estimate.

In Syria, as General Lloyd Austin, commander of the US Central Command, revealed on Wednesday, the programme to train moderate rebels has produced about 50 graduates, of which just "four or five" were fighting.

The US has always cast its fight as a "multiyear" campaign. But officials say the phrase masks a serious shortfall in timing. One senior European diplomat within the coalition said they had expected Isis to be "suffering serious problems" by now. A senior US military official characterises progress as "very slow". In some key areas, they both admitted, it was failing altogether.

"Five or 10 years is the timescale we are now looking at," says Harleen Gambhir, a counter-terrorism analyst at the Institute for the Study of War. "In Syria, the situation is in stalemate and the Iraq theatre is moving incredibly slowly . . . It might be the right approach in principle, but during this time, Isis is digging itself in. They are adapting."

Isis, says Ms Gambhir, "remains a militarily capable organisation that can coordinate sophisticated campaigns and it has scaled up to act regionally".

That virulence, and Washington's hesitance, is making the caliphate's near neighbours restless. Jordan is itching to intervene. Echoing the concerns of the Peshmerga, one Jordanian military officer describes seeing Isis convoys and formations crossing between Iraq and southern Syria on an almost daily basis. "But we're not allowed to hit them."

Amman drew up plans to create a safe zone in southern Syria this summer. Jordan aimed to prevent Isis's advance south of Palmyra and help secure the north-eastern border crossings to Iraq. It even proposed setting up a forward base deep in the desert to take the fight to the caliphate. The White House withheld its backing.

Others have already acted. Turkey's safe zone in northern Syria was grudgingly accepted by the US in exchange for use of the air base at Incirlik. Washington still fears clashes between Turkey and pro-Assad and Kurdish forces.

Russia's move this month to send military material and personnel to fortify Latakia, north of its naval base in Tartus, Syria, has prompted the greatest concern in Washington. Any move to help entrench the regime in Damascus will only strengthen Isis's cause, European and US diplomats believe.

The coalition's caution, though, is not without reason. First, Washington and its European allies are wary of becoming identified by civilians in Syria and Iraq as a foreign aggressor. Winning the support of the local population is a prerequisite to success, they believe.

Second, regardless of the boost a military escalation might achieve, there is not yet a cogent long-term military plan.

Hayder al-Khoei, associate fellow at Chatham House, says: “This was about stopping Isis’s forward momentum but nothing more. The Iraqis have done a good job in carving our terrain and drawing lines of defence, but they are not capable of moving forward yet. There is no plan for Fallujah or Mosul.”

Third, Washington is worried that without having moderate forces on the ground, a vacuum left by Isis could mean more sectarian violence.

RETURN TO TOP

ASIA/PACIFIC

10. Japan Approves Law to Allow Broader Role for Military

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A10 | Jonathan Soble

TOKYO -- In a middle-of-the night vote that capped a tumultuous struggle with opposition parties in Parliament, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe of Japan secured final passage of legislation on Saturday authorizing overseas combat missions for his country's military, overturning a decades-old policy of reserving the use of force for self-defense.

The legislation had been expected to pass; Mr. Abe's governing coalition controls a formidable majority in the legislature. But analysts said the grinding political battle and days of demonstrations that accompanied the effort could hurt his standing with a public already skeptical of his hawkish vision for Japan's national security.

The debate often doubled as a forum for airing views about Japan's most important ally, the United States. Many were hostile.

"If this legislation passes, we will absolutely be caught up in illegal American wars," Taro Yamamoto, a leader of a small left-leaning opposition party, said in a committee debate on Thursday. The debate ended with lawmakers piled on top of one another in a melee for control of the chairman's microphone.

On Friday, Mr. Yamamoto held up the voting by taking a slow-motion "cow walk" to the podium to cast his ballot. Other opposition groups entered symbolic censure motions against Mr. Abe and officials in his Liberal Democratic Party or made long, filibuster-like speeches, often repeating the conviction that a military with expanded powers would end up being dragged into an unjustified American war.

"We must not become accomplices to murder," said Mizuho Fukushima of the Social Democratic Party. Similar sentiments have been echoed -- usually in less provocative terms -- by newspaper columnists, political scientists and members of the general public.

The opposition's obstructionist tactics delayed Mr. Abe's victory until after 2 a.m., but could not prevent it.

Mr. Abe's critics have a variety of grievances against the defense legislation. Not least is the question of its constitutionality: In multiple surveys of constitutional specialists, more than 90 percent have said they believe that it violates Japan's basic law, laid down by the United States in the postwar occupation, which renounces the use of force to resolve international disputes.

But a less abstract fear of being "caught up in war" has been just as important in fueling opposition to the legislation, exposing a strain of public unease about the United States-Japan alliance that is usually kept out of view.

Japan has accepted American protection for ever since the end of the United States' occupation, and today there are more than 40,000 United States military personnel stationed in the country. Yet the arrangement has come at the cost of Japanese independence, many here believe. The trade-off has taken on new significance now that Japan could be asked to risk the lives of its own soldiers and sailors for the United States in return.

"Japan is caught between fear of entanglement and fear of abandonment," said Tsuneo Watanabe, a senior fellow at the Tokyo Foundation, a policy research group. "It's partly about public distrust of Japan's own government. People think Japanese leaders are too weak to say no to the U.S."

Mr. Abe argues that Japan needs to play a more active role in the alliance in order to strengthen it against threats like the growing military power of China and a nuclear-armed North Korea. His legislation has won support from United States policy makers, who have welcomed a larger role for Tokyo in regional security at a time when American resources are increasingly stretched.

But a central question for many Japanese is whether loosening restrictions on the military will put Japan on a more equal footing with the United States, as Mr. Abe has argued, or, as critics contend, turn it into an American "deputy sheriff" in Asia, its new military powers at Washington's disposal.

Leftist politicians and peace campaigners have been the most vocal proponents of the latter view, but they are not alone. Some to the right of Mr. Abe are also concerned. Yoshinori Kobayashi, a right-wing author and manga artist, came out against Mr. Abe's plans at a gathering of foreign journalists last month, saying, "We must not be caught up in American wars of aggression."

Such attitudes are partly fueled by the war in Iraq, though they have existed in one form or another at least since Vietnam. Although Japan did not fight in Iraq, its government was a vocal supporter of the war and sent troops from the Self-Defense Forces, as the military is known, to play a noncombat rebuilding role during the American occupation.

"Japan has not been careful about choosing when to support the United States, which is the biggest worry," said Kiichi Fujiwara, a professor of international politics at Tokyo University who was otherwise broadly supportive of the legislation.

He said the main aim of the changes was to allow Japanese and United States forces to coordinate responses to contingencies on Japan's doorstep, such as any destabilization of the Korean Peninsula, not to get Japan involved in faraway wars. And he noted that the risk of military entanglement runs both ways: American leaders, for instance, worry about being drawn into a potential conflict between Japan and China over disputed islands in the East China Sea.

"That's not something you hear about in Japan," Mr. Fujiwara said. "There's this assumption that it's America that will get Japan into trouble, when it could just as easily be the other way around."

Mr. Abe's government has kept a number of limits on military deployments in the new legislation. The Self-Defense Forces will be able to engage in combat overseas to protect allies, but only when all peaceful options are exhausted and not intervening would threaten "the lives and survival of the Japanese nation." Critics say those criteria are dangerously vague.

Mr. Abe has said it is "inconceivable" that Japan might be caught up in an Iraq-style war, but many average citizens remain wary, seeing the changes as a slippery slope. In several surveys conducted by news organizations in May, after Mr. Abe first made that pledge, only one in six respondents found it convincing.

Outside the Parliament building on Friday, that doubt was the prevailing sentiment. Crowds over the three days leading up to the final vote reached between 10,000 to 30,000 at peak times, according to estimates by the police and the Japanese news media.

"American's power has been weakening and they can't bear all the military costs on their own, so they want Japan to share the costs," said Taketo Yamanouchi, an office worker from Tochigi Prefecture, north of Tokyo, who had traveled to the capital to join the demonstration. "My impression is that Japan is legislating the security bills in response to the U.S.'s request."

Yoshie Baba, a history student, worried that backing the United States in places like the Middle East could earn Japan dangerous enemies. "If Japan shares the same policy beliefs with the States, Japan could be targeted by terrorists just like Britain and other U.S. allies," she said. "I am concerned Japan could be involved in conflicts or troubles."

--Hisako Ueno and Maki Nakamatsu contributed reporting from Tokyo

RETURN TO TOP

11. U.S. monitoring North Korean facility

A newly modified satellite launch site is under scrutiny after Pyongyang's threat

Los Angeles Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A6 | W.J. Hennigan and Brian Bennett

U.S. intelligence analysts are scrutinizing a newly modified North Korean satellite launch facility but see no imminent threat despite the reclusive government's latest threats of nuclear attack against the United States.

U.S. officials say North Korean crews have upgraded the Sohae Satellite Launching Station in recent months by building new rail tunnels to move equipment and new buildings where a long-range ballistic missile could be assembled.

"The goal is to prevent us from seeing what they're doing," said a U.S. official, who was not authorized to speak publicly on the intelligence assessments. "Stealth has been central to each facet of the new design."

The launch facility is about two hours' drive from Yongbyon, North Korea's major facility for producing nuclear bomb fuel. State media announced Tuesday that "normal operation" had restarted at Yongbyon, which had been partly deactivated under a 2007 international agreement.

U.S. intelligence officials have constructed a 3-D animation computer model based on satellite imagery. They say the gantry tower appears more than 200 feet tall and could accommodate a larger rocket or missile than the country has launched in the past.

"The technology they use on their rockets is nearly the same as what's used on an" intercontinental ballistic missile, the U.S. official said. "That's what has our attention."

On Tuesday, North Korea threatened to use nuclear weapons at "any time" against the U.S. because of its "reckless hostile policy," bellicose language the government in Pyongyang has used often before.

U.S. analysts don't believe the threat is serious, and South Korea's Defense Ministry said it had not detected preparations for a missile launch.

But U.S. officials are concerned that Kim Jong Un's government has made progress toward building a smaller nuclear warhead and a missile that could carry it outside the region. The country is believed to have 10 nuclear warheads.

In December 2012, North Korea launched a three-stage rocket that placed a crude satellite into orbit. Two months later, it conducted a third underground nuclear blast test.

Pyongyang previously has timed nuclear tests and missile launches to coincide with major political anniversaries. This year, Oct. 10 marks the 70th anniversary of the founding of the ruling party, and U.S. intelligence analysts are watching for a possible missile test that day.

The country's largest missiles could reach South Korea or Japan, but are unable to hit Guam, Hawaii or the U.S. mainland, according to U.S. estimates. More powerful missiles are under development but haven't been tested.

"North Korea is the greatest threat that I face in the Pacific," Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., head of U.S. military forces in the Asia-Pacific region, told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday.

"You have a leader in North Korea who has nuclear weapons and is seeking the means to militarize them and deliver them intercontinentally, and that causes me great concern," he said.

Adm. William Gortney, head of North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command, said in April that he was concerned about Pyongyang's missile capabilities but that U.S. missile defense capabilities are adequate.

"Should one [missile] get airborne and come at us, I'm confident that we'll be able to knock it down," he said at a Pentagon news briefing.

The Obama administration said any use of ballistic missile technology would violate United Nations Security Council resolutions aimed at curbing the country's missile launches.

"We continue to call on North Korea to refrain from irresponsible provocations that aggravate regional tensions, and instead focus on fulfilling its international obligations and commitments," State Department spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday.

Jim Walsh, a security expert at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Security Studies Program, said if North Korea tests another missile, it would be mostly for a domestic audience.

"These sorts of tests are a way for Kim to build legitimacy -- the crisis that it creates makes it easier for him to govern and lift people up behind him," Walsh said.

The impoverished country is facing a severe drought, and Kim may be looking to rally and distract a starving and frustrated population with a show of military force, he said.

"This is a kind of provocation that is pretty low risk" for Kim, Walsh said.

RETURN TO TOP

12. China to respond firmly to any North Korea nuke test
Associated Press, Sept. 18 | Christopher Bodeen

BEIJING — If North Korea launches a rocket into space or conducts a nuclear test in the coming weeks, as observers suspect it may, China is certain to respond angrily, and perhaps with an unprecedented level of economic punishment. The question is whether North Korea can be swayed even by its most important ally.

China, which fought on North Korea's side in the 1950-53 Korean War and remains its biggest trading partner and source of assistance, is thought to have the most leverage of any nation over Kim Jong Un's authoritarian country.

Yet the degree of that influence has long been questioned, particularly over the almost four years since Kim took power following the death of his father, Kim Jong Il, who visited China repeatedly and maintained close ties with Beijing.

The younger Kim has yet to make a trip to China or receive any high-ranking Chinese officials in Pyongyang. He snubbed a prestigious military parade in Beijing earlier this month, instead sending an envoy, secretary of the ruling Korean Workers Party Choe Ryong Hae.

Now, North Korean officials have signaled that they could mark the 70th anniversary of the founding of its ruling Workers Party on Oct. 10 with a satellite launch, and announced a restart of atomic-fuel plants that prompted speculation that North Korea is preparing for its fourth nuclear test explosion. Either a nuclear test or a satellite launch would violate U.N. resolutions, the latter because the rocket technology needed can also be used to develop long-range missiles.

China's response to North Korea's last declared nuclear test, in the spring of 2013, was considered something of a watershed in degree of harshness. China swiftly joined the international community in condemning the action, called in the North Korean ambassador to protest, and, according to some indications, slowed the flow of goods across their border.

A new nuclear test or rocket firing could lead China to enforce existing and future sanctions more vigorously.

"China will strongly oppose (a test or launch) and will be sure to implement future United Nations resolutions even more resolutely," said Zhang Liangui, a North Korea expert with the ruling Communist Party's main research and training institute in Beijing.

China may also take unilateral steps such as cutting back on cross-border trade, Chinese experts say. Such measures could target the industrial commodities and luxury goods Kim needs to keep the moribund North Korean economy ticking over and ensure the loyalty of regime supporters.

Information about North Korea's trade relations is difficult to access, though South Korea estimates its rival's total trade rose slightly to $7.61 billion last year, of which China-North Korean trade accounted for as much as $6.8 billion.

Beijing might also consider beefing up its forces along its 1,420-kilometer (880-mile) border with the North, as it was rumored to have done last month during a confrontation between North Korean and South Korean forces.

A test would inflict considerable collateral costs on the already strained China-North Korean relationship, both between their governments and among the Chinese public, where opinion has been increasingly running against North Korea.

"Most importantly, relations between the two parties and people will be greatly harmed if North Korea insists on acting while being clearly aware of China's stance," said Lu Chao, an expert on the North at the Academy of Social Sciences in Liaoning province bordering North Korea.

Such a development, Lu said, will leave North Korea "even more isolated on the international stage," with Beijing less willing to speak up for its ally at forums such as the U.N., where last year it sought to suppress discussion of a report about human rights violations in the North.

Yet, China remains unwilling to take measures that might pose an existential threat to the regime, even as it pushes North Korea harder to end its nuclear provocations and reform its broken-down economy.

Along with their historical ties, Beijing continues to see North Korea as a crucial buffer against U.S. troops based in South Korea and Japan. It also deeply fears that a regime collapse could send swarms of refugees across its border.

For that reason, Beijing probably won't greatly curtail assistance in food and other daily necessities, including fuel oil, although there are indications that some of that aid may have already been cut back, said Jingdong Yuan, a specialist on Asia-Pacific security at Australia's University of Sydney.

"It's hard to anticipate drastic policy changes such as a complete cutoff of aid because limiting the impacts of uncertain developments in North Korea remains a key consideration for Beijing," Yuan said.

Given North Korea's intensely opaque leadership, experts say it's extremely difficult to judge what effect China's existing statements, adherence to U.N. sanctions and unilateral measures may have on the regime. Most, however, believe their value is limited.

"The general conclusion is that Beijing's impact on the nuclear development has been moderate to negligible. The horse is already out of the barn, so to speak," Yuan said.

North Korea's leaders may also have concluded that their regime is secure enough to withstand tougher action from Beijing, Zhang said.

"It's obvious that sanctions haven't affected the lives and decision-making of their leaders. They think that not even a tough stance from China can affect their system's stability, so they just don't care," Zhang said.

Still, Beijing may be hoping to at least give North Korea's government pause.

"When considering the pros and cons, especially with the danger of further economic sanctions from China, the regime may just think twice before acting," Lu said.

RETURN TO TOP

13. China 'extremely concerned' by proposed U.S. challenge to claims
Reuters, Sept. 18 | Ben Blanchard

BEIJING -- China said on Friday it was "extremely concerned" about a suggestion from a top U.S. commander that U.S. ships and aircraft should challenge China's claims in the South China Sea by patrolling close to artificial islands it has built.

China's increasingly assertive action to back up its sovereignty claims in the South China Sea have included land reclamation and the construction of ports and air facilities on several reefs in the Spratly Islands.

The work has rattled China's neighbors, in particular U.S. ally the Philippines, and raised concern in the United States.

China says it has irrefutable sovereignty over the Spratly Islands and no hostile intent.

Admiral Harry Harris, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, told a Senate hearing on Thursday that China's building of three airfields on small islands and their further militarization was of "great concern militarily" and posed a threat to all countries in the region.

Harris said the United States should exercise freedom of navigation and flight "in the South China Sea against those islands that are not islands".

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei said China was "extremely concerned" about the comments and China opposed "any country challenging China's sovereignty and security in the name of protecting freedom of navigation".

"We demand that the relevant country speak and act cautiously, earnestly respect China's sovereignty and security interests, and not take any risky or provocative acts," Hong said at a daily news briefing.

Chinese President Xi Jinping begins a week-long visit to the United States on Monday.

U.S. concerns about China's pursuit of territorial claims in the South China Sea will be high on President Barack Obama's agenda in their talks next Friday.

China has overlapping claims with Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan and Brunei in the South China Sea, through which $5 trillion in ship-borne trade passes every year.

On Thursday, the head of the U.S. Senate's military committee criticized the Obama administration for failing to challenge China's island building in the South China Sea by sailing within 12 miles (19.2 km) of them, saying this amounted to de-facto recognition of Chinese claims.

On Tuesday, a U.S. expert said China was carrying out land reclamation in the South China Sea this month, more than four weeks after saying it had stopped such activity, citing recent satellite images.

RETURN TO TOP

MIDEAST

14. Yemeni tribesmen's loyalty crucial as Saudi-led forces push for Sanaa

Reuters, Sept. 18 | Noah Browning

MARIB, Yemen -- As Gulf Arab troops push through Yemen's central desert into the mountains that lead to the capital held by the Houthis, their Iran-allied foe, winning the hearts and minds of the heavily armed tribes who rule in this area is essential.

The loyalties of the province, whose modest oil wealth is important to Yemen where even before the war over the half the population lived in poverty, are divided.

Most of its famously tough clans are now allies of the wealthy Gulf states, but the Houthis, mostly members of Yemen's Zaydi Shi'ite sect which is distinct from the version in Iran, and army units loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh also have friends there.

Yemeni tribal irregulars -- many of them barely out of adolescence -- drive around the sand-blown roads on the outskirts of the Gulf Arabs' base at Safer and are a vital, if far less organized and well-armed, part of the war effort.

One Emirati soldier operating at the Saudi-led Arab coalition base at Safer said the force relied on local Yemeni fighters to guard the site but only at the outer perimeter.

The Gulf Arab troops have been careful about congregating in one place since a missile attack by the Houthis earlier this month killed at least 60 Emirati, Saudi and Bahraini men. They now sleep mostly separately and gather in smaller groups.

Some Yemenis from Marib, the area's main town, speculate that the new policy might have been implemented out of fear that Yemeni informants had tipped the Houthis off to the base's location ahead of the Sept. 4 missile strike.

The UAE pays local combatants hundreds of dollars a month each, according to one Emirati soldier, a considerable sum in the poorest Arab country. The coalition also distributed new assault rifles and ammunition belts, but the Yemenis still clamored for more, the soldier said.

"We give them a lot, but they say 'I need more guns, more body armor, and oh, a Toyota Hilux (pick-up), but it has to be a 2015 model!'" he joked.

The Houthis, with help from Saleh loyalists in the military, pushed south from their northern stronghold last year to seize the capital Sanaa, before striking quickly this spring towards Aden, the last city held by President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi.

Saudi Arabia, which fears that its main enemy Iran would use Houthi control in Yemen to undermine Riyadh's own stability, gathered a coalition of Arab countries backed by the West to push back the Houthis and restore Hadi.

After months of intense air strikes and territorial stalemate, they recaptured Aden and its surrounding area in July and have now pushed from the Saudi border into Marib, east of Sanaa, as a launchpad for a thrust towards the capital Sanaa.

INDISCIPLINE AND GOOD HUMOR

Some of the Gulf Arab troops were sharply critical of the tribal irregulars, questioning their fighting ability and their unruly approach to tactics.

"They're nuts. They fire around indiscriminately - not disciplined fighters. I don't like to fight where they are," said another soldier, who declined to be named but said he had served in Afghanistan.

Far from the base, Hassan Taleb, a Marib tribesmen, accepted the charge of indiscipline in good humor.

"It's true, there's no real order when tribesmen do combat, it's just the local style," said Taleb, clad in a gray robe and headscarf.

He had bought his flashy new bullet belt himself, he insisted, from Marib's thriving black market. But he and his fellow fighters agreed that Gulf Arab help has improved their fighting ability.

"They give aid, weapons and salaries, but in a responsible way ... through our sheikhs (leaders)," Taleb said. "In the end we buy most of our things ourselves and fight with our Arab brothers against the same threat, the Houthi militias."

Capturing Marib, which is not only strategically important, but symbolically resonant across the region, is important for a coalition which sees its campaign as restoring bygone Arab unity, this time against the influence of Persian-speaking Iran.

ORIGINAL ARAB HOMELAND

According to folklore, Marib was the original Arab homeland, and its people only spread across the Arabian Peninsula after the area's ancient dam, constructed more than 2,000 years ago and the source of its lush agricultural wealth, burst.

Distant shudders from explosions, either air strikes or artillery, now echo from the gap in mountains where a new dam, partly paid for by the founder of the UAE Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan in the 1980s, stands near the ruins of the old.

A couple of dozen kilometers away from the dam, the nearly 3,000-year-old temple famed to have been built by the Queen of Sheba stands as another forgotten relic of "Happy Arabia", as Yemen was once known.

Far before the conflict erupted on its doorstep, the site had been abandoned by foreign tourists after several Spanish tourists and Yemenis in 2007 were killed in a suicide bombing claimed by al Qaeda.

"The dam and the temple of the sun here have writings carved by our old tribes, our ancestors," said Ali Ahmed Abdullah, a lone caretaker at the site with a gray beard.

"God willing, and with the help of the other Arabs, we will have victory and Yemen will return to being great again."

RETURN TO TOP

15. Houthis, Divided

How the Saudi Strikes Created Discord in Yemen

Foreign Affairs Online, Sept. 18 | Michelle Ghabrial

In Yemen's tattered capital city, Sanaa, the fortified walls around the sprawling, now vacant Saudi embassy have become one of the favorite hangout spots for the Houthi militia group that seized the capital in September.

The rebel group's supporters have covered the steel gates with graffiti. A large white skull floats forebodingly next to the head of a black snake—mouth open, fangs bared. The combination is meant to send a message to Yemen's oil-rich neighbor, Saudi Arabia, to keep out.

But the graffiti has done little to stop the Saudi-led coalition from targeting the Houthis and their allies in Yemen. Almost daily for the last six months, the coalition has bombed Houthi-controlled areas in Yemen's major cities. And as a result of their weakening position, the Houthis' initial bold words, anti-Saudi cross-border attacks, and recent killings of dozens of coalition troops in a rocket attack are no longer winning it any points among civilians. Nor are its military assaults on its rivals, which together with Saudi-led air strikes have led to heavy civilian casualties that human rights groups have said may amount to war crimes.

Indeed, locals who used to generally support the Houthis now debate which is worse: the Houthis or the Saudis. Meanwhile, defections from the movement have multiplied, and its leadership is divided between conservative hard-liners—the so-called men of the podiums (named after the religious figures who follow Houthi founder Hussein Badr Eddin al-Houthi) who favor the use of force—and the pragmatists who are pushing for a political settlement.

THE THIEVES OF GOD

Once a small insurgency group in the northern hinterland of Saada, over the past year, the Shiite Zaydi Houthis amassed weaponry and grew in power as they marched southward, striking alliances with other disenchanted tribes and political factions while winning the support of anti-Islamists, both liberals and conservatives alike. The Houthis

even managed to strike a détente with Yemen's armed forces, who have remained loyal to former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. After 32 years in power, six of which were spent fighting the Houthis, Saleh stepped down as part of a United Nations–brokered power-sharing deal after protesters called for him to resign during the 2011 Arab Spring. He, like the Houthis, opposes the new government that has declared Aden the temporary capital.

With the backing of several tribal factions, the Houthis were able to overtake Sanaa in September 2014. Once in power, the die-hard fighters, who have long promoted themselves as the best-equipped force to beat Islamic extremists in Yemen, promised to combat corruption and enact drastic reforms to end the poisonous, decades-long inequality between tribes and regions. Abdul Malek al-Houthi, the group's young, bearded leader, also promised, in a lengthy speech to thousands of supporters, a number of symbolic reforms, including constructing a park to replace the massive army barracks.

Yet the Houthis have failed to make the transition from militiamen to statesmen. For one, the Houthis' southward push from Sanaa into predominantly Sunni areas is bolstering al Qaeda. Under the banner of combating terrorism, the Houthis are instead seeding sectarianism and propelling Sunni tribesmen to strike alliances with al Qaeda since it is the only organized Sunni armed group that has confronted the Shiite Houthis. With rising lawlessness in the newly coalition-"liberated" cities in the south, it is believed that Islamic extremists, including al Qaeda and affiliates of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as the ISIS), are filling this new security vacuum.

"No one is serving Houthis like al Qaeda and no one is serving al Qaeda like Houthis," wrote Hussein al-Wadie, a prominent Yemeni Zaydi researcher and scholar, summing up the way the two groups have antagonized each other to rally the people's support.

And instead of the promised park, the Houthis have used the prison cells inside the army barracks to detain opponents. As one former Houthi sympathizer explained to me, "The Houthis found themselves facing towering waves, but they don't even know how to swim." Other disillusioned supporters and one-time allies speak of the Houthis' Orwellian practices (such as installing loyalists in every state institution to monitor employees and weed out suspicious activity); grave incompetence in state management; and extensive crackdowns on opponents—not to mention kidnappings, torture, and the silencing of media.

At the same time, however, the Houthi government has blacklisted dozens of government employees over mere suspicions that they had links to Islamists and also jailed hundreds of top- and middle-ranking leaders of the competing Islamist Islah Party. To secure their release, detainees had to either appear on the Houthis' television network Al Masirah ("the March") and denounce the Saudi-led offensive or sign a paper pledging their support of the Houthis' "Quranic Movement." Among the most prominent imprisoned Islah leader is Mohammed Qahtan, who was asked to denounce the Saudi offensive on television and refused, according to his son Zayed. A top Houthi politician, Dhaif Allah al-Shami, justified the arrests. "We are in a state of war," he told me.

The Houthi militias have violently attacked other opponents as well, namely, the media and intellectuals. They have systematically blown up hundreds of their enemies' houses. In Yemen's tribal and rural areas, this practice is hugely symbolic; a man who is unable to protect his house, according to tribal standards, brings shame to himself and is exiled from his village. A whole cluster of Yemeni politicians, technocrats, and tribal leaders fled to Saudi Arabia, Southeast Asia, and Turkey for fear of retaliatory attacks.

They were probably right to run: a mere personal clash with a Houthi member can lead to prison time. Lawyer Sadel al-Moalami, a legal consultant to the Ministry of Culture and an Islah affiliate, recalled being detained just

for serving as a ministry lawyer to settle a lawsuit against a Houthi member. Al-Moalami told me that on June 7, Abu Baroud, a militia commander, and his armed men stormed his house. They blindfolded him and led him to an undisclosed location, where they interrogated him about his political affiliations for seven hours. They finally deposited him at a police station, where he was set free. Like Baroud, the Houthis have rounded up dozens of journalists, professors, and young people, stormed dozens of media institutions, and shut down Yemen's most popular news sites.

The Houthis' economic management is just as bad as their human rights record. Critics say that the group was behind last month's liberation of fuel prices, which provided the Houthis with more funds to finance the war but left consumers, who are already squeezed given the severe fuel shortage, to the mercy of the volatile international market. The group has long called for a boycott of American-made products, but local media claim that the Houthis have seized the factories and warehouses of Western franchises such as KFC and Baskin-Robbins, operated by business tycoons such as the al-Ahmar family. And instead of shutting them down, they changed the staff and took over operations to collect the revenues, the paper Al Sharea reported in an extensive investigation. The Houthis also imposed an extra tax on businesses, justifying it as being for the "war effort." In one incident last month, female drivers staged a spontaneous protest by setting fire to tires at a Sanaa gas station. They were outraged by the owner's refusal to sell them gas even though they had waited for two days in the mile-long queue. When the two women accused the station manager of smuggling the gas to the Houthis, he replied, "It went to the war effort."

UNRAVELING SUPPORT

Given the Houthis' problems, it might not be surprising that their success on the battlefield has also been waning.

With help from the Saudi Arabia–led coalition, the exiled Yemeni government, which just returned to Aden, has now recaptured at least five of Yemen's 22 provinces. At this point, the Houthis fully control around six other provinces. Intense ground fighting and air strikes are engulfing the central region. The ground fighting and air strikes have left entire cities devastated and pushed the already impoverished nation to the brink of famine, according to international relief groups. By the latest UN estimates, more than 4,000 civilians have died, some 19,000 were wounded, more than 1.5 million have been displaced, and 13 million now lack steady access to food.

Meanwhile, the Saudi-led coalition continues to build strength in the key eastern province of Marib, home to Yemen's oil infrastructure. The aim is to clear the way for recapturing Sanaa.

But so far, the coalition's bombings have mostly deepened the tribal, regional, and sectarian divisions within Yemen. Most of the southerners are supporters of the Saudi-led coalition after suffering under the Houthis' military campaign. Northerners, on the other hand, who are mostly Shiite Zaydis, carry deep animosity toward the Saudis for waging a merciless air campaign that doesn't differentiate between civilian and military targets. The bombings have forced entire neighborhoods in Sanaa to seek refuge in the outskirts of the capital or in rural areas.

The conflict has also created rifts within the Houthi movement. Ali al-Bukhaiti, a former top Houthi politician, defected in September. In a series of Facebook postings, he dubbed the group "the thieves of God." Ali al-Emad, the new head of the Revolutionary Committee for Oversight, which was blamed for a series of human rights violations and mismanagement, acknowledged the organization's mistakes in state management and blamed the abuses on a faction of hard-liners. Al-Emad belongs to the more political savvy and pragmatic faction. Former member Abdu Bishr has left the Supreme Revolutionary Committee, a Houthi ruling body that formed in February, and accused the group of creating unaccountable bodies to use as a façade from which to rule behind. Another

former member, Mohammed al-Megaleh, wrote on his Facebook page, “The power is . . . in hands of people we don’t know and we can’t reach.”

RETURN TO TOP

AFRICA

16. ISIS Group Attacks Prison in Libya

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A10 | Suliman Ali Zway

TRIPOLI, Libya -- Four militants loyal to the Islamic State attacked a prison on Friday inside the air base that serves as the only working airport for Tripoli, the Libyan capital, according to statements by the group and by the political faction that controls the city. It was one of the group's most aggressive forays into the capital.

A militia operating out of the air base successfully rebuffed the attack, killing all or most of the attackers, according to spokesmen for the Tripoli government.

A group calling itself the Tripolitania Province of the Islamic State released a statement claiming responsibility for the assault, saying the aim was to free prisoners held at the facility. The group said its fighters "clashed with the guards and killed and wounded many of them."

A photograph with the statement showed the four fighters said to have carried out the attack sitting on a grassy lawn.

The militia that beat back the assault said three of its fighters were killed, along with a prisoner who had fought at their side. The base, once used by the American Air Force, is known as Mitiga International Airport.

Fighters operating under the banner of the Islamic State's Tripolitania Province also control the city of Surt. The group has staged attacks in Tripoli before, including a mass shooting that killed at least eight people at a luxury hotel in January and bombings at diplomatic and government buildings.

Tripoli is controlled by a political faction centered in the midcoastal city of Misurata that also includes Islamist groups and militias. It is struggling against Libya's recognized government, which has retreated to the eastern cities of Tobruk and Bayda under the protection of an independent military leader, Gen. Khalifa Hifter. The Islamic State is fighting both factions, deeming them apostates.

RETURN TO TOP

EUROPE

17. The Pentagon Is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia

But the really troubling thing is that in the war games being played, the United States keeps losing

ForeignPolicy.com (Exclusive), Sept. 18 | Julia Ioffe

For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S. Department of Defense is reviewing and updating its contingency plans for armed conflict with Russia.

The Pentagon generates contingency plans continuously, planning for every possible scenario — anything from armed confrontation with North Korea to zombie attacks. But those plans are also ranked and worked on according to priority and probability. After 1991, military plans to deal with Russian aggression fell off the Pentagon's radar. They sat on the shelf, gathering dust as Russia became increasingly integrated into the West and came to be seen as a potential partner on a range of issues. Now, according to several current and former officials in the State and Defense departments, the Pentagon is dusting off those plans and re-evaluating them, updating them to reflect a new, post-Crimea-annexation geopolitical reality in which Russia is no longer a potential partner, but a potential threat.

"Given the security environment, given the actions of Russia, it has become apparent that we need to make sure to update the plans that we have in response to any potential aggression against any NATO allies," says one senior defense official familiar with the updated plans.

"Russia's invasion of eastern Ukraine made the U.S. dust off its contingency plans," says Michèle Flournoy, a former undersecretary of defense for policy and co-founder of the Center for a New American Security. "They were pretty out of date."

Designing a counteroffensive

The new plans, according to the senior defense official, have two tracks. One focuses on what the United States can do as part of NATO if Russia attacks one of NATO's member states; the other variant considers American action outside the NATO umbrella. Both versions of the updated contingency plans focus on Russian incursions into the Baltics, a scenario seen as the most likely front for new Russian aggression. They are also increasingly focusing not on traditional warfare, but on the hybrid tactics Russia used in Crimea and eastern Ukraine: "little green men," manufactured protests, and cyberwarfare. "They are trying to figure out in what circumstances [the U.S. Defense Department] would respond to a cyberattack," says Julie Smith, who until recently served as the vice president's deputy national security advisor. "There's a lively debate on that going on right now."

This is a significant departure from post-Cold War U.S. defense policy.

After the Soviet Union imploded, Russia, its main heir, became increasingly integrated into NATO, which had originally been created to counter the Soviet Union's ambitions in Europe. In 1994, Moscow signed onto NATO's Partnership for Peace program. Three years later, in May 1997, Russia and NATO signed a more detailed agreement on mutual cooperation, declaring that they were no longer adversaries. Since then, as NATO absorbed more and more Warsaw Pact countries, it also stepped up its cooperation with Russia: joint military exercises, regular consultations, and even the opening of a NATO transit point in Ulyanovsk, Russia, for materiel heading to the fight in Afghanistan. Even if the Kremlin was increasingly miffed at NATO expansion, from the West things looked fairly rosy.

After Russia's 2008 war with neighboring Georgia, NATO slightly modified its plans vis-à-vis Russia, according to Smith, but the Pentagon did not. In preparing the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review, the Pentagon's office for force planning — that is, long-term resource allocation based on the United States' defense priorities — proposed to then-Secretary of Defense Robert Gates to include a scenario that would counter an aggressive Russia. Gates ruled it out. "Everyone's judgment at the time was that Russia is pursuing objectives aligned with ours," says David Ochmanek, who, as deputy assistant secretary of defense for force development, ran that office at the time. "Russia's future looked to be increasingly integrated with the West." Smith, who worked on European and NATO

policy at the Pentagon at the time, told me, "If you asked the military five years ago, 'Give us a flavor of what you're thinking about,' they would've said, 'Terrorism, terrorism, terrorism — and China.'"

Warming to Moscow

The thinking around Washington was that Mikheil Saakashvili, then Georgia's president, had provoked the Russians and that Moscow's response was a one-off. "The sense was that while there were complications and Russia went into Georgia," Smith says, "I don't think anyone anticipated that anything like this would happen again." Says one senior State Department official: "The assumption was that there was no threat in Europe." Russia was rarely brought up to the secretary of defense, says the senior defense official.

Then came the Obama administration's reset of relations with Russia, and with it increased cooperation with Moscow on everything from space flights to nuclear disarmament. There were hiccups (like Russia's trying to elbow the United States out of the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan) and less-than-full cooperation on pressing conflicts in the Middle East (the best the United States got from Russia on Libya was an abstention at the U.N. Security Council). But, on the whole, Russia was neither a danger nor a priority. It was, says one senior foreign-policy Senate staffer, "occasionally a pain in the ass, but not a threat."

Ochmanek, for his part, hadn't thought about Russia for decades. "As a force planner, I can tell you that the prospect of Russian aggression was not on our radar," he told me when I met him in his office at the Rand Corp. in Northern Virginia, where he is now a senior defense analyst. "Certainly not since 1991, but even in the last years of Gorbachev." Back in 1989, Ochmanek thought that Washington should be focusing on the threat of Iraq invading Kuwait, not on the dwindling likelihood of Soviet military aggression. For the last 30 years, Ochmanek has shuttled between Rand, where he has focused on military planning, and the nearby Pentagon, where he has done the same in an official capacity: first in the mid-1990s, when he was the deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy, and then for the first five years of Barack Obama's administration, when he ran force planning at the Pentagon.

It was there that, in February 2014, Russian President Vladimir Putin caught Ochmanek and pretty much every Western official off guard by sending little green men into Crimea and eastern Ukraine. "We didn't plan for it because we didn't think Russia would change the borders in Europe," he says. Crimea, he says, was a "surprise."

War games, and losing

In June 2014, a month after he had left his force-planning job at the Pentagon, the Air Force asked Ochmanek for advice on Russia's neighborhood ahead of Obama's September visit to Tallinn, Estonia. At the same time, the Army had approached another of Ochmanek's colleagues at Rand, and the two teamed up to run a thought exercise called a "table top," a sort of war game between two teams: the red team (Russia) and the blue team (NATO). The scenario was similar to the one that played out in Crimea and eastern Ukraine: increasing Russian political pressure on Estonia and Latvia (two NATO countries that share borders with Russia and have sizable Russian-speaking minorities), followed by the appearance of provocateurs, demonstrations, and the seizure of government buildings. "Our question was: Would NATO be able to defend those countries?" Ochmanek recalls.

The results were dispiriting. Given the recent reductions in the defense budgets of NATO member countries and American pullback from the region, Ochmanek says the blue team was outnumbered 2-to-1 in terms of manpower, even if all the U.S. and NATO troops stationed in Europe were dispatched to the Baltics — including the 82nd Airborne, which is supposed to be ready to go on 24 hours' notice and is based at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

"We just don't have those forces in Europe," Ochmanek explains. Then there's the fact that the Russians have the world's best surface-to-air missiles and are not afraid to use heavy artillery.

After eight hours of gaming out various scenarios, the blue team went home depressed. "The conclusion," Ochmanek says, "was that we are unable to defend the Baltics."

Ochmanek decided to run the game on a second day. The teams played the game again, this time working on the assumption that the United States and NATO had already started making positive changes to their force posture in Europe. Would anything be different? The conclusion was slightly more upbeat, but not by much. "We can defend the capitals, we can present Russia with problems, and we can take away the prospect of a coup de main," Ochmanek says. "But the dynamic remains the same." Even without taking into account the recent U.S. defense cuts, due to sequestration, and the Pentagon's plan to downsize the Army by 40,000 troops, the logistics of distance were still daunting. U.S. battalions would still take anywhere from one to two months to mobilize and make it across the Atlantic, and the Russians, Ochmanek notes, "can do a lot of damage in that time."

Ochmanek has run the two-day table-top exercise eight times now, including at the Pentagon and at Ramstein Air Base, in Germany, with active-duty military officers. "We played it 16 different times with eight different teams," Ochmanek says, "always with the same conclusion."

The Defense Department has factored the results of the exercise into its planning, says the senior defense official, "to better understand a situation that few of us have thought about in detail for a number of years." When asked about Ochmanek's conclusions, the official expressed confidence that, eventually, NATO would claw the territory back. "In the end, I have no doubt that NATO will prevail and that we will restore the territorial integrity of any NATO member," the official said. "I cannot guarantee that it will be easy or without great risk. My job is to ensure that we can reduce that risk."

Protect the Baltics

That is, the Pentagon does not envision a scenario in which Russia doesn't manage to grab some Baltic territory first. The goal is to deter — Defense Secretary Ashton Carter announced this summer that the United States would be sending dozens of tanks, armored vehicles, and howitzers to the Baltics and Eastern Europe — and, if that fails, to painstakingly regain NATO territory.

The Pentagon is also chewing on various hybrid warfare scenarios, and even a nuclear one. "As you look at published Russian doctrine, I do believe people are thinking about use of tactical nuclear weapons in a way that hadn't been thought about for many years," says the senior defense official. "The doctrine clearly talks about it, so it would be irresponsible to not at least read that doctrine, understand what it means. Doctrine certainly doesn't mean that they would do it, but it would be irresponsible to at least not be thinking through those issues. Any time there is nuclear saber rattling, it is always a concern, no matter where it comes from."

There is a strong element of disappointment among senior foreign-policy and security officials in these discussions, of disbelief that we ended up here after all those good years — decades, even — in America's relations with Russia.

"A lot of people at the Pentagon are unhappy about the confrontation," says the State Department official. "They were very happy with the military-to-military cooperation with Russia." There are also those, the official said, who feel that Russia is a distraction from the real threat — China — and others who think that working with Russia on arms control is more important than protecting Ukrainian sovereignty. Not only would they rather not have to think about Moscow as an enemy, but many are also miffed that even making these plans plays right into Putin's paranoid fantasies about a showdown between Russia and NATO or between Russia and the United States — which makes those fantasies, de facto, a reality. In the U.S. planning for confrontation with Russia, says the Senate staffer, Putin "is getting the thing he always wanted."

Yet despite this policy shift, the distinctly American optimism is confoundingly hard to shake. "We would like to be partners with Russia. We think that is the preferred course — that it benefits us, it benefits Russia, and it benefits the rest of the world," the senior defense official says. "But as the Department of Defense, we're not paid to look at things through rose-colored glasses and hence must be prepared in case we're wrong about Russia's actions and plan for if Russia were to become a direct adversary. Again, I don't predict that and I certainly don't want it, but we need to be prepared in case that could happen."

Provocation or preparation?

So far, the Pentagon's plans are just that — plans. But they are also signals: to Russia that the United States is not sitting on its hands, and to Congress that America's foreign-policy priorities have shifted drastically since the last Quadrennial Defense Review, which was released as the crisis in Ukraine was unfolding and barely mentioned Russia. It is also a signal that the Pentagon feels that sequestration hobbles its ability to deal with the new threat landscape. In his July confirmation hearing to ascend to the chairmanship of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen. Joseph Dunford made headlines when he said that Russia posed an "existential threat" to the United States and said that America must do more to prepare itself for hybrid warfare of the type Russia deployed in Ukraine.

"It's clearly a signal to the Hill," says Smith. "When I come and ask for a permanent presence in Europe or money for a European presence, I don't want you to say, 'Gee, this is a surprise. I thought it was all about [the Islamic State].'" Dunford's statement angered the White House, which saw it as potentially provocative to Moscow, but it was also a signal to everyone else. The commander in chief has the final say on whether to use these new contingency plans, but Obama's days in office are numbered, and the Pentagon isn't taking any chances.

RETURN TO TOP

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

18. Pentagon official calls for cyber war rules

TheHill.com, Sept. 18 | Katie Bo Williams

The Pentagon's chief information officer is calling for an international set of "rules of engagement" for cyber warfare.

"Rules of the road that apply whether you are inside DOD or frankly if you are on your own [computer] system," explained Terry Halvorsen, the Defense Department's CIO, at a cybersecurity summit in Washington on Thursday.

Halvorsen also said that improving the nation's cybersecurity defenses would require "a culture change."

"What keeps me awake is, 'Will we get the cyber culture right?'"

His statement echoes calls from lawmakers and other military and intelligence leaders for the U.S. to create standardized rules of engagement for cyber warfare.

"We don't know what constitutes an act of war, what the appropriate response is, what the line is between crime and warfare," Rep. Jim Himes (D-Conn.) said last week during a House Intelligence Committee hearing on global cyber threats.

"[It's critical that] we commit ourselves as a country to lead the establishment of some rules of the road internationally on how warfare and crime is conducted in the cyber realm," Himes added.

Lawmakers have questioned who would best spearhead that effort.

At the same hearing, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper and National Security Agency Director Michael Rogers cautioned against placing too much responsibility on the intelligence community to draw up international norms, characterizing such rulemaking as high-level policy decisions more appropriate to Congress.

Clapper and Rogers both suggested that such norms would evolve over time.

There is also debate over whether formal rulemaking is in the U.S.'s best interest from a foreign policy perspective.

Critics claim that just because the U.S. says that some kinds of cyber activity are unacceptable doesn't mean that either individual hackers or state-based actors will follow the rules.

Others suggest that knowing how the U.S. will respond to redline cyber activity will act as a deterrent.

The challenge that the Defense Department faces, Halvorsen said Thursday, is that digital threats evolve so rapidly that officials can be forced to play catch-up.

A cyber criminal can spend "a fairly small sum of money and cause us to spend quite a bit of money," Halvorsen said. "Right now, we are on the wrong side of that cyber-economic curve."

RETURN TO TOP

19. Army CYBERCOM Conducts 'Experiments,' While Navy Cyber Fleet Faces 'Real' Deal
NextGov.com, Sept. 18 | Aliya Sternstein

Army leaders deployed in foreign territory have a lot of data at their fingertips to help avoid surprise attacks, such as digital maps of minefield locations.

But the man in charge of shielding those information flows has questions about the tools and training that will be needed as cyber threats mutate.

Right now, trial and error is providing the answers.

"We've already run two small experiments at the combat training centers, and it's been quite an eye-opening experience," said Lt. Gen. Edward Cardon, commander of U.S. Army Cyber Command. He spoke on a panel at the Billington Cybersecurity Summit, held in Washington.

"You rapidly see the convergence of electronic warfare and information operations also in this space," he said.

Today, there are "tremendous tactical SIGINT capabilities" available to commanders, Cardon said. The challenge is organizing the capabilities. "How is all this integrated together? How do you put the teams together? . . . How do you leverage the intelligence?"

For the Navy, often, there is no time for hacker simulations.

"In a lot of cases, we're doing real world operations because they're there, and we don't have a choice," Vice Adm. Jan Tighe, commander of U.S. Fleet Cyber Command, told Nextgov in a brief interview after she spoke at the conference.

That said, the Navy is developing various exercises, too.

For example, cyber mission forces teams and other maritime commanders plan how they might fight off an attack directed at a specific numbered fleet commander, she said.

The branch encountered a teachable moment a few years ago, when, as the Wall Street Journal reported in 2013, Iran allegedly pierced the Navy Marine Corps Intranet.

Back then, Adm. Mike Rogers, now the head of the entire U.S. Cyber Command, had Tighe's job.

For the next five years, Navy cyber operations will be guided by a strategic plan to expand the branch's cyberspace capabilities and shrink its information security vulnerabilities. According to the strategy, which was released in May, the service will build offensive "cyber effects" through, among other things, "warfighting exercises."

Cyber training across the Navy is particularly important for an organization split across lands and oceans worldwide. Tighe's jurisdiction is global, whereas the other fleet military operations centers are predominantly regionally-focused, she said.

"We've got to train our own [cyber] forces on how to fight," she said. "We've got to train the rest of the Navy how to work with us."

The Army's cyber corps also is tussling with a distributed theater. Local commanders conducting physical military operations need offensive capabilities to help attack the adversaries, Cardon said. Simultaneously, the network required to bring "the incredible capabilities of the U.S. military to the soldier on the ground" must be guarded against adversaries, he said. The Army expects to hold four more experiments in the coming year.

Insider threats have plagued military networks in recent years. There was, among other incidents, a Navy techie who went on a hacking spree at sea and a former Chinese military member, who downloaded Army files while working as a Pentagon contractor.

According to the Justice Department, Nicholas Paul Knight was serving as a systems administrator in the nuclear reactor department aboard the U.S.S. Harry S. Truman when, in 2012 and 2013, he co-led a gang of hackers that breached the Navy's Smart Web Move database. The registry held Social Security numbers, names, and dates of birth, for approximately 222,000 service members.

In 2013, Wei Chen, a one-time Chinese anti-aircraft unit member, allegedly plugged an unsanctioned personal thumb drive into Army computers connected to classified and unclassified networks. After downloading unauthorized material onto the flash drive, he tried to conceal his actions by deleting network logs on the server, according to U.S. authorities. At the time, Chen was serving as a system administrator for Camp Buehring, a U.S. Army base in Kuwait.

RETURN TO TOP

AIR FORCE

20. U.S. Air Force Secretary Could Take on Expanded Space Duties

SpaceNews.com, Sept. 18 | Mike Gruss

WASHINGTON -- The secretary of the U.S. Air Force would have a greater level of oversight over all Defense Department space programs, according to a draft memo from Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work obtained by SpaceNews.

The proposed move is intended to "de-emphasize individual programmatic actions in favor of strategic portfolio decisions," Work's memo says, and allows the service secretary more leeway to advocate for space programs and budgets.

The Sept. 15 memo is addressed to Shaun Donovan, the director of the White House's Office of Management and Budget. A Pentagon spokesperson, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Courtney Hillson, said Friday that Work's memo is a draft and not official.

The proposed organizational changes, according to the memo, would come as the result of a 2014 Defense Department study of space assets known as the Space Strategic Portfolio Review and as part of a broader White House initiative to improve space protection efforts.

"The new focus on space as a warfighting mission and the drive for better and more thorough integration demands strengthened leadership through sharpened authorities and responsibilities," the memo says.

In her job as Air Force secretary, Deborah Lee James also holds the title of executive agent for space. In that job, she is the focal point for coordinating all matters across the service's space enterprise. The position will now be known as the "principal DoD space adviser," the memo says, and will give James "oversight of all Departmental entities with space programmatic authorities," in essence expanding the coordination department-wide.

President Barack Obama nominated James, an SAIC executive and former House Armed Services Committee staffer, in August 2013 to succeed Michael Donley as Air Force secretary.

In the expanded role outlined in Work's memo, she would continue to oversee the department's Defense Space Council, which includes leaders from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps.

Work's memo would expand the council to include the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, the Missile Defense Agency, and the Defense Information Systems Agency.

James has taken an active role in Air Force space programs since becoming secretary. This year she testified beside Gen. John Hyten, commander of Air Force Space Command, at congressional hearings, gave a keynote address at the Space Symposium in Colorado Springs, Colorado, in April and accompanied Hyten during a press conference there. She also regularly fields questions from lawmakers and reporters about the Russian-made RD-180 rocket engine and the certification of SpaceX's Falcon 9 rocket.

RETURN TO TOP

21. Military operations begin at expanded bomber training area
Associated Press, Sept. 18 | James Nord

PIERRE, S.D. — The first military flying operations took to the air Friday at an enormous bomber training area over the northern Plains that was approved this spring after years of consideration.

The expansion of the Powder River Training Complex over the Dakotas, Montana and Wyoming roughly quadruples the training airspace to span nearly 35,000 square miles, making it the largest over the continental United States. Flight operations began after the Federal Aviation Administration finished mapping work on the expanded airspace, a spokeswoman for the 28th Bomb Wing at Ellsworth Air Force Base said in an email.

The airspace will be used by B-1 bombers from Ellsworth in South Dakota and B-52 bombers from Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota. The U.S. Air Force says the expansion will significantly boost training opportunities for Ellsworth and Minot aircrews.

"It'll be the first flights in the newly charted airspace, which again, is something that we think has very positive, beneficial national security implications for our ability to train air crews," said South Dakota U.S. Sen. John Thune, who began pushing for the expansion nearly a decade ago. "At the same time, it's saving money."

The expansion is expected to save Ellsworth up to $23 million a year in fuel costs by reducing the number of training flights to other states.

Ellsworth delayed the first flights for a day after the training complex went active to ensure a smooth transition into the new airspace, said 1st Lt. Rachel Allison, 28th Bomb Wing public affairs chief. Thune, a Republican, told The Associated Press that parts of the expanded airspace won't be active until communications equipment has been installed.

Allison said the complex's first flights took off as scheduled on Friday morning. Outside of large-scale exercises, she said, operations in the new airspace will be similar to flights in the former training area.

Any given location across the training area could experience up to nine low-altitude overflights annually. Supersonic flights would be limited to 10 days a year during large-scale exercises involving roughly 20 aircraft.

The Air Force has said as many as 88 civilian flights a day could be delayed when large-scale exercises are conducted but that the number would likely be smaller.

Opponents of the airspace expansion have argued that the bombers would disrupt rural communities and scare livestock as they roar overhead on maneuvers, dropping flares and chaff, or fiber clusters intended to disturb radar waves.

Thune said he will continue working with the Air Force to make sure that concerns are being addressed.

RETURN TO TOP

ARMY

22. Ranger School: Many do-overs rare, not unprecedented

ArmyTimes.com, Sept. 18 | Michelle Tan

News that the final female student from the Army's gender-integrated assessment of Ranger School will again be allowed to recycle part of the course was greeted by a chorus of online critics accusing the service of giving her an unfair advantage.

However, it is not unprecedented for students to recycle the famously grueling course several times, officials said.

"Approximately 34 percent of students who enter Ranger School recycle at least one phase of the course," said Col. David Fivecoat, commander of the Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade, in a statement to Army Times.

Fivecoat did acknowledge it is more uncommon for a soldier to be allowed to repeat every single phase, as has been the case with the female student. But it does occur every year with more than a dozen men.

"This occurs for approximately 15 students each year, with each situation considered on a case-by-case basis depending on the circumstances," Fivecoat said.

Army officials announced Tuesday that the female Ranger student will recycle the Swamp Phase, Ranger School's third and final phase.

The soldier, who has not publicly been named by the Army, so far has completed three attempts at the Darby Phase, two at the Mountain Phase, and one at the Swamp Phase. She has been in the storied school since April.

Critics of the Army's decision to open Ranger School to women — a school that until this year had only been open to men — have repeatedly bashed the effort via social media. Many have said the Army was relaxing its standards for the school or giving the female candidates an advantage by allowing them multiple attempts at the school's three phases.

The criticism was so persistent that Maj. Gen. Scott Miller, commanding general of the Maneuver Center of Excellence, addressed the complaints during the Aug. 21 Ranger School graduation. The first two female soldiers graduated that day.

During his speech, Miller recalled what the speaker at his Ranger School graduation said.

"He said, more or less, 'you have people who will question the standards of Ranger School. When they question those standards, what I ask you to do is invite them back to Fort Benning, Georgia, and re-validate their tab,'" Miller said. "To date, we've had zero takers."

Miller went on to address "noisy and inaccurate" online critics who continue to insist the Army eased it standards or was pressured to ensure at least one of the women would graduate.

"Ladies and gentlemen, [Ranger Assessment Phase] week has not changed. Standards remain the same," Miller said. "The five-mile run is still five miles. The 12-mile march is still 12 miles."

The required weight of the students' rucksacks have stayed the same, "the mountains of Dahlonega are still here, the swamps remain intact," he said.

"There was no pressure from anyone above me to change standards, and, lastly, the president of the United States was not planning, nor is he here today," Miller said. "I know there are some who still don't believe. … If you don't believe, grab your rucksack, come on down to Fort Benning, Georgia, and [we] will roll you into the next RAP week.

Capt. Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver, on Aug. 21 became the first women to earn the distinctive black and gold tab when they graduated from Ranger School.

The woman who's still a Ranger student went through much of the grueling course with Griest and Haver until she was required to recycle — or try for a second time — the Mountain Phase.

Griest and Haver completed Ranger School after three tries at the Darby Phase and one attempt each at the Mountain and Swamp Phases.

As part of the Army's gender-integrated assessment of Ranger School, 19 women started Ranger School in April. Griest, Haver and the third woman were the only ones who remained.

The Army on Sept. 2 announced that Ranger School is now open to all qualified soldiers regardless of gender.

The prerequisites for students attending Ranger School remain in effect, including the standards of medical fitness, the Army said in its announcement.

RETURN TO TOP

MARINE CORPS

23. Gender Integration of Marines Brings Out Unusually Public Discord

New York Times, Sept. 19, Pg. A11 | Dave Phillips

The Marine Corps and its civilian leadership at the Pentagon are squaring off in an unusually public dispute over whether integrating women into the corps's all-male combat units will undermine the units' effectiveness, or whether the male-dominated Marine leadership is cherry-picking justifications to keep women out.

The military is facing a deadline set by the Obama administration to integrate women into all combat jobs by 2016 or ask for specific exemptions. The Marines, with a 93 percent male force dominated by infantry, are widely seen as the branch with the hardest integration task. The Marine Corps has the most units closed to women and still trains male and female recruits separately.

The tension began last week when the Marine Corps released a summary of a nine-month, $36 million study that found that integrated combat units were slower, had more injuries and were less accurate when firing weapons.

The commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen. Joseph F. Dunford Jr., submitted the corps's recommendation on gender integration to the secretary of the Navy, Ray Mabus, on Thursday. Pentagon officials said the corps was expected to request an exemption for at least some front-line combat units.

Mr. Mabus, the civilian head of the Marine Corps, has steadfastly said in public statements that the Marine Corps study is flawed and that its summary findings were picked from a much larger study in a manner that was biased toward keeping women out of combat roles.

In an interview Thursday, Mr. Mabus said he planned to push ahead with integration despite the study. "My belief is you set gender-neutral standards related to the job Marines have to do, and you adhere to them," he said. "It doesn't matter whether the Marines who meet those standards are male or female."

Further complicating the dispute is the fact that General Dunford, who will take over next week as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, will be responsible for submitting recommendations to the secretary of defense for all the armed services, including the United States Special Operations Command. Officials in the Army, Navy and Air Force have suggested they are not likely to seek exemptions on integration.

On the surface, the debate within the Marine Corps has centered on the physical abilities of men and women. But critics say the dispute is also driven by a male-dominated culture that encourages Marines to believe that their esprit de corps will be undermined by the presence of women.

"The Marines have a climate of non-inclusivity and justify it by talking about combat effectiveness, but a lot of it is based on emotion and not fact," said Lt. Col. Kate Germano, who was removed as the commander of female Marine recruits this summer after she pushed for integration and clashed with male superiors. "A lot of them, especially the older generation, believe integrating women will be disastrous in war."

A recent op-ed by retired Lt. Gen. Gregory Newbold of the Marines laid out the concerns about integration, saying women posed a threat to the "alchemy that produces an effective infantry unit."

"The characteristics that produce uncommon valor as a common virtue are not physical at all," Mr. Newbold wrote in the piece, published in the online magazine War on the Rocks, "but are derived from the mysterious chemistry that forms in an infantry unit that revels in the most crude and profane existence so that they may be more effective killers than their foe."

He asked rhetorically how mixing men and women of "the most libido-laden age cohort in humans, in the basest of environs, will not degrade the nearly spiritual glue that enables the infantry to achieve the illogical and endure the unendurable."

Mr. Newbold could not be reached for comment.

Mr. Mabus dismissed the idea that women would erode unit cohesion and lower morale.

"That is almost exactly the same argument made against ending racial segregation in the military, and the ban on gays -- that it will ruin morale," he said in the interview. "And it just isn't true. We've seen that."

A senior Pentagon official briefed on the Marine Corps study, who was not authorized to speak publicly, said a separate, unreleased study on the same group of Marines, by the Naval Health Research Center, showed that while women scored lower in many physical tasks and had higher injury rates, they scored higher in mental resilience and had fewer mental health problems. The study also found that integrated units rated their unit cohesion at the same levels as all-male units and outperformed male units at making complex decisions, the official said.

The disagreement between the Marine Corps and the Pentagon is a rare public display of tension in a culture that generally values silent professionals.

"I'm struck by how much they aired their dirty laundry in public," said Michael E. O'Hanlon, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution specializing in defense issues. "The Marine leadership is definitely dubious and reluctant about this. I think they know they will have to integrate, but they have real concerns about what it will mean to the force."

Mr. Mabus will make his recommendation to Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter by January. Mr. Carter recently echoed Mr. Mabus's belief that women should be able to enter all military careers if they can meet standards set for their tasks.

Some Marines familiar with the corps's integration study are concerned that changes to current operations could threaten lives. Sgt. Maj. Justin D. LeHew, a decorated Iraq war veteran who oversaw the integration tests, said in a post on his personal Facebook page this week that lowering standards to allow women into combat teams would endanger other Marines. The post was soon taken down, but was published by Marine Corps Times.

"In regards to the infantry... there is no trophy for second place. You perform or die," Sergeant LeHew wrote. "Make no mistake. In this realm, you want your fastest, most fit, most physical and most lethal person you can possibly put on the battlefield to overwhelm the enemy's ability to counter what you are throwing at them, and in every test case, that person has turned out to be a man. There is nothing gender biased about this; it is what it is."

The Pentagon will announce final decisions on integrating the remaining closed positions and occupations and on any approved exceptions around Jan. 1, Capt. Jeff Davis, a spokesman, said.

Captain Davis said that since 2013, some 111,000 jobs that women were previously excluded from had opened up to them, with 220,000 still closed. Presumably, the bulk of those will open come January.

--Helene Cooper contributed reporting

RETURN TO TOP

NAVY

24. Richardson Becomes New Chief of Naval Operations; Greenert Retires After 40 Years
U.S. Naval Institute News, Sept. 18 | Megan Eckstein

Adm. John Richardson took the helm of the U.S. Navy from former chief of naval operations Adm. Jonathan Greenert in a change of command and retirement ceremony at the U.S. Naval Academy Friday.

Surrounded by family, foreign heads of navies, current and retired admirals and dozens of members of the Naval Academy's classes of 1975 and 1982, the two four-stars reflected on the Navy of today and tomorrow.

"When I started the watch in 2011, I said, hey, there's storm clouds out there on the horizon and the clouds are forming," Greenert said during the ceremony.

"But you know, ladies and gentlemen, there's no place better to be than on the bridge if you're going into a storm. You can see things coming, it's kind of frightening, but you don't want to be down below where you get seasick."

"Challenges remain," he told Richardson.

"It's an evolving security landscape. Fiscal uncertainty is out there. The Navy needs a strong leadership team, and that's exactly what we're going to get."

Richardson, who served as the head of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program, or Naval Reactors, for two years before being tapped to serve as CNO, spoke of a sense of urgency in the fleet to meet those challenges.

"I think that deep in our gut we sense a shift in the world, and we sense that once again it will be vitally important to protect our interests on the seas," he said. He spoke of shifts in growing economic centers of gravity and said that "as it has been forever, when nations become strong enough to have global ambitions, it's only a matter of time before they turn to the sea to enhance their prosperity and their security. And so today perhaps for only the second time in the last 70 years, things are getting sporty for us and other nations who have global ambitions. Things are getting sporty on the sea as they go to sea to achieve their aims."

Both Defense Secretary Ash Carter and Navy Secretary Ray Mabus said at the ceremony that Richardson is the right man to lead the Navy through those challenges.

"He's a bold and innovative thinker, a tremendous leader and a go-to officer for many of the Navy's tough issues in recent years," Carter said.

"He's been its best troubleshooter, from handling problems of integrity and ethics, to preparing for the Ohio-class replacement ballistic missile submarine, to leading the Navy's advanced capability efforts. We need to get all of that right in the years ahead, and I know he'll be the one to do it."

Mabus echoed those thoughts, saying that even when Richardson led Naval Reactors under the Department of Energy, "I gave him some of the hardest jobs in the Navy, all as collateral duties, including leading the investigation into the attack at the Washington Navy Yard two years ago. No matter how hard the task, he was always up to it with the calm professionalism which seems to be there in all our submariners but particularly in John Richardson."

Carter and Mabus also heaped praise on Greenert, who ended his 40-year career today that included commanding USS Honolulu (SSN-718), U.S. 7th Fleet and U.S. Fleet Forces Command, and serving as deputy commander of U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Mabus joked that "he was and he remains ahead of his time in technology. He was in his second class year and he was studying for a double-E exam when he and his roommates decided they were already pretty accomplished engineers and had the idea to wire their alarm clock to their coffeemaker with the goal of waking up to the smell of fresh coffee instead of the buzz of an alarm clock. What they woke up to was the fire alarm and the smell of smoke as this home-made device caught fire at the desired time."

On a more serious note, Mabus said that "he's understood where the future of technology lies; spearheaded new concepts in undersea, electromagnetic maneuver, cyber warfare; expanded the use of unmanned systems across all domains. He deployed laser technology for the first time, pushed the electromagnetic railgun for at-sea testing, and we saw the future personally together with the first carrier landing and aerial refueling of an unmanned aircraft."

And, he added, "On a very personal note, Jon Greenert has been an absolutely wonderful partner to have in running the Navy. Having a leader like him – whose enthusiasm for embracing innovation, for knocking down bureaucratic barriers to progress, having flexibility of thought, respecting tradition but not being bound by it, combating constrained resources with thinking and acting differently, recognizing the strength of diversity – that's made us all better."

Carter described how Greenert oversaw the Navy during a time of "rebalancing to the Asia-Pacific, where much of America's future will be written; reinforcing our long-standing NATO allies; supporting our forces ashore in the turbulent Middle East; and providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief the world over, in a way that only America can and does do."

On the topic of innovation, Carter said that "four years ago, [Greenert] was among a small group in the Pentagon who began to realize the advanced capability gap that could begin to develop between the United States and our high-end potential opponents. Jon was one of the first people in the Pentagon to start working on that problem."

Greenert not only began working on new technologies like the electromagnetic railgun and unmanned vehicles, but "the Navy has also been developing innovative operational concepts that use existing capabilities in new and creative ways, like using flocks of swarming drones for several different missions, adapting our Tomahawk missiles to be used against moving targets in a maritime environment, and using smart projectiles that can be fired from a destroyer's 5-inch gun to defeat incoming missiles at a much lower cost per round."

"Continuing and building on all this work will be critical going forward, and Adm. John Richardson was a clear choice to carry it out," Carter said.

RETURN TO TOP

25. Johnson Tapped For Top Navy Uniformed Acquisition Officer
BreakingDefense.com, Sept. 18 | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr.

WASHINGTON -- When the Navy named its next top sub-builder, Rear Adm. Michael Jabaley, back in July, I wondered where the submariner he was replacing would surface. Now we know: The Pentagon announced late

Thursday that Rear Adm. David Johnson will pin on his third star and become the top uniformed acquisition official in the Navy Department.

As Program Executive Officer (PEO) for Submarines, soon-to-be-Vice Adm. Johnson has already spent years as the "whip-cracker" coordinating the Navy's most headache-inducing acquisition: the Ohio Replacement Program to build a new ballistic missile sub. While the service is deliberately not attempting any technological revolutions with the ORP, just building an underwater vessel that can launch nuclear missiles is really rather hard enough.

It's also expensive, enough so that if the Navy doesn't get a bigger ship-building budget — which looks unlikely given current fiscal gridlock — the ORP will crowd out most other construction. Johnson's job was to stay on schedule while squeezing out every drop of cost, right down to reusing parts from the aging Ohio-class boomers the ORP will replace.

"No one should be sleeping comfortably at night," Johnson told a roomful of submariners and contractors last year.

But when Johnson becomes Principal Military Deputy to Sean Stackley, the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition, he'll have a far wider portfolio with even more reasons to sleep badly.

For one thing, Johnson will have to work on the one thing more complicated than a nuclear-powered submarine, a nuclear aircraft carrier. The new Ford class to replace the 1960s-vintage Nimitz is behind schedule, over budget, and under heavy fire from Senate Armed Services chairman John McCain, a famed Navy pilot himself.

At the other end of the size scale is the Littoral Combat Ship, a little ship that's come in for big criticism: That it's too small, too vulnerable, too expensive, and undergunned. Officials have defended LCS as well-suited for its supporting roles in hunting subs, mines, and fast attack boats. Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, however, ordered the program rebooted with a more robust variant that Navy Secretary Ray Mabus calls a "frigate." McCain and company will be watching this evolution skeptically as well.

Johnson's headaches will extend above the water. He'll have to help Stackley oversee the F-35C program, the Navy variant of the Joint Strike Fighter. The Navy chose to have their JSF enter service last, so hopefully the Air Force's A-model and the Marines' F-35B will get the bugs out. On the other hand, there's more institutional ambivalence about the stealth fighter in the Navy than in the other services.

Then there's the Navy's newest acquisition office: the Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Navy (DASN) for unmanned systems that Sec. Mabus announced in April. Johnson and Stackley need to stand this organization up as well as make sure all the programs it oversees — flying drones, underwater drones, robot boats — stay on track.

Especially with Budget Control Act caps and Continuing Resolutions threatening to bite the Navy budget, Johnson may look back wistfully at the relatively simple days when he only had nuclear-powered submarines to worry about.

RETURN TO TOP

VETERANS

26. Report Urges Overhaul of VA Health Care
Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A3 | Ben Kesling

A sweeping independent review of the Department of Veterans Affairs health-care system made public Friday shows the multibillion-dollar agency has significant flaws, including a bloated bureaucracy, problems with leadership and a potentially unsustainable budget.

More than a dozen assessments -- from analysts including Mitre Corp., Rand Corp. and McKinsey & Co. -- show that the Veterans Heath Administration, or VHA, the health-care arm of the department, is still plagued by long-standing issues like unsustainable costs and a system veterans find tough to navigate.

The assessments were mandated in the more than $16 billion emergency funding measure passed last summer in the wake of a systemwide scandal at the VA that led to the resignation of a number of top officials, including then-Secretary Eric Shinseki. They appear to restate, more thoroughly, many issues that have been previously identified. The assessments will be used by the Commission on Care, also mandated by the act, which is tasked with presenting to the VA and Congress a comprehensive reform plan in early 2016.

"The report bears out collectively what I have seen individually, what I have seen in my role as chairman over the past nine months," said Sen. Johnny Isakson (R., Ga.), chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "There is a huge focus on some glaring deficiencies that need to be addressed."

"VA is undergoing a radical transformation," the department said in response to the more-than 4,000 pages of findings, pointing out efforts under way to address problems highlighted in the assessments.

"VA will work with Congress, veterans service organizations, veterans, and other stakeholders on the recommendations outlined in the Independent Assessment Final Report. VA will especially work closely with Congress on those final report recommendations that specify specific congressional action needed to implement."

The assessments found VA care outperformed non-VA care by many measures but also showed a system that needs even more change.

"The independent assessment highlighted systemic, critical problems," the report said. "Solving these problems will demand far-reaching and complex changes that, when taken together, amount to no less than a systemwide reworking of VHA."

With an annual budget of some $60 billion, 1,600 health-care sites and 300,000 employees, the VHA says it is the largest integrated health-care system in the U.S. Last year, nearly six million veterans were treated in the system.

The reports portray the VA as a huge operation that has become difficult to steer and permeated by a bureaucratic system plagued by mismanagement and inconsistent care from hospital to hospital.

The reports come as the VA faces questions over whether it should allow more veterans to go outside of the system to receive private care. Recently, according to the assessments, health care obtained outside of the VA accounted for about 10% of VHA expenditures. The Veterans Choice Act of last year was built in large part around funding this type of care.

Robert McDonald, who took over as VA secretary last summer, has been praised by many in Congress and most major veterans groups for his efforts to reform the VA and his willingness to listen to patients and workers. But he

has also been criticized for moving too slowly in firing underperforming employees and not supporting efforts to create an environment in which employees can point out wrongdoing. Mr. McDonald has said multiple times in the past that he was forcing out bad actors as quickly as possible.

"As a general matter, the president has made it a priority to ensure that America's veterans are getting the kind of health care and benefits they have so richly earned," White House press secretary Josh Earnest said Friday, adding that he hadn't seen the substance of the report.

RETURN TO TOP

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

27. Centcom's Intel Massage
The problem is the failing strategy against ISIS, not lying spooks
Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. A12 | Editorial

President Obama has spent most of the past year talking up the success of his military campaign against Islamic State. "Our coalition is on the offensive, ISIL is on the defensive, and ISIL is going to lose," the President said in February. He hasn't changed his tune, despite a string of battlefield reversals, from Ramadi in Iraq to Palmyra in Syria to Sirte in Libya.

Whence the happy pills?

In July two Defense Intelligence Agency analysts lodged a complaint with the Pentagon's Inspector General alleging that Centcom -- the military command that oversees the effort against ISIS -- was altering its intelligence assessments to bring them into line with the Administration's positive spin. The allegation has since been corroborated by more than 50 other analysts, according to the Daily Beast.

We won't join the clucking brigades claiming that President Obama or his inner circle are "manipulating intelligence" -- the dishonest and discredited claim endlessly made about the Bush Administration's mistaken intel on Iraq. If you need a refresher on this score, read the conclusions of the July 2004 bipartisan report from the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, or the equally definitive Robb-Silberman report from March 2005.

What we know of the Centcom story so far reminds us that intelligence is a complex business involving partial information, unverifiable sources, conflicting analysis and bureaucratic turf wars -- all of it aimed at a moving target. Even in an age of cybersleuths and surveillance drones, it's more often a wonder when intelligence agencies get things right.

As it is, no Administration has an interest in coloring intelligence estimates or forecasts in a way that's eventually bound to be exposed by leaks or embarrassed by events. Mr. Obama certainly hasn't gained anything politically by calling ISIS the "jayvee" team of global terror. His spin looks even sillier now that Centcom commander Lloyd Austin admitted in the Senate Wednesday the Administration's oft-touted $500 million effort to train and equip an anti-Assad force has a grand total of four or five active fighters.

That doesn't mean there aren't lessons from this episode. One is that the impulse to tell the boss what you think he wants to hear is as true in the military and the intelligence professions as it is anywhere else.

In Iraq, senior advisers and generals repeatedly gave President George W. Bush a more hopeful picture of the war than reality warranted. Mr. Bush only got the policy right when he went outside normal channels to get a fresh analysis from people like retired General Jack Keane and scholar Fred Kagan.

A similar dynamic may explain the rosy intelligence estimates in the fight against ISIS. The wish to stay positive would have been reinforced by the knowledge that the Commander in Chief has been adamant in his opposition to deploying combat troops against ISIS, or bombing the Assad regime, or establishing no-fly zones over Syria. Policy makers don't have to manipulate intelligence for intelligence analysts to want to curry professional favor by flattering the policy makers.

That leads to the second lesson, which is that policy makers need to cultivate dissenting views, not consensus, within the intelligence community. The two analysts who complained about the skewed intelligence had been embedded in Centcom, but their chain of command led back to the DIA, which has been better than most agencies in defending its intellectual integrity against political influence.

But the general intelligence practice is to produce "estimates" that amount to the lowest-common denominator of agreement among more than a dozen separate intelligence agencies. That these estimates are overseen by a Director of National Intelligence who is close to the President often serves to sanitize them further -- another reason we feel vindicated for opposing the Bush Administration when it created the DNI in the wake of 9/11.

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As the late Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan liked to say, "intelligence is not to be confused with intelligence." Spy agencies err, and intel can never substitute for a clear policy direction and overall strategy.

The problem with current U.S. policy against ISIS isn't that the intel might have been massaged. It's that Mr. Obama has little interest in doing much more than fighting a half-hearted war against ISIS as a political alibi to show that he's doing something. Americans don't need a classified briefing or Inspector General report to reach that conclusion. It's obvious from the terrible results on the ground in Syria, Iraq and North Africa.

RETURN TO TOP

28. Ruin of Damascus

Assad's brutality and Putin's adventurism have destroyed Obama's strategy in Syria

The Times (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 27 | Editorial

The dogged persistence of President Bashar al-Assad in retaining power is a catastrophe for Syria. It is also a heavy defeat for the strategy of the United States and its allies. Assad's four-year assault against a captive population has reaped the emergence of a brutal jihadist force across great tracts of Syrian and Iraqi territory. This in turn has given a pretext for Russia to give support to Assad, under the guise of countering the forces of Islamic State.

Vladimir Putin has filled a vacuum left by the United States. It is a terrible indictment of President Obama, whose disengagement has allowed Assad to survive. It is also a measure of US helplessness that the Obama administration yesterday accepted an offer of "military-to-military" talks with Moscow about the crisis. What was in the first instance a war by a brutal dictator on peaceful protesters has become successively a humanitarian catastrophe, a vehicle for President Putin's aggressive diplomacy and increasingly a wider military danger to the region.

Only four months ago, the Pentagon launched a $500 million programme to train 5,400 Syrian fighters a year for three years to combat Islamic State. Scarcely credibly, the general in charge of the campaign has admitted that only four or five of the US-trained rebels remain in combat and fewer than 120 are in training.

Hence Mr Obama's default position of seeking some solution to the crisis through co-operation with Mr Putin. That is worse than an indignity: it is also highly unlikely to work. Mr Putin's approach is not to resolve the crisis but to support Assad in power while thwarting US diplomacy.

Russia has been steadily building military stockpiles and deploying personnel at a government base in Latakia in northern Syria. It claims it wants a stable state rather than to prop up the Assad regime. Yet at every stage in the crisis it has stymied international efforts to apply sanctions on Assad or punish his use of chemical weapons.

The Assad dynasty had been closely allied to the Soviet Union since the 1970s and continued that relationship with Mr Putin. Russia benefits from, among much else, having a naval facility at the Syrian port of Tartus. The notion that Mr Putin is engaged in Syria primarily in order to combat Islamic State and mitigate the disaster that has led to the deaths of some 240,000 Syrians is incredible. He seeks instead an easing of western sanctions in response to his seizure of Crimea and his intimidation, bluster and force against Ukraine. Appearing to co-operate with the US in trying to reach a stable arrangement in Syria is a means to that end.

It is a lamentable abdication of moral responsibility to Syrians and to Ukraine that Mr Obama has allowed things to reach this pass. His disinclination to intervene in Syria is one of the consequences of the ill-fated US campaign against Saddam Hussein, an even more vicious tyrant than Assad. Yet US policy (or rather the lack of it) has had horrific consequences, with so many thousands dead and millions of refugees, many of them now spilling into Europe.

Affecting to be a resolute opponent of Islamist extremism, Mr Putin cements his autocratic rule at home and his diplomatic position abroad. While Russia's economy contracts sharply under the pressure of sanctions and weak commodity prices, its foreign adventurism burgeons. Syrians are paying a colossal human price.

RETURN TO TOP

29. Let's not be suckered into playing Putin's game in Syria. That way disaster lies

Embracing Assad would be like cosying up to the Khmer Rouge. The only proper response is disgust

The Guardian (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 37 | Natalie Nougayrède

"How many did [the Khmer Rouge] kill? Tens of thousands?" asked Henry Kissinger in 1975 when he sat down with Thailand's foreign minister to discuss the genocide in Cambodia. "You should tell the Cambodians that we will be friends with them," Kissinger went on. "They are murderous thugs, but we won't let that stand in the way."

That is roughly the message that Vladimir Putin has been sending out as he prepares to take the stage at the UN general assembly later this month: let's all ally ourselves with Bashar al-Assad – the Syrian president may be a murderous thug, but we shouldn't let that stand in our way. The Russian leader's message encapsulates the biggest dilemma western policymakers now face as they confront the spillover from the war in Syria.

Kissinger's priority in 1975 was to use the Khmer Rouge as a "counterweight" to North Vietnam. Putin's priority is to cast Assad as the main bulwark against Isis, and to position Russia as the centrepiece of a new international

strategy on Syria. Russia has moved fast to demonstrate its assertiveness. It has begun a military deployment in coastal areas of Syria controlled by the Assad regime – which has caught western officials off balance.

What does Russia seek to achieve? One old hope has resurfaced: is Putin preparing for a post-Assad Syria, with a peace settlement in the making? There is no doubt that basking in international recognition is something the Russian president would enjoy: remember how, in 2013, he helped Obama wriggle out of his commitment to airstrikes against Syria by arranging a deal over Assad's chemical weapons arsenal.

Syria-fatigue in western circles has reached such a point that Putin has a good opportunity to cast himself as the man with a plan. Who, he might disingenuously ask, could possibly object to fighting Isis as part of a wider alliance? But this is precisely the problem. Western failure in the region is one thing, but it doesn't mean that the Russian president can bring salvation. Quite the contrary.

For a start, let's put aside naive and wishful thinking. There is no credible sign that Putin is ready to overthrow or replace Assad. Nor was there ever a serious Russian intention to do so, at any point. In the summer of 2012, when the big powers met in Geneva to discuss a Syrian national unity government, Russia made sure that this would not entail Assad's departure. Russia has consistently shielded the Syrian president – not out of any love for him, but because, after the overthrow of the Gaddafi regime, he represents Russia's last foothold in the Middle East: and its best chance to demonstrate western fickleness.

Second, Putin's main inspiration on Middle East affairs is Yevgeny Primakov, a former Russian prime minister and a long-time pillar of KGB policies in the region. Primakov, who died earlier this year, played an important role in securing tight links between the Russian and Syrian intelligence services. In his book Russia and the Arabs, he theorised about how Russia's role in the region might reflect its global status and its capacity to counter America's influence. Primakov also set the Russian tone of denouncing the 2011 Arab spring as a western plot aimed at regime change that must be opposed.

But Putin's intentions are best described by the man himself. In a recent interview he was clear about the kind of "political process" he has in mind: "Holding early parliamentary elections and establishing ties with the so-called healthy opposition, involving them in running the country" – all this "in agreement" with Assad. In a nutshell: fake elections and a fake governing coalition, in a war-torn, decomposing country.

Third, when talking about "anti-terrorism", it's important to dwell on the meaning of words. For the west, anti-terrorism means fighting Isis. For Assad, whose views are supported by Moscow, any political opposition to his rule amounts to terrorism. In the name of "anti-terrorism" he has had tens of thousands of Syrians killed, whole neighbourhoods and cities flattened, and families massacred – not unlike what Putin's army did in Chechnya. Is this the type of warfare the west will condone by joining a new alliance with Russia and Assad?

It's not that talking to Putin about Syria is wrong in itself. What counts is what is said and what actions are taken as a result. If Putin is genuinely interested in what the west calls antiterrorism, then putting an immediate end to barrel bombs and other Syrian government atrocities would be a good place to start. Assad's military machine is the main cause of civilian deaths – and now it is pumped up with new Russian weapons. Assad and Isis feed off each other. It is in Assad's interests to make sure Syria is viewed – as is widely the case now in the west – as primarily a clash between him and violent extremist jihadism. And Isis is able to recruit because it claims to defend Sunni populations against the indiscriminate onslaught of Assad's military.

The Russian logic of propping up a regime that actually fuels, rather than reduces, violent Islamic militancy can be challenged as contradictory. After all, Russia has domestic concerns with jihadism on its southern flanks. But for Putin the political gains of harnessing an ally, demonstrating steadfastness and parading Russian clout in the Middle East – while the west wallows in confusion – largely outweigh that apparent contradiction. Even if one day Assad ends up dead, jailed or on the run, Russia will have, in the meantime, shown resolve.

Putin's suggestion that the west should embrace Assad is an illusion that will lead to more bloodshed in Syria and won't solve the refugee crisis. It risks making Syria an even greater hell, if only because alignment with Assad will be met with more meddling by Saudi and Gulf actors who back Sunni Islamic insurgents. It should be rejected with the same kind of disgust that Kissinger's overtures to the Pol Pot regime inspire to this day.

RETURN TO TOP

30. Freedom Fighter

Henry Kissinger is often condemned as a heartless practitioner of realpolitik; But early in his career, writes Niall Ferguson, the future secretary of state was strikingly idealistic -- and saw America's commitment to liberty as its key asset in world affairs

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 19, Pg. C1 | Niall Ferguson

Surely no statesman in modern times, and certainly no American secretary of state, has been as revered and then as reviled as Henry Kissinger.

At the height of his fame, Kissinger appeared as a cartoon "Super K" on the cover of Newsweek, complete with tights and cape. Time magazine called him "the world's indispensable man." In 1974, his approval rating, according to the regular Harris survey, was an astounding 85%.

Since then, however, heaping opprobrium on Kissinger has become a thriving industry. The Nation magazine once caricatured him under a stars-and-stripes bedcover, gleefully ravishing a naked female whose head was the globe. The late Christopher Hitchens went further, accusing him of "war crimes and crimes against humanity." Protest groups like Code Pink never tire of repeating such charges, most recently by disrupting a January hearing of the Senate Armed Forces Committee at which Kissinger was testifying.

The vitriol of the left is at first sight puzzling, especially when one considers how many of Kissinger's initiatives were denounced by conservative critics at the time as too accommodating of America's communist enemies. In his time as national security adviser, he played a key role in negotiating the first Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty with the Soviet Union. It was Kissinger who, with Zhou Enlai, opened diplomatic communications between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China. It was Kissinger who extricated the U.S. from the Vietnam War. And it was Kissinger who pressed for the end of white rule in Rhodesia.

Critics of every stripe tend to agree that Kissinger took foreign-policy realism too far. According to authors Marvin and Bernard Kalb, writing in the mid-1970s, he pursued "a global realpolitik that placed a higher priority on pragmatism than on morality." His former Harvard colleague, the late Stanley Hoffmann, called Kissinger a Machiavellian who believed that "the preservation of the state . . . requires both ruthlessness and deceit at the expense of foreign and internal adversaries." Even a relatively sympathetic writer, Walter Isaacson, concluded in his 2005 biography that "power-oriented realpolitik and secretive diplomatic maneuvering . . . were the basis of [Kissinger's] policies."

This view of Kissinger is in urgent need of revision. When one actually reads what he wrote, especially in the years before his rise to international prominence, it is astounding how little one finds of the Machiavellian realist. At least in the first half of his career, Henry Kissinger was an idealist.

To be sure, Kissinger was not an idealist in the sense often used to characterize that tradition in U.S. foreign policy, dating back to Woodrow Wilson, which emphasizes the subordination of the "might" of states to supranational laws, courts and assemblies. Rather, I am using the term "idealism" in its philosophical sense -- a doctrine that elevates thought and perception above supposedly objective realities.

Idealism stands in opposition to philosophies that see human actions and events as determined by factors beyond our control, such as laws of history or economic development. Kissinger rejected the idea that such "necessity" was the crucial element in human affairs. He exalted the role of human freedom, choice and agency in shaping the world.

His unpublished senior thesis at Harvard, "The Meaning of History," was an admiring critique of Immanuel Kant's philosophy of history. Kissinger's central argument was that freedom is "an inner experience of life as a process of deciding meaningful alternatives." "Perpetual peace" might indeed be the ultimate goal of history, as Kant famously argued, but from the point of view of the individual, there was nothing inevitable about that outcome. "Whatever one's conception about the necessity of events, [and] . . . however we may explain actions in retrospect, their accomplishment occurred with the inner conviction of choice."

From this point on, Kissinger was consistent in rejecting the idea that politics, especially international politics, was simply a matter of feeding data into some kind of social-scientific calculating machine. This applied especially to the place of economics in the contest between the West and the communist bloc.

Kissinger rejected the economic determinism of Marxism-Leninism, which saw all human affairs as rigidly driven by class struggle, but he was also critical of those who thought that the West's superiority was just a matter of higher productivity. It was dangerous, he argued in his senior thesis, to allow "an argument about democracy [to] become a discussion of the efficiency of economic systems." By contrast, the "inward intuition of freedom . . . would reject totalitarianism even if it were economically more efficient." To the idealist, the contest with the Soviet Union had to be about more than relative growth rates.

Why, if it was an economic contest, did the Cold War prove so hard for the much richer U.S. to win? To that question, Kissinger was able to offer a compelling answer. Quite simply, it wasn't about economics. It wasn't even about nuclear stockpiles, much less tank divisions. It was primarily about freedom.

In a remarkable interview with ABC's Mike Wallace in July 1958, the young Kissinger made the startling argument that the U.S. was being insufficiently idealistic in its Cold War strategy. Asked by Wallace if he thought the U.S. could exist "in a completely socialist revolutionary world," Kissinger replied:

"You could well argue that a capitalist society or, what is more interesting to me, a free society, is a more revolutionary phenomenon than 19th-century socialism, and this illustrates precisely one of our problems. I think we should go on the spiritual offensive in the world. We should identify ourselves with the revolution. We should say that freedom, if it is liberated, can achieve many of these things. . . . Even when we have engaged in constructive steps . . . we have always justified them on the basis of a communist threat, very rarely on the basis of things we wanted to do because of our intrinsic dynamism."

The U.S., he continued, should say more than, "We must keep Latin America from going communist." Its message to the southern hemisphere should be, "These are things we want to do because of the values we stand for."

On the central Cold War question of Germany, too, Kissinger was an idealist, insisting on the principle of self-determination and opposing a permanent division of the country. He was dismayed when, to end the Berlin crisis of 1961, President John F. Kennedy pragmatically concluded, "A wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."

While at the highest level the Cold War was a nuclear-armed standoff -- not least when the superpowers were eyeball to eyeball in Germany -- it was also a succession of hot conventional wars in what came to be known as the Third World: the new nations emerging as the old European empires crumbled. To the leaders of anticolonial movements, communism appeared to have much to offer: not only state-led industrialization but also a permanent grip on political power. What could the U.S. offer as an alternative?

Like many of his contemporaries, Kissinger exaggerated the Soviet Union's capacity to win a contest defined in terms of output growth. But he was quite right to argue that the Western claim to superiority needed to be based on more than productivity.

What made democracy work in the West, Kissinger pointed out, were certain peculiar limitations on governmental power, not least the rule of law. These limitations were not naturally occurring in the "new countries," he argued in his 1960 book "The Necessity for Choice." Therefore, "unless we address ourselves to the problem of encouraging institutions which protect human dignity, the future of freedom is dim indeed."

The aim was not to win a contest between rival models of economic development but above all to "fill . . . a spiritual void," for "even Communism has made many more converts through the theological quality of Marxism than through the materialistic aspect on which it prides itself."

"Unless we are able to make the concepts of freedom and respect for human dignity meaningful to the new nations," Kissinger concluded, "the much-vaunted economic competition between us and Communism . . . will be without meaning."

All this helps to explain why, when the question initially arose of how far to prop up the government of South Vietnam in the early 1960s, Kissinger believed that the country's right to self-determination was worth American lives. True foreign-policy realists, like the University of Chicago's Hans Morgenthau, vehemently disagreed.

Kissinger's idealism was the idealism of a generation forged in the searing heat of World War II. As a refugee from Hitler's Germany, who returned there in 1944 in an American uniform to play his part in the final defeat of Nazism, he had paid a personal price for the diplomatic failures of the 1930s.

After the euphoria of V-E Day, Kissinger astonished his parents by staying in Germany for two more years. "You'll never understand it," he wrote to them, "& I would never explain it except in blood & misery & hope. Sometimes when I look down our table and see the empty spaces of our good and capable men, the men that should be here to nail down what we fought for, I think of . . . the night Hitler's death was announced. That night [we] agreed that no matter what happened, no matter who weakened, we would stay to do in our little way what we could to make all previous sacrifices meaningful."

More than 20 years later, on the eve of his unexpected appointment as President Richard Nixon's national security adviser, Kissinger expressed his dismay at the failure of a new generation to feel a similar responsibility toward Vietnam. In an essay that he wrote for the Brookings Institution in 1968, he could hardly overlook "the contemporary unrest" that was sweeping American campuses. But he struggled to make sense of a "younger generation [who] consider the management of power irrelevant, perhaps even immoral" and whose "new ethic of freedom is not 'civic'; it is indifferent or even hostile to systems and notions of order."

As Kissinger observed, there was something unforgivable about the way the "protest movements [had] made heroes of leaders in repressive new countries," oblivious to "the absurdity of founding a claim for freedom on protagonists of the totalitarian state -- such as Guevara or Ho or Mao." The student radicals failed to see that they were living through a fundamental transformation of the postwar international order. "The age of the superpowers," Kissinger announced, "is drawing to an end."

This international revolution, he argued in the essay, had "deep-seated" and "structural" causes. The first of these was what was already occasionally referred to as globalization: the multiplication of nation states since the breakup of the European empires, combined with unprecedented economic integration and the emergence of "problems of bureaucratization, pollution, environmental control, urban growth . . . [that] know no national considerations."

The second driver of change was technology. Paradoxically, the "gargantuan" increase in destructive power made possible by innovations in nuclear technology tended to reduce the superpowers' influence over smaller countries. This was not only because the superpowers seemed less and less likely ever to use their vast atomic arsenals; it was also because each new power that joined the nuclear club substantially reduced the value of membership. In this post-superpower world, "a radio transmitter [could] be a more effective form of pressure than a squadron of B-52s," while annexing territory would count for less than acquiring nuclear weapons.

Yet what mattered more than these changes in the material world was how Americans thought about them. In his 1968 essay, Kissinger urged his fellow citizens to answer two simple questions: "What is it in our interest to prevent? What should we seek to accomplish?"

If the Vietnam War had done nothing else good, it had at least proved that the answer to these questions could not be "Everything" -- for a U.S. that was "the trustee of every non-Communist area" would very soon "exhaust its psychological resources." Nor, however, could the answers to Kissinger's questions be "Nothing." Generation gap or no generation gap, it was time for "the American mood" to stop "oscillat[ing] dangerously between being ashamed of power and expecting too much of it."

If such arguments sound familiar, it is because they still resonate today. "Optimism alternating with bewilderment; euphoria giving way to frustration": That was how Kissinger summed up the American trajectory in Vietnam. In our own day, we have relived that cycle in Iraq.

No doubt controversy will continue to rage about the actions that Kissinger took after he went to work in Washington in 1969, from his support for the bombing of Cambodia to his desire to see President Salvador Allende of Chile overthrown.

But even his most determined critics would have difficulty denying that he was prescient about the shape of the post-Cold War world: a new era of economic globalization, of technological revolution, of nuclear proliferation, but

also an era in which international order was primarily a function of the ebb and flow of America's faith in itself. Nearly a half-century later, Henry Kissinger's idealistic analysis still applies.

--Mr. Ferguson is a professor of history at Harvard University and a senior fellow of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. This essay is adapted from "Kissinger, 1923-1968: The Idealist," published later this month by Penguin Press

RETURN TO TOP

OVERVIEW

The United States and China are discussing what might become the first arms control accord for cyberspace, and an agreement could be announced as soon as Thursday when Chinese President Xi Jinping arrives in Washington for a state visit, according to the *New York Times*. In Syria, Russia's military buildup now includes surface-to-air missiles in addition to combat aircraft with air-to-air capability, deployments that raise "serious questions" about Moscow's role in the region, Secretary John Kerry said. Also of note, *Agence France-Presse* reported that 75 Syrian rebels newly trained by U.S. and coalition forces in Turkey to fight ISIL have entered northern Syria.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0430

- Pope to hold giant Mass in Cuba one day after veiled critique to leaders
- Weary Greek voters trickle to polls in knife-edge election
- Sheikh Rashid, son of Dubai's ruler, dies of heart attack at 33
- Burkina Faso to return to civilian rule after coup, mediator says
- Chinese computer hack attacks slow ahead of Obama summit – experts
- Best-selling novelist Jackie Collins dies at 77
- Ole Miss pulls off 43-37 upset over No. 2 Alabama

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Al Manar*: Warring sides in northwest Syria agree to local cease-fire
- *Arutz Sheva*: Former bin Laden lieutenant killed in Syria fighting
- *Haaretz*: At least 55 Kurdish PKK militants killed by Turkish airstrikes in Iraq

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1854 – In the first battle of the Crimean War, an Anglo-French force under Gen. FitzRoy Somerset and Marshal Jacques Leroy de Saint Arnaud defeats Gen. Aleksandr Menshikov's Russian army at the Battle of Alma

Table of Contents

TOP STORIES

3. **Seventy-five US-trained rebels enter Syria from Turkey – monitor**

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Maya Gebeily

A batch of 75 rebels newly trained by US and coalition forces in Turkey to fight jihadists have entered northern Syria, a monitoring group told AFP on Sunday.

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. **Syrian rebel group claims it attacked base used by Russians**

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Not Attributed

A powerful Syrian rebel group has claimed that it fired several rockets at an airport on the coast said to be used by Russian troops.

5. **On Iraq's front line in Anbar province**

British GQ (Print Edition), September 2015 | Anthony Loyd

I first heard the name "James" on the front, east of Fallujah. It was a late morning in March, the sun was high but shrouded behind a one-dimensional layer of cloud. A cold grey light fell on Al Anbar's level landscape, the desolate farms and abandoned crops, sucking the colour out of the greens and accentuating the drabness of the huge earthen berms the Shia fighters had bulldozed up in lieu of trenches. Anbar looked more miserable than usual, even in spring. It was only ever harsh at the very best of times, and these past 12 years had been hard.

MIDEAST

6. **Arab Coalition Bombs Yemen's Capital, Killing Dozens**

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A4 | Shuaib Almosawa and Kareem Fahim

A Saudi-led military coalition bombarded government buildings and residential neighborhoods in Sana, the Yemeni capital, overnight on Saturday, killing more than two dozen people, officials and witnesses said, and destroying homes in Sana's Old City, a Unesco World Heritage site.

7. **Saudi Arabia says 100,000 troops to secure this year's hajj**

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Aya Batrawy

Saudi Arabia has deployed 100,000 security personnel to oversee the annual Islamic hajj pilgrimage that begins on Tuesday, the Interior Ministry spokesman said, underscoring both the massive arrangements needed to secure one of the largest pilgrimages in the world and the multitude of threats the hajj faces.

ASIA/PACIFIC

8. **Warily Eyeing China, Philippines May Invite U.S. Back to Subic Bay**

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A8 | Javier C. Hernández

With China forcefully pressing its claim to a vast expanse of sea west of here, the Philippines is now debating whether to welcome the United States Navy back to the deepwater docks, airstrips and craggy shores of Subic Bay, which served as a haven for bruised battleships and weary soldiers during the Vietnam War.

9. Reforming the armed forces: Command and lack of control

The Economist (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 41 | Not Attributed

If the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were a company, it would be about to lose its position as the world's largest corporate employer. When troop cuts recently announced by Xi Jinping, China's president, are completed in 2017, the ranks of China's armed forces will have shrunk by 300,000 to 2m, putting it just behind Walmart, a retailer. It would still be by far the world's largest military outfit.

10. China says Japan security law 'threat' to regional peace

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Shingo Ito

China accused Japan of threatening regional peace Saturday after Tokyo passed laws clearing Japanese troops to fight abroad for the first time since World War II, saying that its rival should learn "profound lessons from history".

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

11. Afghan Taliban divided as talks between two factions fail

Reuters, Sept. 19 | Jibran Ahmad

The Afghan Taliban may split into two factions, said a spokesman for one group on Saturday, because they cannot agree who should be leader following the death of their founder.

12. Kabul rejects claim that Afghanistan behind Peshawar attack

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Not Attributed

The Afghan government on Saturday rejected Pakistan's claim that a militant attack on a military base near Peshawar was planned and controlled from Afghanistan.

13. Afghans Flee Battered City on Perilous Journey to West

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A6 | Rod Nordland

Najim Rahim says that when he looks around his neighborhood in the northern city of Kunduz now, "I feel lonely." His friend Ahmad Ulomi, who worked in the photo shop down the street, gave up his photography studies and left with five family members, striking out across the Iranian desert on the way to Europe. The shop's owner, Khalid Ghaznawi, who was Mr. Ulomi's teacher, decided to follow him with his family of eight, and he put his business up for sale. Mr. Rahim's friend Atiqullah, who ran the local grocery shop, closed it and also left for Iran with his wife. Another neighbor, Feroz Ahmad, dropped out of college and last week called from Turkey to say he was on his way to Europe.

AFRICA

14. In Libya, deadline time for a single government

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Missy Ryan and Hassan Morajea

Libya finds itself today in the odd position of having two rival governments, each of them vying for international legitimacy and dwindling resources as the North African nation slips deeper into civil war. But soon Libya may have no recognized government at all, if negotiators fail to meet a Sept. 20 deadline for clinching a United Nations-brokered political deal to create a unity government that, officials hope, can end a

tangled conflict that has nearly bankrupted this oil-rich nation in the four years since the NATO-backed ouster of Moammar Gaddafi.

15. Boko Haram leader dismisses Nigerian military claims

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Bukar Hussain

Nigeria's military on Saturday claimed further gains in its counter-offensive against Boko Haram, but the group's shadowy leader Abubakar Shekau dismissed the talk of success as "lies".

EUROPE

16. Putin gives go-ahead to Belarus airbase plan

Reuters, Sept. 19 | Jason Bush

Russian President Vladimir Putin has backed the establishment of an airbase in neighboring Belarus, the latest move by Moscow to project its military power abroad.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

17. Pentagon enlisting outsiders to help search for U.S. World War II MIAs

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Chris Carola

Justin Taylan has been to the remote Pacific island nation of Papua New Guinea dozens of times over the past two decades, spending countless hours slogging through crocodile-infested swamps in his quest to document as many World War II airplane wreck sites as possible. Since 2013, he has conducted those missions for the newly reorganized Pentagon agency whose predecessor he and others had criticized for years for failing to recover and identify more remains of U.S. service members.

AIR FORCE

18. Display of air power dazzles

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. C12 | Perry Stein

Maryland's Joint Base Andrews on Saturday hosted its first air show since 2012, featuring a mix of vintage, stunt and state-of-the-art planes soaring above thousands of people. The once-annual display had been on hiatus amid sequestration-related budget cuts. This year's show cost less than $1 million to stage, compared with $2.1 million in 2012.

19. Budget showdown worries JBLM workers, could upend Boeing tanker contract

News Tribune Online (Tacoma, WA), Sept. 19 | Adam Ashton

The latest budget impasse in Congress has civilian workers at Joint Base Lewis-McChord bracing for a possible government shutdown and the Air Force raising an alarm about a threat to a $51 billion tanker program Boeing is developing in the Puget Sound region.

20. Air-force bases: Catch-2015

The Economist (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 27 | Not Attributed

The cinema at Dyess Air Force Base, in central west Texas, is a splendid facility. It is entirely free for airmen and their families. Outside, there is a smart café selling snacks, sodas and, in the evenings, when children are

not present, alcohol. Yet for more than two years, this centre for social life on the base sat empty, because it did not have the equipment to project films. Just a few months after the air force paid a hefty sum to refurbish the building, the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, the government-owned firm which ran the cinema, switched from analogue to digital distribution of films. When it did so, it decided it could not afford to buy a new digital projector for Dyess. That is just one tale of the maddening bureaucracy recounted by Colonel Michael Bob Starr, the commander of the base.

ARMY

21. 'One Valid Standard'

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, GA), Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Chuck Williams

As the Army prepares to make its recommendation to the Secretary of Defense about opening all combat positions to women, many of the organization's top generals were speaking from the same playbook last week. It's about standards -- not gender -- they said while at Fort Benning for the Maneuver Warfighter Conference, three days of conversation devoted annually to combat and readiness.

22. General: Army plans to rely more heavily on Fort Carson soldiers to counter Russian aggression

The Gazette Online (Colorado Springs, CO), Sept. 19 | Tom Roeder

The top U.S. Army general in Europe said he will lean more heavily on Fort Carson soldiers in a bid to counter Russian aggression and assure American allies.

MARINE CORPS

23. Why Marines have a problem with women in combat

San Diego Union-Tribune, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Gretel C. Kovach

The Marine Corps is making its last stand in the bitter debate over women in combat, fighting to retain gender restrictions on employment in frontline fighting units despite the Pentagon's new open-door policy set to take effect in the new year.

NAVY

24. Navy announces Georgia solar farm project

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A3 | Joby Warrick

The eight Ohio-class submarines berthed here are the biggest in the U.S. fleet, with steel hulls nearly 600 feet long to accommodate up to 24 nuclear missiles. But soon they will share quarters with something far bigger: a field of solar panels so vast that 500 of the gargantuan subs could hide in its shadow.

VETERANS

25. A Unit Stalked by Suicide, Trying to Save Itself

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Dave Phillips

After the sixth suicide in his old battalion, Manny Bojorquez sank onto his bed. With a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam beside him and a pistol in his hand, he began to cry. He had gone to Afghanistan at 19 as a machine-gunner in the Marine Corps. In the 18 months since leaving the military, he had grown long hair and a bushy mustache. It was 2012. He was working part time in a store selling baseball caps and going to

community college while living with his parents in the suburbs of Phoenix. He rarely mentioned the war to friends and family, and he never mentioned his nightmares.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. How to Close Guantánamo

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. SR10 | Editorial

For almost 14 years, the United States' military prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has sat festering on the edge of the Caribbean and the Constitution. Opened by President George W. Bush in the panicky months after the Sept. 11 attacks, the detention center has had a powerful radicalizing effect, has severely tarnished America's standing as a nation of laws and has cost taxpayers more than $5.2 billion. This travesty could and should have ended years ago. But Congress has gone to great lengths to keep the prison open. Within the executive branch, agencies have sometimes worked at cross-purposes and at times dragged their feet. In the end, however, the buck stops with the president.

27. Women in combat

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A20 | Editorial

Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus has made clear that nothing is likely to change his intention not to seek exemptions in the opening up of military jobs to women. He doubled down in the face of a Marine Corps study raising doubts about the ability of women to serve in combat units. Mr. Mabus is right to argue that the emphasis should be on standards that ensure excellence in the military, and on whether individuals - no matter their gender - can meet those standards. But by cavalierly dismissing, even impugning, the concerns of Marine officials, he inadvertently helps those who say political correctness is driving the push for full integration of the armed forces.

28. More waffling on Syria

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A20 | Editorial

President Obama acknowledged the obvious this week: that to resolve the massive humanitarian emergency afflicting the Middle East and Europe, "we ultimately have to deal with the source of the problem, which is the ongoing crisis in Syria." His administration then offered a remarkable illustration of why that hasn't happened. A $500 million program launched last year to train moderate Syrian rebel forces, officials conceded, had been an abject failure. But, the White House contended, the president was not at fault because he had never believed in the strategy, anyway.

29. While Obama shrugs, Putin struts into Syria to play world policeman

Sunday Times (UK), Sept. 20, Pg. 40 | James Rubin

You have to give Vladimir Putin credit. By sending a new contingent of military forces to Syria this past week and simultaneously calling for a summit with the United States, Russia's president has not only grabbed the international spotlight but done so at Washington's expense.

30. National loyalty lies in ruins in Iraq and Syria

The Independent on Sunday (UK), Sept. 20, Pg. 34 | Patrick Cockburn

Little has been done to end the four-year civil war that is destroying Iraq and Syria and which has caused the biggest mass flight of people ever seen in the Middle East. More than half of the 23 million Syrian population have fled their homes, of which four million are refugees outside Syria. There is a growing exodus from Iraq, with three million people displaced, many of whom today see that the war is not ending and that they can never again hope to live safely in their own country.

TOP STORIES

1. U.S. and China Seek Arms Deal For Cyberspace

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | David E. Sanger

WASHINGTON -- The United States and China are negotiating what could become the first arms control accord for cyberspace, embracing a commitment by each country that it will not be the first to use cyberweapons to cripple the other's critical infrastructure during peacetime, according to officials involved in the talks.

While such an agreement could address attacks on power stations, banking systems, cellphone networks and hospitals, it would not, at least in its first version, protect against most of the attacks that China has been accused of conducting in the United States, including the widespread poaching of intellectual property and the theft of millions of government employees' personal data.

The negotiations have been conducted with urgency in recent weeks, with a goal to announce an agreement when President Xi Jinping of China arrives in Washington for a state visit on Thursday. President Obama hinted at the negotiations on Wednesday, when he told the Business Roundtable that the rising number of cyberattacks would "probably be one of the biggest topics" of the summit meeting, and that his goal was to see "if we and the Chinese are able to coalesce around a process for negotiations" that would ultimately "bring a lot of other countries along."

But a senior administration official involved in the discussions cautioned that an initial statement between Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi may not contain "a specific, detailed mention" of a prohibition on attacking critical infrastructure. Rather, it would be a more "generic embrace" of a code of conduct adopted recently by a working group at the United Nations.

One of the key principles of the United Nations document on principles for cyberspace is that no state should allow activity "that intentionally damages critical infrastructure or otherwise impairs the use and operation of critical infrastructure to provide services to the public." The goal of the American negotiators is to have Chinese leaders embrace the principles of the United Nations code of conduct in a bilateral agreement with Washington.

But it seems unlikely that any deal coming out of the talks would directly address the most urgent problems with cyberattacks of Chinese origin, according to officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to describe continuing negotiations.

Most of those attacks have focused on espionage and theft of intellectual property. The rules under discussion would have done nothing to stop the theft of 22 million personal security files from the Office of Personnel Management, which the director of national intelligence, James R. Clapper Jr., recently told Congress did not constitute an "attack" because it was intelligence collection -- something the United States does, too.

The agreement being negotiated would also not appear to cover the use of tools to steal intellectual property, as the Chinese military does often to bolster state-owned industries, according to an indictment of five officers of the People's Liberation Army last year. And it is not clear that the rules would prohibit the kind of attack carried out last year against Sony Pictures Entertainment, for which the United States blamed North Korea. That attack melted down about 70 percent of Sony's computer systems.

Sony is not, by most definitions, part of the nation's "critical infrastructure," although the Department of Homeland Security does include "movie studios" on its list of critical "commercial facilities," along with stadiums, museums and convention centers.

Still, any agreement to limit cyberattacks in peacetime would be a start. "It would be the first time that cyber is treated as a military capability that needs to be governed as nuclear, chemical and biological weapons are," said Vikram Singh, a former Pentagon and State Department official who is now vice president for international security at the Center for American Progress.

Within the Obama administration, the effort to design "a set of norms of behavior" to limit cyberattacks has been compared to President John F. Kennedy's first major nuclear treaty with the Soviet Union in 1963, which banned atmospheric nuclear tests. That accord did not stop the development of nuclear weapons or even halt underground tests, which continued for decades. But it was a first effort to prevent an environmental disaster, just as this would be a first effort by the world's two biggest economic powers to prevent the most catastrophic use of cyberweapons.

Joseph S. Nye, a Harvard professor known for his studies of American power, said the concept of a "no first use" doctrine for cyberattacks had been "gestating for some time" in a variety of international forums. "It could create some self-restraint," Mr. Nye said, but he added that the problem was, "how do you verify it, and what is its value if it can't be verified?"

That problem goes to the heart of why arms control agreements in the cyberspace arena are so much more complicated than better-known agreements covering nuclear weapons.

In the Cold War and still today, nuclear arms remain in the hands of states, meaning they can usually be counted and their movements observed. Cyberweapons, too, are often developed by countries -- the United States, Russia, China and Iran are among the most sophisticated -- but they can also be found in the hands of criminal groups and teenagers, neither of which negotiate treaties.

Moreover, it was usually clear where a conventional attack had originated; the trajectory of a missile could be tracked by radar or satellite. Mr. Obama himself noted last week the difficulty of tracing a cyberattack, and thus of deterring it -- or retaliating with confidence.

Earlier efforts to get Mr. Xi and other senior Chinese leaders to address cyberattacks have largely failed. Mr. Obama spent a considerable amount of time on the issue during a summit meeting with Mr. Xi at Sunnylands, a California estate, in 2013. But even after that session, the Chinese denied that their military was involved in attacks, and portrayed themselves as victims of attacks from the United States.

It was not an entirely spurious claim: Classified documents released by Edward J. Snowden showed a complex effort by the National Security Agency to get into the systems of a Chinese telecommunications giant, Huawei,

though the United States maintained that the effort was for national security surveillance, not for the theft of intellectual property.

The recent Chinese movement on cybersecurity can be traced to several events, officials say.

The Office of Personnel Management breach, which went undetected for roughly a year, was traced to Chinese sources, and one official said evidence had been presented to Chinese officials. In August, Susan E. Rice, Mr. Obama's national security adviser, took a trip to Beijing to meet with Mr. Xi and other officials, and used it to increase pressure on China, suggesting that newly devised economic sanctions could be imposed. Mr. Obama referred to that possibility in two recent speeches, suggesting that he would hold off only if there was progress with Mr. Xi.

Last week, a high-level Communist Party envoy, Meng Jianzhu, who is responsible for state security, came to Washington and met with Ms. Rice, several American intelligence officials and the director of the F.B.I., James B. Comey. That session focused on coming up with some kind of agreement, however vaguely worded, that Mr. Obama and Mr. Xi could announce on Friday.

For the United States, agreements limiting cyberweapons are also problematic. The country is spending billions of dollars on new generations of weapons, and in at least one famous case, the cyberattacks on Iran's nuclear enrichment site at Natanz, it has used them.

American cyberwarriors would be concerned about any rules that limited their ability in peacetime to place "beacons" or "implants" in foreign computer networks; these are pieces of code that monitor how foreign computer systems work, and they can be vital in determining how to launch a covert or wartime attack. The Chinese have littered American networks with similar technology, often to the consternation of the Pentagon and intelligence agencies.

"One of the things to look for are any rules that bar 'preparing the battlefield,' " said Robert K. Knake, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations who worked in the White House cybersecurity office earlier in the Obama administration.

Mr. Obama, who has said little about the United States' development of cyberweapons during his presidency, has begun to talk about it in recent days. "If we wanted to go on offense, a whole bunch of countries would have some significant problems," he told the Business Roundtable on Wednesday.

RETURN TO TOP

2. Russian Buildup in Syria Raises Questions on Role

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A4 | Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt

LONDON -- Russia's military buildup in Syria now includes surface-to-air missiles as well as combat aircraft with air-to-air capability, deployments that raise "serious questions" about Moscow's role in the region, Secretary of State John Kerry said Saturday.

Russian officials have said that the purpose of the buildup at a base near Latakia, Syria, is to combat the Islamic State.

But the deployment of air defense systems and fighter aircraft -- weapons that can be used against a conventionally armed foe but that have little utility against extremist fighters -- has spurred concerns that Moscow's goal is also to establish a military outpost in the Middle East.

It has also added to the Pentagon's worries about the risk of an inadvertent confrontation between Russia's military and the American-led coalition that is carrying out airstrikes in Syria against the Islamic State.

"Clearly the presence of aircraft with air-to-air combat capacity" as well as "surface-to-air missiles raise serious questions, which is precisely why Secretary Carter talked with the Minister of Defense of Russia Shoigu yesterday," Mr. Kerry said, referring to Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter and Russia's defense minister, Sergei K. Shoigu.

At the White House's direction, Mr. Carter began a dialogue Friday with Mr. Shoigu aimed at ensuring that American and Russian aircraft avoid unintended incidents as they operate over Syria.

While Mr. Kerry did not provide details, an American official, who requested anonymity because he was discussing intelligence reports, said that a Russian SA-22 air defense system was already in place at Latakia. The United States had observed elements of the system at the base in the last week, but now the launcher and the missiles it fires are there, too, the official said.

The American official added that the four Su-27 aircraft Russia had flown to the air base were armed with air-to-air missiles.

"What's the air-to-air threat there for them?" asked the official, who called the development "troubling."

Other American officials suggested, however, that the deployment might simply reflect the Russian military's standard defensive precautions as it established an air hub in a foreign country.

The prefabricated building Russia has erected at the base now has the capacity to house 2,000 military advisers and personnel. Ferrying weapons and equipment to the base has involved well over 20 flights by Russian Condor transport planes -- almost all of which have flown to Syria by passing over Iran and Iraq.

Syria, and the migrant crisis it has spawned, has been a major focus of Mr. Kerry's trip to Europe. After a meeting Saturday morning with Philip Hammond, the British foreign secretary, Mr. Kerry said that it was vital to pursue a diplomatic solution to the crisis but that Moscow was not putting enough pressure on President Bashar al-Assad of Syria to make him negotiate seriously.

"We need to get to the negotiation," Mr. Kerry said at a joint news conference with Mr. Hammond. "That's what we're looking for, and we hope Russia and Iran, other countries with influence, will help to bring that about, because that's what's preventing this crisis from ending."

"Right now, Assad has refused to have a serious discussion," Mr. Kerry added, "and Russia has refused to help bring him to the table in order to do that."

Mr. Hammond and Mr. Kerry each emphasized that Mr. Assad could not remain in power if there was to be a durable solution to the conflict, but they said that the timing of his departure during a political transition in Syria would be a matter of negotiation.

"It doesn't have to be on Day 1 or Month 1," Mr. Kerry said. "There is a process by which all the parties have to come together and reach an understanding of how this can best be achieved."

"I just know that the people of Syria have already spoken with their feet," Mr. Kerry added. "They're leaving Syria."

"Assad has to go," Mr. Hammond added. "He can't be part of Syria's long-term future. But the modality and the timing has to be part of a discussion about a political solution."

Despite his concerns about Russia's military buildup in Syria, Mr. Kerry said that the Obama administration welcomed a role for Russian forces if it was focused on combating the Islamic State, which is also known as ISIS or ISIL, and not on propping up Mr. Assad.

"ISIL is plotting attacks today against the West," Mr. Kerry said. "So to the degree that Russia wants to focus its efforts against ISIL, we welcome that."

Mr. Kerry and Mr. Hammond also discussed Yemen, Libya and Ukraine.

On Friday, Mr. Kerry discussed the Syrian crisis here with Abdullah bin Zayed, the foreign minister from the United Arab Emirates. On Sunday, Mr. Kerry plans to fly to Berlin to discuss Syria and the migrant crisis with his German counterpart, Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

--Michael R. Gordon reported from London, and Eric Schmitt from Washington

RETURN TO TOP

3. Seventy-five US-trained rebels enter Syria from Turkey – monitor
Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Maya Gebeily

A batch of 75 rebels newly trained by US and coalition forces in Turkey to fight jihadists have entered northern Syria, a monitoring group told AFP on Sunday.

"Seventy-five new fighters trained in a camp near the Turkish capital entered Aleppo province between Friday night and Saturday morning," said Rami Abdel Rahman, director of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

He said the group had entered in a convoy of a dozen cars with light weapons and ammunition, under air cover from the US-led coalition that has been carrying out air strikes against the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq.

The fighters then deployed to support two US-backed units, with most assigned to Division 30 -- the main unit for US-trained fighters -- and others to a group called Suqur al-Jabal (Falcons of the Mountain).

Before the new batch of fighters, the US-led train-and-equip programme had only managed to identify and train some 60 rebels to fight IS jihadists on the ground.

The $500 million programme run out of Turkey has been fraught with problems, with more than a dozen of those already deployed with Division 30 either dead or kidnapped.

RETURN TO TOP

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. Syrian rebel group claims it attacked base used by Russians

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Not Attributed

BEIRUT — A powerful Syrian rebel group has claimed that it fired several rockets at an airport on the coast said to be used by Russian troops.

In a video posted late Friday, members of the Islam Army warned the Russians that they will not enjoy peace in Syria. The fighters are then are seen loading and launching multiple rockets from a mountainous area.

Earlier this week, new satellite imagery showed the recent arrival of Russian tanks, armored personnel carriers and other military equipment at an air base in Syria's coastal Latakia province, confirming reports by U.S., Israeli and other officials of a Russian military buildup.

The imagery also confirms extensive new construction, including a runway being built at the air base inside the Basel Assad International Airport.

"We declare that we are targeting the Basel airport that has been turned into a Russian base," says a fighter, standing in front of two masked men and the rocket launcher.

Russia's intervention in Syria has been widely criticized by Syrian opposition and rebel groups. Russia says its recent military buildup in Syria is designed to fight the Islamic State group

The Syrian National Coalition, the main Western-backed group, condemned earlier this week what it called "direct Russian military intervention" and described such a step as "hostile behavior." The coalition's statement said the Russian intervention "turns its forces in Syria to occupation forces."

Russia has been one of President Bashar Assad's strongest allies and used its veto power four times at the U.N. Security Council to prevent international sanctions on Syria.

RETURN TO TOP

5. On Iraq's front line in Anbar province

British GQ (Print Edition), September 2015 | Anthony Loyd

I first heard the name "James" on the front, east of Fallujah. It was a late morning in March, the sun was high but shrouded behind a one-dimensional layer of cloud. A cold grey light fell on Al Anbar's level landscape, the desolate farms and abandoned crops, sucking the colour out of the greens and accentuating the drabness of the huge earthen berms the Shia fighters had bulldozed up in lieu of trenches.

Anbar looked more miserable than usual, even in spring. It was only ever harsh at the very best of times, and these past 12 years had been hard.

Faith flowed smoothly with war over those shrapnel-tilled fields, pictures of Shia religious leaders adorning the fighters' every vehicle and bunker, while among the volunteers a group of smiling, turbaned clerics mingled, there to give spiritual sustenance to the men.

The front was relatively quiet that day. Since being shot and kidnapped in Syria last year, "relatively quiet" is about as hard-core as I am up for, at least for now. The fluidity of the previous summer's fighting, when Islamic State - aka Isis or the Daesh, an Arabic acronym preferred by its opponents - had rampaged unchecked across northern and western Iraq, had gelled, settling into an attritional phase of bloodshed in which each side raided the other across fixed front lines that were defined by increasingly complex sets of fortifications.

To the north, in Saladin Governorate, a painfully slow Iraqi offensive was under way, grinding away at Islamic State fighters holding Tikrit. As Iraqi government forces there were shoehorned forwards, block by block, by coalition air strikes, it seemed that Islamic State might, at last, be in decline as their earlier battlefield fortunes waned.

In Baghdad, diplomats and senior coalition officers began to talk about the "turn of the tide", and promised that the days of Islamic State's deceptional feint, manoeuvre and battlefield triumph were over. They spoke of 6,000 Islamic State fighters killed by coalition air strikes in the space of just seven months, a body count that supposedly included half the organisation's leadership cadre. Some even told me that if the Iraqi government so wished, the operation to recapture Mosul could begin before the summer. They told me this to my face and I believed them. I think they believed it themselves.

Yet only two months later, Islamic State was to spring forwards again in a blitzkrieg advance, capturing the city of Ramadi, provincial capital of Anbar, behind a rolling wave of suicide attacks that shattered the Iraqi Army lines, allowing just a few hundred Daesh fighters to rout their more numerous foe.

All that lay ahead. Nevertheless, even "relatively quiet" had its drawbacks on that stretch of the line in Anbar that day in March. An Islamic State sniper hidden in the vegetation a couple of hundred yards the other side of the berm took a shot that punched dead centre into the chest of one of Brigadier Saeed Hamid al-Yasser's sentries, snapping him back off the lip of the berm. He was wearing a flak jacket but, even so, the force spun him down into the sand and made him kick and drum his heels like a man hanged on a short rope.

The other fighters gathered around him and scooped him up. By the time he managed to suck some air back into his lungs he had been frogmarched into the brigadier's forward headquarters, just back from the base of the berm.

He was a young guy, the shot man, rangy and colt-like, and his eyes shone with the dazzled wonder of surprise salvation. His comrades crowded him, keen to hold him close and poke their fingers in the hole in the front of his chest plate, hoping a bit of his luck might rub off on them.

"Thanks be to God he was wearing his flak jacket!" the brigadier mused as he prodded the plate, apparently as surprised by the man's professionalism in choosing to wear it as by his survival. "I lost four men in one day to a sniper here. None of them were wearing their flak jackets."

He was an instantly likeable figure, Brigadier al-Yasser. He had a refreshing sense of humility but an unstated sense of edge, too, so that it would have been a mistake to underestimate him. There was, however, nothing especially martial in his outward appearance. Short and slightly chubby, in his early forties, he was originally a teacher and

community leader from Muthanna Governorate in Iraq's southern Shia heartland. Responding to the fatwa of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the most revered Shia religious scholar in Iraq, the previous summer he had travelled northwards at the head of a unit of 2,600 Shia volunteers, named Ansar al-Marjaeya, to join the fight against Islamic State on the lines east of Fallujah.

Across Iraq, four divisions of regular troops had collapsed and fled, abandoning their positions almost without fight. At Sistani's behest these Shia "Popular Mobilisation Units", the al-Hashd al-Shaabi, filled the breaches they left behind, giving their commanders a key share in the overall future of Iraq.

Not since the Iran-Iraq war had so many thousands of Shia volunteers gathered beneath the pennants of their faith, the green and black flags of Imam Ali. They had converged to fight in a war they described as a "jihad" for the defence of their faith, against Islamic State and the Sunni extremists who were fighting a jihad for the expansion of theirs.

Islamic State had always been strongly represented in Fallujah, one of its original breeding grounds, so that in the months since it arrived there the brigadier's scratch civilian force had to learn how to fight against some of the most hard-bitten Daesh units in Iraq, and his casualties had been predictably heavy.

A fortnight earlier he had lost 22 men in a single Islamic State assault, most killed by a double suicide attack on his position. Noticing my interest pick up as he described the fight, he showed me footage of the attack originally taken by one of the sector's surveillance cameras, later downloaded onto a phone.

The ruthless precision of what I watched epitomised Islamic State's tactics. First, given cover by heavy machine-gun fire, an armoured Islamic State bulldozer emerged from the tree line, impervious to the Shia fire ranged upon it, and cleared a lane to the Shia berm.

Next, in co-ordinated turn, two captured Humvees packed with explosives sped down the lane; the first detonated to blow a breach in the berm through which the second moved, exploding just in front of the brigadier's headquarters, while in the wake of the latter blast an assault group of Islamic State fighters charged forwards, among them sappers laden with pre-rigged charges.

"I was blown through the air but survived," the brigadier murmured, pointing to the footage of the mushroom cloud enveloping his HQ, the same trace of wonderment in his voice that I had earlier noticed in the shot fighter's eyes.

In the desperate fight that followed the two blasts, all the Islamic State fighters were eventually killed, but only after they had penetrated deep into the Shia lines and caused havoc. The last men died only after they had seized a vehicle, then lost control of it and crashed head on into the brigadier's pursuing pick-up, the pile-up survivors scrambling out of the wreckage and blasting away at each other point-blank in a final meltdown of jihad furore and road rage.

I asked if foreign fighters were often identifiable among the Daesh dead. It was a lazy question, for the front in Anbar province was already a well-known magnet for out-of-area volunteers to Islamic State. Earlier that month eight foreign fighters, including a Russian, a Belgian and an Australian - 18-year-old Muslim convert Jake Bilardi - died in a co-ordinated series of suicide attacks on Iraqi positions in Ramadi, the same day that Brigadier al-Yasser lost his 22 men.

He rattled off a familiar roll call of Saudis, Libyans and Tunisians in reply, adding that his fighters found the occasional African among the dead Daesh, and on one occasion discovered two dead Australians and a German convert. Then he caught me by surprise.

"We killed one of yours the other day!" he said, clearly amused. "A white British guy. His name was 'James'."

James! Most of the Brits who joined the Daesh were clone replicas of one another, as mutually transposable in their names, age, origin and influence, right down to their plastic-gangsta roots and faux faith lingo, as to warrant little individual interest, no matter how often they were billed as "coming back to a street near you".

The security services in the UK have estimated that more British Muslims have joined Islamic State than are currently serving in the British Army. (In June, a 17-year-old became Britain's youngest suicide bomber, reportedly having joined Islamic State before blowing himself up in the northern town of Baiji.) The route to their ranks was well-trodden. Until Turkey belatedly tightened up its border controls last year, most prospective jihadists entered Syria through southern Turkey, using exactly the same route as the small cadre of reporters who had worked in Syria. Among ourselves we nicknamed the flight from Istanbul to Hatay, in Turkey's south, the "jihad express", due to the volume of foreign fighters we saw aboard.

Most of the Brits reached their destination in Syria unmolested, blowing their cover only when they started tweeting their jihad experiences. Rarely among these British jihadists was there ever a glimpse of an educated mind and evolved ideology, although foreigners joining Islamic State -included veteran fighters as well as skilled radical ideologues.

Instead, the British volunteers seemed uniformly similar: disempowered, disillusioned young Muslim men whose rage, frustration or sense of meaninglessness was given a portal by Islamic State on a journey of dark-star self-revelation. The product may have been radical, but the roots were usually utterly banal.

"James" suggested something very different. "James", a name favoured by British royalty, a Christian name with Latin and Hebrew history, carried all sorts of connotations. James, I mused, was possibly a wayward public-school boy who may have taken a very wrong turn on his gap-year travels. Whatever his true identity, he was certainly worth checking out. So I asked the brigadier to take me to the dead man's battlefield grave.

He grumbled for a while, as it seemed that it was some way away. But his sense of irony was tickled by the thought of the dead Briton and, after a few minutes' discussion, he agreed to take me to the resting place of James, the dead British Daesh.

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"We have killed a few from the UK, but this is the first British I remember who was white," the brigadier elaborated as we drove away from his headquarters into the flat, lush vista of ruined farms and abandoned crops, bisected by canals and irrigation ditches.

"We even marked his grave so that your people can collect him."

Earlier he had shown me welfare boxes sent to his unit by a class of seven-year-old school girls in Uruk, a city in Iraq's Shia south.

Asked by their elementary school teacher to bring something from home to send to the brigadier's volunteers, each girl donated a heartfelt gift: a 7.62mm Kalashnikov bullet.

"I had mixed feelings when I opened the boxes that arrived from these little girls," the brigadier murmured, jingling the rounds between his fingers in the open boxes.

"I was delighted that they thought of us in our time of hardship," he continued as, outside, across berms and tangled crops, the sound of heavy machine-gun fire rolled along the line.

"But I was sad that small fingers, better used for pencils, chose to hand us ammunition."

I think he really meant it, too. The al-Hashd al-Shaabi defied easy generalisation. Some of their militias really were little more than expanded Shia death squads - thugs in uniform whose idea of a quick thrill was killing a Sunni or, even better, torturing one to death. Yet other Shia commanders led disciplined units of relatively skilled fighters, and understood that if Iraq had any future as a cohesive entity, then it lay in reconciliation and sectarian accord between Shia and Sunni communities.

Expanding this theme as we drove to find James' grave, the brigadier pointed out the overgrown fields, left behind by fleeing Sunni farmers, in which lay overripe squash, potato and tomato crops, unmolested by his fighters' forage parties.

"We don't even take their fruit and crops," he assured me, insisting that his men were under strict orders from Sistani not only to preserve Sunni property and prevent the abuse of Sunni civilians, but also to bury slain Daesh fighters with respect.

"We know that if we mistreat the Sunnis they will all run to the hands of the Daesh," he added. "If all of our Sunni brothers lose faith in our government, then we will have war here until the end of time."

Yet other Shia units I encountered had long, dark track records of running death squads against the Sunnis, as well as entrenched relationships with Iran. Although they shared a common enemy with the US in the shape of the Daesh, beyond it their intent and aspirations differed wildly, so that the war had become as much about internal Iraqi politics, regional power games and the greater Shia-Sunni standoff as a fight to remove Islamic State from Iraq.

Each of the three principal Shia militias involved in the battle for Tikrit that month - the Badr Organisation, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah - was vehemently pro-Iranian and anti-American, and to some or other extent all had the blood of Sunni civilians on their hands.

Hadi al-Amiri, the head of the Badr Organisation, was a grizzled, enigmatic man I met on the east bank of the Tigris outside Tikrit. He made no secret of his close friendship with the commander of the Iranian Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, who was an archenemy of the US and probably the most influential special forces commander in the Middle East.

"He was my guest and provided us with tremendous help, unlike the Americans," Amiri told me. "We can rely on Qasem Soleimani every time."

Despite recent forays into political moderation, Amiri remained shadowed by his reputation during the earlier era of Iraq's sectarian bloodshed. In December 2009, a US diplomatic cable from Baghdad, part of the Wikileaks trove, alluded to a claim that between 2004 and 2006 Amiri had personally ordered attacks on Sunnis.

Meanwhile Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, which had boasted of conducting 6,000 attacks against US and British forces during the occupation and was responsible for the 2007 kidnap of British IT expert Peter Moore along with his four bodyguards, held positions along the same stretch of Tikrit front line.

Its commander, Qais al-Khazali, had been arrested in an SAS raid in 2007, but was later released from jail as part of a protracted negotiation for Moore's freedom.

The third member of this leading troika of Shia militias fighting in Tikrit, Kata'ib Hezbollah, had been added to the US State Department list of foreign terrorist organisations in 2009, and even as it fought in Tikrit, it was in the middle of issuing repeated threats to shoot down coalition aircraft that flew over its positions.

Given such sinister allies, Brigadier al-Yasser seemed fatalistic as he discussed the possible cost of shouldering Sistani's orders for restraint and discipline. His own willingness to accept coalition air support also put him at odds with other Shia units.

During a top-level meeting the previous month in Baghdad with the Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, attended by various Shia militia commanders, the brigadier said he had repeatedly insisted on the need for Iraq to embrace its friendship with coalition countries.

"We are defending the world from the Daesh, and our religious council has said there should be no barrier in asking for help from friends, including the coalition," he told me.

Such frankness did not go down well with other Shia commanders there.

"At the end of the meeting the prime minister shook my hand as I left and warned me quietly, 'Be careful your friends do not get you killed.'"

We drove on in silence for a few minutes until a couple of desert grouse suddenly scurried across the track ahead of us. Slamming on the brakes, the Brigadier grabbed his M16, leapt to the ground and shouldered the rifle.

Already he seemed far too gentle to survive the war, and I was sure he had not the skill required to hit either bird as they scurried away through the crops: blurred, low-profile targets, well-camouflaged and moving fast through cover. I winced inwardly at the inevitable humiliation that was about to follow...

He fired just one round. It was a perfect shot and it nailed a scurrying grouse dead on the spot. Noticing me gawp with surprise, the brigadier turned to me and grinned as one of his fighters ran to collect and pluck the dead bird.

"Don't go thinking I am just a teacher who doesn't know how to shoot."

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James had died in the obliterated tangle of a village named al-Rafush. The journey there with the brigadier had taken the best part of an hour across earthen tracks, and included unnerving expanses of deserted landscape, heavy with vegetation, which my imagination populated with ambush parties and IEDs.

Anbar had always given me the heebie-jeebies, ever since I was first embedded with US Marines in Fallujah in 2004. That time, the Marines were in action in a failed attempt to bring the city back under control after four US Blackwater contractors had been killed, burnt, and the bodies of two of them hung from a bridge over the Euphrates.

I was in Anbar again later that same year after US troops finally did manage to crush the resistance in Fallujah, and had returned a few more times across the intervening decade. It was never anything less than mean, with levels of violence that usually far exceeded those of any other province in the country.

The last time I had been in Ramadi, the provincial capital, in 2012, a Sunni sheikh had pointed to the place in his garden at which a suicide bomber tried to detonate himself during a tribal gathering. The sheikh and his entourage had flailed around the flower beds in a desperate wrestle to keep the young man's fingers from clicking the detonator, until finally someone had produced a pistol and shot him in the head. Unsure of how best to defuse the man's suicide vest, they elected to chuck him in a canal and throw grenades at him until he properly exploded.

Then there was the memory of an American padre in Ramadi, who had confided to me in 2005 that he was struggling to hold himself together while giving the last rites to dying soldiers, describing how he had often walked away from stretchers sobbing. He said that a brother priest there had abandoned the cloth because he could no longer contain his desire to kill.

Iraq's largest governorate, Anbar province was ever a bastion of Sunni resistance. Expanding westwards from Fallujah right up to Iraq's borders with Syria, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, along its north-eastern flank ran the river Euphrates, which rolled down the map on a long, winding journey to join the Tigris in the Shatt al-Arab, far to the south.

The Americans almost lost control of Anbar entirely during the savage fighting there of 2004-2005; in all, more than 1,300 US soldiers died in the province during the occupation. Paradoxically, it had also been the scene of one of the Americans' biggest successes in Iraq. In late 2005 leading Anbari sheikhs, unnerved by the savagery of the extremist ideology imported to the province by foreign fighters, had begun to turn their tribesmen away from attacks against the Americans, to target the radicals instead.

The Americans encouraged this local uprising by the so-called "Anbar Awakening", otherwise known as the "Sons of Iraq", and co-ordinated their own troop surge with the Sunni tribal forces, eventually routing the Islamic State of Iraq - the Daesh's forebears - from Anbar.

However, in the years since US troops left Iraq in 2011, the situation had fallen apart again as the juggernaut of sectarian loathing rolled unchecked through Iraqi Shia and Sunni communities, cleaving them one from another during the tenure of the then prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, under whose rule sectarianism had flourished.

Already discriminated against by the de-Baathification purges that had accompanied Saddam's downfall and their loss of power in Iraq, the Sunnis were further antagonised by Article 4 of Iraq's contentious anti-terrorism law. Repeatedly abused, Article 4 skewed the definition of criminality, and was cited time and time again to justify the

mass arrest of Sunnis, as well as the detention of Maliki's political opponents. Eventually, late in 2012, a series of Sunni protest camps was established in Anbar, which spread further across Iraq in response to the alleged rape of a Sunni woman in jail and the arrest of a prominent Sunni politician's bodyguards.

Demanding an end to human-rights abuses and sectarian prejudice, which they felt made Iraq's Sunni population second-class citizens, the camps became the focus of violence after dozens died when Iraqi security forces clashed with Sunni protesters in the town of Hawija in April 2013, an incident that ignited a surge in sectarian killings across the country.

Meanwhile, across the border in Syria, the revolution had turned to civil war. This further refracted Iraq's Sunni-Shia divide through a prism of divergent sectarian interests, as Iraqi Sunni volunteers crossed the border to serve with the rebels, while Shia militias journeyed to Damascus to fight alongside the regime.

So, by the time Islamic State rolled into the Iraqi city of Mosul in the summer of 2014, most Sunni communities already either loathed or feared the Baghdad government, and regarded Islamic State as the lesser evil of a limited choice. Fallujah had been captured by Islamic State months earlier, in January, and the government held only a few quarters in Ramadi, Anbar's capital, ahead of the city's complete fall to Islamic State this May.

James had died fighting in December, serving with the Daesh in the middle of this Sunni-Shia conflagration, his life ended by an air strike that had blasted apart the house he was defending against an assault by the brigadier's fighters, who had crossed a nearby canal complex in boats at dawn supported by coalition jets.

The ferocity of the fighting had completely destroyed al-Rafush, transforming the village into piles of rubble and shredded beams, and the dry soil beneath our feet rang with shrapnel shards, bullet casings and broken glass. Amid the wreckage lay scattered the remnants of some Isis fighters: leg bones, frizzled beards and bits of skull, too blasted apart to bury. As we stomped around the rubble I noticed the air still reeked of ash and decayed flesh, three months after the battle.

Elsewhere amid the devastation, though, Brigadier al-Yasser and his men had been good to their word, and shallow graves marked the final resting place of dead Islamic State fighters.

Among them, James' grave was unique. Curious at the pale European corpse, the brigadier had personally supervised his burial. A shredded set of chest webbing, a blast-twisted flak jacket and a bent Kalashnikov magazine had been used to mark his tomb. So certain was the brigadier of James' nationality that he ordered his men to place a sign beside it, believing that one day British authorities may wish to repatriate his corpse.

"Tomb of the British Daesh James", it read.

"He was in his thirties, and had ID on him," the brigadier remembered, as we stared at the chest webbing and ravaged flak vest. He described finding what seemed to be a British driving licence on James' body. Recalling only the corpse's first name, he said that he had obeyed orders by wrapping the ID card in a nylon bag, before placing it on the dead man's chest and shovelling the soil on top of him. Next, he had written a letter to his senior commanders in Najaf mentioning the grave's location, and suggesting that they should contact the British embassy and have James' body repatriated.

In vain, I pestered him to remember James' surname, but it eluded him. Considering the great pyramids of Iraqi dead raised over the previous few months, I was not altogether surprised that he could not recall a foreigner's second name, especially one written in alien script. One of the Shia fighters there suggested digging up the body to read the driving licence, but we quickly ditched the idea: whoever James was and whatever he had done, he deserved the peace of the earth.

The brigadier collected his thoughts for a moment.

"If the British do come one day to collect James, they should not seek compensation or revenge against us," he said finally, grinning at the war's ironies in that ravaged village. "After all, he was a Western man and killed by Western jets."

Then we walked back to the vehicle, leaving James, his story and his lonely grave behind us.

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I never did discover James' full identity. He was certainly mentioned in correspondence between Shia commanders in Anbar and their headquarters in distant Najaf. The British embassy in Baghdad said it had never heard of him, but also mentioned that it would not investigate reports of a British citizen's death unless it knew their full identity and had received a direct request from the family to repatriate the body.

The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, by contrast, told me that the Ministry of Interior in Baghdad had a list of all dead foreigners, including British citizens, killed fighting for Islamic State in Iraq. However, it refused to share its details.

Elsewhere, in another Baghdad office, a flustered Iraqi official in a suit pulled out a muddled box of files concerning some, but not all, of the dead foreigners in Iraq, and told me that among them was a letter sent from London, written by an "interested party", referring to the grave of a dead British Islamic State fighter in Anbar whose nom de guerre was "Abu Barra", but not "James".

The Shia fighters on the front certainly believed they killed a white British convert named James in al-Rafush. As far as I know his grave marker remains there to this day, although the original, its lettering bleached out by the sun and wind, has since been replaced by one spelled with the phonetic "Jeems".

Perhaps, after all, it is best that the mystery of James, the dead British Daesh, is never resolved. Dead men don't tell tales, after all. Some, though, like James, at least tell you fragments of a story you might not have ever heard if they had remained alive.

RETURN TO TOP

MIDEAST

6. Arab Coalition Bombs Yemen's Capital, Killing Dozens

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A4 | Shuaib Almosawa and Kareem Fahim

SANA, Yemen -- A Saudi-led military coalition bombarded government buildings and residential neighborhoods in Sana, the Yemeni capital, overnight on Saturday, killing more than two dozen people, officials and witnesses said, and destroying homes in Sana's Old City, a Unesco World Heritage site.

The Saudi coalition, which includes nine other Arab nations and is supported by the United States, began fighting Yemen's Houthi rebels in March, two months after the Houthis drove the government from power and took control of Sana. Coalition warplanes have sharply intensified their bombing of Sana in recent weeks, leading analysts to speculate that the airstrikes are intended to ease the way for a coalition ground incursion of the capital.

The airstrikes hit the headquarters of the Interior Ministry and a military honor guard, killing at least 17 security and military personnel, according to government officials and witnesses. But several of the targets appeared to have no military value, witnesses said.

One set of airstrikes crushed a group of houses, killing at least 10 members of one family and destroying at least two other houses, all in the Old City, which has been inhabited for more than 2,500 years.

Other bombs struck an underpass, damaging a passing truck, as well as a four-story residential building.

The aerial campaign has helped coalition forces advance in parts of Yemen, but has been marked by a persistent imprecision that has led to the deaths of more than a thousand civilians, according to human rights groups. The warplanes have bombed homes, markets, refugee camps and hospitals, but the coalition has consistently refused to acknowledge any culpability for the deaths.

Errant airstrikes have become so frequent that critics of the coalition say they are part of a deliberate policy intended to terrorize the population and turn public opinion against the Houthis.

On Friday, Unicef said that an airstrike in Dhamar, south of the capital, had destroyed a warehouse the agency used for water supplies, imperiling more than 11,000 people. Last week, the United Nations human rights chief called for an independent inquiry into violations by the coalition, as well as by the Houthi rebels.

The bombing was the second major attack on the Old City since the start of the war in March. Around 11:30 p.m. on Friday, bombs destroyed the Ayni home, killing the family and damaging wells and several other homes in the area, according to Taha al-Maghribi, a neighbor. Mr. Maghribi said he had no idea why the family had been targeted: The father, Hifthallah al-Ayni, had no connection to either of the warring parties, he said, and the house was far from any military or security installation.

Near the site of another attack that wounded two people in a four-story building, Hisham Abu Oraig, a neighbor, said a nearby government building could have been the target. "But I don't think so," he added. "The bombs are precise. They just want to scare people off."

--Shuaib Almosawa reported from Sana, and Kareem Fahim from Cairo

RETURN TO TOP

7. Saudi Arabia says 100,000 troops to secure this year's hajj

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Aya Batrawy

MECCA, Saudi Arabia — Saudi Arabia has deployed 100,000 security personnel to oversee the annual Islamic hajj pilgrimage that begins on Tuesday, the Interior Ministry spokesman said, underscoring both the massive arrangements needed to secure one of the largest pilgrimages in the world and the multitude of threats the hajj faces.

"We always concentrate on hajj considering that a threat might exist," Maj. Gen. Mansour al-Turki said. "We've been targeted by terrorism for years now and we know that we are a target for terrorist groups."

Al-Turki spoke exclusively to The Associated Press on Saturday from the Interior Ministry's security headquarters for the hajj, located in the sprawling tent city of Mina just a few miles outside the Grand Mosque in Mecca that houses Islam's holiest site, the cube-shaped Kaaba.

Roughly 3 million people from around the world are expected to converge at the Kaaba, in Mina and other nearby areas for the hajj, which lasts about five days. It is series of rituals meant to cleanse the soul of sins and instill a sense of equality and brotherhood. All able-bodied Muslims are required to perform the hajj once in their lives.

Members of an elite counterterrorism unit, traffic police and emergency civil defense personnel are among those deployed to help with crowd control and safety. They are supported by additional troops from the army and national guard, al-Turki said.

Inside the Interior Ministry's nerve center, police monitor dozens of screens with feeds from about 5,000 CCTV cameras installed throughout Mecca and Medina, the two cities frequented by pilgrims.

"We're active, we're awake," al-Turki said, referring to the security forces' readiness to deal with any eventuality.

Civil defense emergency personnel were among the first responders when a crane collapsed at the Grand Mosque on Sept. 11, killing 111 people and injuring nearly 400 others who had come for the hajj. Authorities blamed the collapse on high winds and the contractor was faulted for not following operating procedures.

On Thursday, the kingdom's military and police put on a parade in Mecca, with security forces jumping through burning hoops and thwarting a mock terrorist attack. The show was aimed at deterring any would-be troublemakers, and was attended by Crown Prince and Interior Minister Mohammed bin Nayef, who himself was the target of a terrorist attack in 2009.

Saudi Arabia's custodianship of holy sites in Mecca and Medina has long made the kingdom a target of terrorist groups who want to wrestle control of them from the kingdom's Western-allied monarchy.

The pilgrimage this year comes as Saudi Arabia faces an expansion of Islamic State group attacks. Two Saudi suicide bombers targeted Shiite pilgrims in eastern Saudi Arabia in May, and a Saudi suicide bomber carried out a third attack in June in neighboring Kuwait. The attacks, which killed 53 people, were claimed by an IS affiliate calling itself "Najd Province," the traditional name for the central heartland of the peninsula.

An IS-claimed suicide bombing last month in Abha, 350 miles south of Mecca, killed 15 people inside a mosque in a police compound. It was the deadliest attack on the kingdom's security forces in years. Eleven of the dead belonged to a counterterrorism unit whose tasks include protecting the hajj.

That attack was claimed by a second alleged IS affiliate in Saudi Arabia calling itself "Hijaz Province" of the Islamic State group, in reference to the traditional name of the western stretch of the Arabian Peninsula.

Al-Turki acknowledged that this year the kingdom saw the most terrorist acts since 2003, when al-Qaida unleashed a wave of bombings that lasted for three years until its militants were driven out to Yemen where they remain active.

Little is publicly known about the structure of the Islamic State group in Saudi Arabia, such as whether militants in the kingdom have direct operational ties with the group's leadership based in its self-declared "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria — or if they simply operate independently in the group's name.

Al-Turki said IS supporters in Saudi Arabia are little more than small "cluster cells" or even individuals inspired by the IS group who find one another by communicating online. He said their claims of having a province or state in Saudi Arabia is nothing more than online propaganda.

"In reality, they cannot control a centimeter anywhere in Saudi Arabia," he said.

RETURN TO TOP

ASIA/PACIFIC

8. Warily Eyeing China, Philippines May Invite U.S. Back to Subic Bay

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A8 | Javier C. Hernández

SUBIC BAY, Philippines -- In a flash of anticolonialist fervor nearly a quarter-century ago, lawmakers in the Philippines expelled the United States from an enormous naval base here, then the largest overseas outpost of the American military. Promising to break free from the "shackles of dictatorship," they declared that foreign troops would never return.

But with China forcefully pressing its claim to a vast expanse of sea west of here, the Philippines is now debating whether to welcome the United States Navy back to the deepwater docks, airstrips and craggy shores of Subic Bay, which served as a haven for bruised battleships and weary soldiers during the Vietnam War.

It is also asking Washington for hundreds of millions of dollars in new funding to strengthen its own military, one of the weakest in Asia.

The change of heart is just one sign of the shifting strategic calculations in the region as President Xi Jinping of China has sought to reinforce Beijing's claim to almost all of the South China Sea by turning reefs into islands and putting military facilities on them. Satellite photos taken last week appear to show China preparing to build a third airstrip on one of the new islands.

United States officials have objected to the buildup in contested waters, and the dispute is expected to be high on the agenda when Mr. Xi meets President Obama in Washington on Thursday. Even as China has accelerated construction, though, the Obama administration has struggled to coordinate a response in Asia, where many leaders are not sure how hard they should push back against China, the region's economic giant, and how much they should rely on the United States, its dominant military power.

Several nations lay claim to parts of the South China Sea, through which pass some of the world's busiest shipping routes and which is believed to hold significant oil and natural gas deposits. But China's push to establish the sea as its own has hit closer to home in the Philippines than almost anywhere else.

An island with a civilian Filipino population is in the disputed area, and Chinese forces have occupied reefs and shoals the Philippines once controlled. "The fight hasn't even started yet, and it looks like the Philippines government has already surrendered," said Renato Etac, 35, a fishing boat captain who says Chinese vessels there routinely chase and try to ram his ship. "I can't even count the Chinese ships I see, there are so many."

Last year, the government in Manila signed a 10-year agreement that would let the United States station troops, weapons and matériel at bases across the Philippines, setting the stage for an American return to several facilities, including Subic Bay and the sprawling Clark Air Base nearby. But the pact has been tied up by a legal challenge.

Filipinos, by a wide margin, hold favorable views of the United States, polls show. There is ambivalence, however, about allowing American troops to be stationed in the country -- a concern amplified by the Philippines' history as an American territory from 1898 to 1946 -- and anxiety over how China might respond.

"When the elephants brawl, ants should be spared," said Rene Augusto V. Saguisag, one of a group of former senators who voted to expel American troops in 1991 and has petitioned the Philippines Supreme Court to block the military agreement. "The U.S. and China should leave us alone and not involve us in the quarrels of the strong."

Washington has expressed frustration with the delay in carrying out the agreement, which President Obama announced with fanfare during a visit to Manila last year. The case is not expected to be decided in the Philippines Supreme Court until later this fall at the earliest.

If it goes forward, the pact would give the United States the ability to operate a stronghold on the shores of the South China Sea, less than 500 miles from the new islands built by the Chinese. Currently, American forces in the region rely largely on bases more than 1,500 miles away, in Japan and the United States territory of Guam, for repairs.

The Philippines, prized for its deep, sheltered waters, is a linchpin in the Pentagon's effort to shift resources toward Asia. The Subic Bay base, roughly the size of Singapore, played a role in virtually every American conflict of the 20th century. United States and Japanese forces battled to control it in World War II, and millions of American personnel passed through it every year during the Vietnam War.

The base was reborn as an economic development zone after the American withdrawal in 1992. Luxury villas were erected atop former ammunition bunkers, and a marine park was built along the shore. Outside the local government here, a statue of a woman holding a dove celebrates the American withdrawal and a plaque reads: "Unchain us now."

In addition to the legacy of American rule of the Philippines, another hurdle to military cooperation is the decrepit state of the Philippine armed forces, which have long suffered from waste and corruption.

Despite a recent effort to modernize its military, the Philippines still lacks basic equipment, including submarines and fighter jets. The most famous vessel in its fleet may be the Sierra Madre, a decaying World War II-era ship that the government ran aground nearly two decades ago to protect a contested reef. American military aid to the

Philippines has increased significantly in recent years, more than doubling last year to $50 million. But that is less than the hundreds of millions the United States provided during the Cold War, when the Philippines was used to counterbalance Soviet support of Vietnam.

In private talks, the government of President Benigno S. Aquino III has pressed the United States for up to $300 million in aid this year, arguing that it needs a substantial buildup of planes and ships to deter Chinese expansionism, according to a senior Philippine official who spoke on the condition of anonymity because United States officials have asked to keep the talks confidential.

But the Obama administration has so far rebuffed the request because it worries about corruption and the Philippines' capacity to handle such an influx of resources. A spokeswoman for the State Department noted that the Philippines was already the largest recipient of American military aid in Southeast Asia.

"The issue of the West Philippines Sea is a shared responsibility of the Philippines and the United States," said Fernando I. Manalo, a Philippine defense official, who used the local term for the South China Sea in arguing for joint investments in military upgrades.

But Senator Dan Sullivan of Alaska, a Republican member of the Armed Services Committee, said it would take time to rebuild trust between the two countries.

"If you look at what happened in Subic Bay, that was a pretty abrupt turnaround by the Philippines," he said, referring to the American expulsion in 1992. "I think memory probably lingers in both the Philippines and the United States."

On Pag-asa Island, home to about 100 residents in territory claimed by the Chinese, Mayor Eugenio B. Bito-onon Jr. has promised to resist what he calls the "Chinese invasion."

"This is a question of preserving our existence," he said during a visit to Puerto Princesa, a nearby city, pointing to a wall-sized map that he uses to track the advances of Chinese ships and construction work.

Mr. Bito-onon, 59, said he was worried that the Philippines was too weak to stand up to China, and that allies like the United States were too timid. "We seem to have lots of leaders and allies with no strong direction," he said.

The Philippines has deployed coast guard ships in an effort to protect reefs and shoals from Chinese advances, and it has announced plans to station fighter jets and frigates at Subic Bay next year. It has also lodged a complaint before an international tribunal at The Hague, arguing that China's claim to almost the entire 1.4 million square miles of the South China Sea violates international law. Chinese officials have said they will ignore the court's ruling, contending that territorial disputes should be resolved through direct negotiations between the two countries.

In Manila last month, the top United States commander in the Pacific, Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., told Philippine officials that the United States did not want to take any military action that might distract from the case at The Hague, according to an individual briefed on the talks. But Admiral Harris also said that the United States planned to conduct more patrols in the South China Sea, the individual said.

Some Filipinos are worried that relying on the United States will delay efforts by the Philippines to build its own military. Others are concerned that the United States, despite its mutual defense treaty with the Philippines, is too distracted by its fight against terrorism in the Middle East to help them.

"We can't simply trust that others will come to save the day," said Maria Turco, 42, a teacher in Subic Bay. "We have to take ownership."

RETURN TO TOP

9. Reforming the armed forces: Command and lack of control

A cut in the number of troops may presage wider military reform

The Economist (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 41 | Not Attributed

If the People's Liberation Army (PLA) were a company, it would be about to lose its position as the world's largest corporate employer. When troop cuts recently announced by Xi Jinping, China's president, are completed in 2017, the ranks of China's armed forces will have shrunk by 300,000 to 2m, putting it just behind Walmart, a retailer. It would still be by far the world's largest military outfit.

When the downsizing was announced, at a big military parade on September 3rd, the cuts seemed no more significant than a round of corporate redundancies. Mr Xi's own explanation--that they would help the PLA to "carry out the noble mission of upholding world peace"--also seemed to come straight from the gobbledygook of corporate obfuscation.

But recent commentary in China's state media suggests that the reductions may presage something more: a long-overdue reform of the command structure of the PLA and a shift in the balance of the main military services. If so, one of the most important subsidiaries of the Chinese state is in for a shake-up.

The army has long been the senior service. Almost three quarters of active-duty personnel are soldiers. The navy and air-force chiefs did not have seats on the main institution for exercising civilian control over the armed forces, the Central Military Commission, until 2004. It was only in 2012 that an officer outside the ranks of the army became its most senior military figure. The army's dominance is a problem at a time when China is expanding its influence in the South China Sea and naval strategy is looming larger.

Moreover, there has long been a split within the PLA between combat forces (which kill the enemy) and other operations (logistics, transport and so on) which are regarded as secondary. But in modern, high-tech warfare, non-front-line services such as those responsible for cyberwarfare and electronic surveillance often matter more than tanks and infantry.

Embodying these outdated traditions is a top-heavy, ill-coordinated structure with four headquarters and seven regional commands. Many Chinese analysts argue that, as now constituted, the PLA would not be able to conduct modern information-intensive military operations which integrate all the services properly.

China has long talked about military reform. In late 2013 Mr Xi told fellow leaders that the command system for joint operations was "not strong enough". It was duly announced that China would "optimise the size and structure" of the armed forces. China Daily, an English-language newspaper, said that a "joint operational command system" would be introduced "in due course".

It now appears that these changes are under way. Mr Xi was recently quoted in PLA Daily, a newspaper, saying that "we have a rare window ... to deepen [military] reform". It is possible that Mr Xi's anti-corruption purge, which has taken aim at two men (one now dead) who were once the country's most powerful military figures, as well as 50 other generals, may have weakened opposition enough for change to begin.

The South China Morning Post, a newspaper in Hong Kong, recently published what it described as a radical plan devised by military reformers. This would scrap three of the four headquarters, reduce the number of regional military commands to four and give a more prominent role to the navy. It remains to be seen whether Mr Xi will go that far. But there is no doubt that, in order to fulfil what he calls China's "dream of a strong armed forces", he wants a leaner, more efficient PLA. To China's neighbours, that would make it even more frightening.

RETURN TO TOP

10. China says Japan security law 'threat' to regional peace

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Shingo Ito

China accused Japan of threatening regional peace Saturday after Tokyo passed laws clearing Japanese troops to fight abroad for the first time since World War II, saying that its rival should learn "profound lessons from history".

Japan's ruling coalition, led by nationalist Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, pushed the laws through in the early hours of Saturday morning after days of tortuous debate that at times descended into physical scuffles in parliament.

For the first time in 70 years, the new laws will give the government the power to send the military into overseas conflicts to defend allies, even if Japan itself is not under attack.

China's defence ministry said Saturday the reforms had "aroused grave concern among its own citizens, Asian neighbouring countries and the international society," state media reported.

A Xinhua editorial added that Japan's new security bills "not only broke Japan's promise to the world after World War II, but also betrayed its own people".

Japan's nationalist premier has argued the laws are necessary to protect against threats from what it views as an increasingly belligerent China and unstable North Korea, but opponents fear the vague wording could see Japan dragged into far-flung foreign wars.

South Korea called on Japan to remember the need for transparency in implementing its new defence policy "while maintaining the spirit of the pacifist constitution," its foreign ministry said in a statement cited by the Yonhap news agency.

North Korea's official KCNA news agency later released a strongly-worded statement from the foreign ministry accusing Japan of being "obsessed with an anachronistic ambition for reinvasion".

"Japan's militarist moves are posing a grave threat to peace and stability in Asia and the rest of the world," the statement added.

It warned the North "will further increase the war deterrence to cope with the dangerous moves for aggression against it".

Abe has faced bitter opposition at home over the changes, which have seen his popularity slump, and opposition lawmakers have vowed to do everything in their power to fight them.

"This is not an end," said Renho, a senior lawmaker from the main opposition Democratic Party of Japan, who goes by one name.

"Let's make it the beginning of the beginning," she said on Twitter.

Mizuho Fukushima, a senior lawmaker from the opposition Social Democratic Party, told a crowd of more than ten thousand who gathered outside parliament during the debate: "Abe's cabinet criminals... Let's get them out of here."

Speaking after the vote, Abe said the changes were "necessary in order to protect people's lives and peaceful way of life".

"This is designed to prevent wars," he told journalists.

Abe had been unable to muster support to amend the pacifist constitution and instead opted to "re-interpret" the meaning of self-defence in order to push through the new laws, but the move has sparked a groundswell of opposition not seen for decades in Japan.

A hardcore group of some 300 protesters gathered outside parliament on Saturday, calling for the legislation to be abolished and vowing never to stop their fight against Abe.

"Our battle will never end. This is just the beginning," Keisuke Yamamoto, an organiser from one of the citizen groups that have been leading weeks of rallies, told AFP.

"We will resort to every possible measure, including bringing the case to the courts... We can't let this movement fizzle out now."

Behind him, demonstrators carried banners or billboards, which read: "We should not get children killed," and "Don't let them wage a war".

Legal scholars have argued the legislation violates Japan's pacifist constitution, imposed by the US after World War II, and several groups on Saturday said they were preparing to challenge the new laws.

Susumu Murakoshi, chairman of the 36,000-strong national bar association, on Saturday criticised the government for going against the will of the people and pledged to see the changes abolished.

The laws have "left a black stain on the history of Japan as a constitutional democracy," he said in a statement.

National broadcaster NHK reported that respected constitutional scholar Setsu Kobayashi, from Keio University, is already planning to muster 1,000 lawyers to file a challenge to the legislation in the Tokyo district court.

Legal action aside, the laws will likely take months to come into effect and the supreme court could urge lawmakers to amend them.

Even under the new legislation, Japan's military will still be more restricted than other countries: parliament will have to approve any deployments, based on strict criteria, and force must be kept to a minimum.

Tokyo has said the changes would allow troops to help their American counterparts, but officials have remained tight-lipped on who else it would cover.

It could include the Philippines, or Australia, both of which Japan has forged closer military ties with in recent years, and the new laws were welcomed by the Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop.

"These reforms will allow Japan to make a greater contribution to international peace and stability," she said in a statement Saturday.

RETURN TO TOP

AFGHANISTAN/PAKISTAN

11. Afghan Taliban divided as talks between two factions fail

Reuters, Sept. 19 | Jibran Ahmad

PESHAWAR, Pakistan -- The Afghan Taliban may split into two factions, said a spokesman for one group on Saturday, because they cannot agree who should be leader following the death of their founder.

The split could derail fledgling peace talks between the insurgency and the Afghan government and open the way for the Islamic State group to expand its foothold in one of the world's most tumultuous regions.

The dispute occurred after Afghan intelligence leaked news last month that the insurgency's reclusive founder, Mullah Omar, had been dead for more than two years.

A hastily convened meeting chose Omar's deputy, Mullah Mansour, as the new leader. But many commanders were angry that Mansour had concealed Omar's death and objected to his speedy appointment.

On Saturday, Mullah Abdul Manan Niazi, a spokesman for the anti-Mansour faction, said talks between Mansour and the dissatisfied commanders had failed.

"We waited for two months and wanted Mullah Mansour to understand the situation and step down to let the Supreme Council choose the new leader by consensus - but he failed," said Niazi.

Representatives for Mansour were not available for comment.

The Taliban ruled Afghanistan, imposing a severe interpretation of Islam and Sharia, from the mid-1990s until 2001 when they were overthrown during a U.S.-led invasion. But in recent years, and with the withdrawal of Western forces, their guerrilla forces have grown in influence.

NO JIHADI

Niazi did not suggest the dissident commanders would attack Mansour, who has considerable support. Instead, he said the dissident commanders will now direct their own attacks on the Afghan government and its foreign allies in Afghanistan.

"Anyone engaged in militant activities under the leadership of Mullah Mansour isn't a jihadi," he said. "We will now publicly oppose him."

Niazi's comments come after Omar's son Yaqoob and brother Manan swore allegiance to Mansour this week. Omar's family had initially opposed Mansour but agreed to support him after he agreed to a list of their demands.

Niazi said Mansour had threatened to cut Taliban funds that Manan had been receiving if he did not support Mansour's leadership.

"Its an economic issue rather than religious," Mullah Niazi said. "Mullah Yaqoob and Mullah Manan had never played any role in 20-year of jihad. They were sitting at home."

"We founded the Islamic Emirate, we gave sacrifices and we brought it to this level. We are the real heirs of the Islamic Emirate."

The Islamic Emirate is what the Taliban called Afghanistan under their rule.

Representatives for Omar's family were unavailable for comment.

Niazi said the dissident Taliban included Mullah Abdul Qayum Zakir, a prominent commander formerly held in the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay; Mullah Hasan Rahmani and Mohammad Rasool, two Taliban leaders with substantial power bases; and Mullah Abdul Razaq, a former Taliban minister of the interior.

Several powerful Taliban leaders based at the political office in Qatar have not yet publicly endorsed Mansour.

RETURN TO TOP

12. Kabul rejects claim that Afghanistan behind Peshawar attack

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Not Attributed

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Afghan government on Saturday rejected Pakistan's claim that a militant attack on a military base near Peshawar was planned and controlled from Afghanistan.

The presidential palace issued a statement saying Kabul never has and never will allow its territory to be used against other states.

"Afghanistan, as a victim of terrorism, feels the agony and pain of terrorism, and commiserates in that spirit with the victims of yesterday's attack in Peshawar," it said.

Suspected Taliban militants launched a brazen attack on the Badaber military base on Friday, killing 29 people including 16 who were gunned down inside a mosque during prayers. Another 29 people were wounded. Pakistani security officials said all the 13 attackers were killed after an hours-long firefight.

Pakistan army spokesman Gen. Asim Saleem Bajwa has said the attackers came from and were being handled by superiors in Afghanistan, though he stressed he did not mean the government in Kabul was behind the assault. Bajwa said the information came from intercepted communications, but would not elaborate further because Pakistan's spy agency was investigating the evidence.

The Pakistani Taliban claimed responsibility for the attack, saying it was to avenge Pakistani military bombardment of mosques and the killing of civilians in tribal regions, as well as the humiliation of seminary students in cities.

No new details emerged Saturday in the investigation, as funerals were held for a young army captain and other personnel killed in the attack in their hometowns.

The Pakistan air force has been playing an important role in the fight against militants since June 2014, when the army launched an operation to flush militants out of tribal areas along the porous border with Afghanistan.

The Afghan government said Kabul and Islamabad should continue working together to eliminate the threat of terrorism.

"The government of Afghanistan ... once again calls on Pakistan to jointly fight alongside Afghanistan all terrorist groups without discrimination so that peace and stability are ensured in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region," it said.

RETURN TO TOP

13. Afghans Flee Battered City on Perilous Journey to West
New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A6 | Rod Nordland

KABUL, Afghanistan -- Najim Rahim says that when he looks around his neighborhood in the northern city of Kunduz now, "I feel lonely."

His friend Ahmad Ulomi, who worked in the photo shop down the street, gave up his photography studies and left with five family members, striking out across the Iranian desert on the way to Europe. The shop's owner, Khalid Ghaznawi, who was Mr. Ulomi's teacher, decided to follow him with his family of eight, and he put his business up for sale. Mr. Rahim's friend Atiqullah, who ran the local grocery shop, closed it and also left for Iran with his wife. Another neighbor, Feroz Ahmad, dropped out of college and last week called from Turkey to say he was on his way to Europe.

All of that happened in the past two weeks as people in Kunduz are rushing to seize what many see as a last chance to make it to Europe, just as others are doing throughout Afghanistan.

"Including my friends, neighbors and people I could say hello to, it'd be more than a hundred who left in the past few weeks," said Mr. Rahim, a 25-year-old journalist, who with his brother founded the weekly newspaper Roshangran in Kunduz City. He sometimes contributes to outside newspapers, including The New York Times.

Kunduz is particularly badly hit because the city has for several months been the center of an intense battle between government forces and Taliban insurgents who hold large parts of the surrounding province. The fighting has subsided in recent weeks, which has only made it easier for people to leave, and many want to go before it resumes.

"Every time I see one of my friends, they say, 'Hey, we're leaving, why aren't you?' " Mr. Rahim said.

So many have left that their friends and family have started a Facebook page, Kunduz Markaz, documenting their successes and failures, and helping people find those who made it through and those who were sent back. It has thousands of followers.

Some of his friends make it only to Iran, where the authorities often beat and sometimes kill Afghan migrants attempting the dangerous land crossing toward Turkey and then Europe.

Others have reached Greece and reported that they were heading farther into Europe, hoping to make it to Germany before the borders closed. That was the case with his neighbor Abed Faqiri, a used-car salesman. "He called and said he was going to try to cross," Mr. Rahim said. "We haven't heard yet."

For many, the first stop is Kabul, where they line up for passports or find "brokers" who sell visas to way points, especially Turkey. The visas appear genuine and the brokers are receiving them from embassy officials with just a one-week turnaround, but the markup is steep. A couple of months ago, Turkish visas bought through Afghan brokers were running at about $3,000; this past week, the asking price was $5,500 to $6,000, according to interviews with several brokers.

Mr. Rahim has four friends who were here Wednesday seeking various visas or passports.

So many people are applying for new passports that lines begin forming at 2 a.m. outside the passport office in Kabul -- the only place they are issued now.

The office has 5,000 applicants a day, compared with 1,000 a day last year, according to data from the International Organization for Migration here.

While the Afghan government has been largely quiet on the exodus of its citizens -- many officials deny it is even occurring -- former President Hamid Karzai acknowledged the problem in a recent speech, pleading for young people to remain. "I urge you all not to leave the country. Stay here and develop your own country," he said.

Mr. Rahim and his brother Mohammad Naim are among those who have heeded that call. His brother actually returned after going to the United States for a month on an academic fellowship, surprising their neighbors. " 'Why'd you come back?' people asked him," Mr. Rahim said.

In his own case, Mr. Rahim would almost certainly qualify for a special immigrant visa to the United States, because he worked for a year with American Special Forces teams in Kunduz, helping them set up and operate a radio station, now defunct. Since then he has worked as a journalist in the city.

"My friends are telling me to go, they say, 'You're crazy not to apply,' but I don't want to," he said, adding that he felt responsible for an ailing father and other family members whom he supports financially.

Mr. Rahim's friend Ahmad Ulomi by Wednesday had been beaten up, tortured and turned back from Iran, expelled to the remote southwestern Afghan desert province of Nimroz.

Speaking by telephone, Mr. Ulomi said he was undeterred. He was with a group of friends, 45 young people in all, mostly from Kunduz, and they were going to try next to reach Iran through Pakistan. Their eventual goal was to reach Germany.

"The endless war in the country, the constant shrinkage of job prospects and the disheartening vision of having an unstable country for many more years forced us to decide to leave our homeland behind," Mr. Ulomi said.

Another of Mr. Rahim's friends, Sayed Kareem Hashimi, 23, had better luck, after his father promised a hefty sum to a smuggler in Kunduz, payment only on arrival. After being passed from one smuggler's agent to another, through 15 handlers in all, Mr. Hashimi said, he reached Finland three weeks ago, via Germany, Greece and Turkey. He crossed the Aegean Sea in a boat piloted by an amateur, and it nearly capsized.

"Now I feel so safe and happy," he said by phone.

He was already working on his asylum request. Although it was the first Mr. Rahim and their other friends had heard of it, Mr. Hashimi said that he had received Taliban threats because of his work at a Kunduz television station. He was a cleaner there.

Leaving Kunduz is not a new phenomenon; Mr. Rahim knows plenty of people who went last year and the year before. In one case, two brothers drowned trying to reach Greece in 2014. Afghanistan has long been in the top two or three countries in the number of citizens seeking asylum in Europe; this year it is second to Syria, according to recent data from the United Nations' refugee agency.

Departures this year, and particularly in recent weeks, appear to have vastly increased. Of the 411,567 arrivals to Europe by sea in the first six months of 2015, including across the Aegean from Turkey, 51 percent of the refugees were Syrians, and 15 percent were Afghans, according to the refugee agency. That does not include what most observers say has been a much busier August and now September.

Even Mr. Rahim's resolve to stay in Kunduz has started to waver, as he has watched his neighbors become refugees, only to be replaced in their former homes by other refugees -- villagers fleeing fighting in more remote parts of Kunduz Province.

"If my father wasn't sick, I would go tomorrow," he said. "And if I could be sure of going safely, maybe I would go anyway. I'm thinking about it."

--Ahmad Shakib contributed reporting

RETURN TO TOP

AFRICA

14. In Libya, deadline time for a single government

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Missy Ryan and Hassan Morajea

TRIPOLI - Abdullah al-Thinni is Libya's prime minister. From his office in the eastern city of Bayda, the 61-year-old former defense minister boasts an army, a suite of ministers and a host of challenges, including an Islamist insurgency and an economy in free fall.

But Khalifa al-Ghwell, who sits in the capital, also is Libya's prime minister. A civil engineer who took over when his predecessor was ousted earlier this year, Ghwell may not enjoy the backing of world powers, but he does have the advantage of support from the country's most powerful militias.

Libya finds itself today in the odd position of having two rival governments, each of them vying for international legitimacy and dwindling resources as the North African nation slips deeper into civil war. The country has two central banks, two national oil companies, and three anti-corruption commissions. British courts are now mulling which of the two Libyan investment chairmen has authority over the country's $67 billion sovereign wealth fund.

But soon Libya may have no recognized government at all, if negotiators fail to meet a Sept. 20 deadline for clinching a United Nations-brokered political deal to create a unity government that, officials hope, can end a tangled conflict that has nearly bankrupted this oil-rich nation in the four years since the NATO-backed ouster of Moammar Gaddafi.

Even if an agreement can be reached, Libyans will face major obstacles to implementing that deal and, more fundamentally, resolving the issues that have made the post-revolution era so turbulent: replacing defiant militias with a cohesive national security force and ending the lawlessness that has made the country a haven for Islamic State extremists.

Despite failed attempts to foster stability, Western officials say the time is right to reconcile the internationally recognized legislature in the city of Tobruk, which supports Thinni, and its rival in Tripoli, the Islamist-dominated General National Congress.

"Libyans are finally coming to terms with the fact that no one can win this conflict," Bernardino León, the U.N. envoy to Libya, said in an interview. "This is the reality."

Leon hopes that months of talks will result in a deal by Sunday, giving Libyans a month to form a new government before the Tobruk parliament's mandate lapses on Oct. 20.

Mohamed Benruwin, an academic who is helping draft Libya's new constitution, said Libyans allowed their inexperience at governing and their internal divisions to undermine the country's natural advantages: oil, a small population and proximity to Europe.

"We're in a position where either we're going to win, or we lose it all," he said in an interview in the city of Misurata.

If a deal is struck, Libyans will face a host of potential land mines in the first few weeks. They must create consensus on a new cabinet, including coveted military and financial positions, and sort through legislation passed by each side after the schism took place.

An agreement may also herald the return of Western military involvement in Libya. American and European officials have been discussing options for sending a mix of civilian and military personnel, possibly from Italy, Britain and the United States, to help Libyans begin the process of establishing a functional national force.

Western officials recognize that foreign troops could further polarize Libyans or fan the jihadist cause. But they also fear that history will repeat itself if the new government can't establish a minimum of security during a crucial transition period.

"It's fundamental that we build the capability as swiftly as possible," a U.S. military official said.

In another illustration of the difficulties ahead, armed men stormed the Tripoli legislature Thursday as its members were deliberating the terms of a possible U.N.-backed deal, a suspected show of force from hard-liners who oppose an agreement.

Islamist groups, meanwhile, are growing bolder. On Friday, a team of Islamic State suicide bombers killed three militia guards when they attacked the Tripoli airport, possibly in an attempt to free prisoners held on the airport grounds.

In 2013, world leaders huddled at a Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland were growing increasingly worried by insecurity in Libya. Joining them was Ali Zeidan, the then-Libyan prime minister who was struggling to rein in militias and tame a separatist movement in the east.

President Obama turned to Zeidan. "Tell me how many soldiers are loyal to you . . . and I'll tell you if you have a government or not," the president said, according to Libyan and Western officials who, like others, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss diplomatic deliberations.

Obama's question remains equally important today. Since 2011, no Libyan leader has been able to tame a vast array of armed groups, including rival military forces, tribal factions and renegade oil police, on both sides of the country.

"Libya will continue to remain unstable, polarized and marred by violence for as long as the issue of widespread armed militias having de facto full control over discrete pockets of territory remains untackled," said Jason Pack, a researcher of Libyan history at Cambridge University and president of LibyaAnalysis.com.

Tripoli, the seaside city where Ghwell's government is based, is today controlled by a number of militias loosely organized under the banner of "Libya Dawn." In July 2014, a militia war erupted over control of the international airport here, prompting an evacuation of the U.S. Embassy and the newly elected parliament's flight to Tobruk.

Many Libyans agree that the biggest challenge will be persuading well-armed militias to disband or allow their members to join regular armed forces.

"You're talking about a very large number of young men who have no other source of income and have been doing nothing for the last four years but working for one of these hybrid security . . . groups," said Hanan Salah, Libya researcher for Human Rights Watch. "How is the future government going to cut them out?"

Since 2011, when Gaddafi was ousted, militia commanders have grown rich, not just in influence but also in cash. Now they must surrender lucrative revenue sources such as airports or oil facilities.

"The real problem is that, as always in Libya, it comes down to . . . who thinks they're losing out on something and who thinks they can gain something," a senior U.S. official said. "It's all about their 'stuff' again."

Of all the assets that armed factions may be reluctant to give up, the most prized is oil.

In 2014, guards loyal to Ibrahim Jathran, the young leader of an oil protection force who launched a campaign to secure greater power for eastern Libya, commandeered an oil tanker and tried to sell its load of Libyan oil on the global market. The maneuver was blocked only when the United States dispatched a team of Navy SEALs to recover the ship.

Today, Jathran says his guards need additional weapons and support to fend off attacks by Islamist groups and rival forces and to lure back foreign oil firms spooked by insecurity.

"Libya needs oil revenues; it needs the presence of oil companies," he said by phone.

But Jathran, with his loyal fighting force and his locally focused agenda, represents just the sort of unruly faction that could impair the credibility of a new government. Western officials are also worried about other potential spoilers, including Khalifa Hifter, the powerful general who heads armed forces in the east.

"You can't have individual militia leaders or petroleum guards successfully shaking down the government," another senior U.S. official said.

Western officials hope a deal, even if it is not universally accepted, will garner enough support on both sides to ensure a fragile transitional period. Once a unity government is established, partner nations can resume aid programs, investors can sign contracts, and oil firms can move ahead with exploration projects.

Abu Bakr al-Hureishi, a member of Misurata's local council, said success will require a more fundamental shift for Libyans.

"Every country has political conflicts," he said. "The difference in the new Libya was that it was: 'If you're not with me, you're my enemy.' "

RETURN TO TOP

15. Boko Haram leader dismisses Nigerian military claims

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 19 | Bukar Hussain

Nigeria's military on Saturday claimed further gains in its counter-offensive against Boko Haram, but the group's shadowy leader Abubakar Shekau dismissed the talk of success as "lies".

Army spokesman Sani Usman said troops destroyed more rebel enclaves and camps in the restive state of Borno, which has been worst hit by the six-year Islamist insurgency.

"The fight against the terrorists in the northeast is gaining successful momentum, with most of the camps falling to the Federal might," he said in a statement.

A total of 62 people were rescued from around the town of Gwoza, which last year Boko Haram declared the headquarters of its caliphate but which it lost control of in March.

Some 77 men, women and children, most of them "haggard, dejected and obviously malnourished", also arrived in the town of Bama on Saturday, Usman said.

One man picked up said he had his right hand cut off by militants in their Sambisa Forest stronghold in Borno last year, he said, adding that eight Boko Haram suspects surrendered to troops.

Nigeria's military has claimed a series of successes against Boko Haram recently and on Friday said it had rescued 90 people and dislodged Boko Haram from two villages near Gwoza.

President Muhammadu Buhari in early August gave his new military commanders three months to defeat Boko Haram, after six years of violence, at least 15,000 dead and more than two million homeless.

Shekau has not been seen on video since February and until an audio message last month had not spoken since March, when he proclaimed Boko Haram's allegiance to the so-called Islamic State group.

His absence sparked fresh rumours about whether he was still alive or had been deposed as leader, with other videos this year fronted by an unknown rebel under the name Islamic State in West Africa Province (ISWAP).

Shekau said in a 25-minute recording in Hausa and Arabic via social media: "They (the military) lied that they have confiscated our arms, that we have been chased out of our territories, that we are in disarray.

"We are alive, I am alive, this is my voice, more audible than it was before. This is Shekau."

He added: "Buhari is a liar and has deceived you. The army spokesman is also lying. He and his footsoldiers always run helter-skelter whenever we come face to face with them...

"Buhari, you once claimed that you will crush us in three months. How can you crush us?"

Shekau directly refers to IS group leader Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi, to whom he says he is "loyal and subservient".

He also namechecks IS spokesman Abu-Mohammed al-Adnani and sends "greetings to the faithful in Yemen", where there is also an IS "affiliate".

There was no indication of where or when the recording was made but it appears to have have been in recent days.

Shekau talks of Buhari's "deal with Hollande", referring to the Nigerian president's three-day visit to Paris earlier this week, which included talks with his French counterpart Francois Hollande.

He also dismissed as untrue Buhari's comments about "our brethren in prison".

Buhari this week said the Nigerian authorities were talking to Boko Haram prisoners in their custody and could offer them amnesty if the group hands over more than 200 schoolgirls abducted last year.

RETURN TO TOP

EUROPE

16. Putin gives go-ahead to Belarus airbase plan
Reuters, Sept. 19 | Jason Bush

MOSCOW -- Russian President Vladimir Putin has backed the establishment of an airbase in neighboring Belarus, the latest move by Moscow to project its military power abroad.

Saturday's announcement, which comes at a time of tension with the West over Russian involvement in Ukraine and Syria, may also signal the Kremlin's interest in keeping unpredictable Belarus within its geopolitical orbit.

Putin said in a statement he had agreed a government proposal to sign a deal for the military airbase and ordered defense and foreign ministry officials to start talks with Belarus. The plan is not expected to face major obstacles.

The idea of setting up an airbase in the ex-Soviet republic was revealed by Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu in 2013, and follows a 2009 agreement under which Russia and Belarus agreed to defend their common external frontier and airspace.

Russian defense officials have said the base would be used to station Su-27 fighters. Russia already has some fighter aircraft in Belarus but this would be the first full-scale base there since Soviet times.

Russia has scaled back its military presence abroad, closing bases in distant Cold War allies such as Cuba and Vietnam.

However, a naval base at Tartus in Syria has recently become the focus of world attention as Russia has boosted its troop presence there in a move seen as bolstering its diplomatic influence in the region.

Russia already has military bases in ex-Soviet neighbors Kyrgyzstan and Armenia, which like Belarus are also members of a Eurasian Economic Union that Putin sees as the embryo of a new geopolitical bloc.

Last year Russia annexed the Ukrainian province of Crimea, partly due to fears it would be pushed out of its large naval base in the Crimean port of Sevastopol.

The creation of a base in Belarus may also be a signal to the West that Russia will not tolerate intrusion in its traditional sphere of influence.

Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled Belarus since 1994, is seen as a long-standing Russian ally and is often criticized in the West for his record on human rights.

He has a reputation for being unpredictable because of his common practice of playing off Russia against the West.

Spooked by Russia's annexation of Crimea, Poland and the Baltic states have repeatedly asked NATO to station forces permanently in their territories along the alliance's eastern flank in Russia's vicinity.

RETURN TO TOP

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

17. Pentagon enlisting outsiders to help search for U.S. World War II MIAs

Associated Press, Sept. 19 | Chris Carola

ALBANY, New York — Justin Taylan has been to the remote Pacific island nation of Papua New Guinea dozens of times over the past two decades, spending countless hours slogging through crocodile-infested swamps in his quest to document as many World War II airplane wreck sites as possible.

Since 2013, he has conducted those missions for the newly reorganized Pentagon agency whose predecessor he and others had criticized for years for failing to recover and identify more remains of U.S. service members.

Taylan's hiring is part of the military's plans to reach out to private groups and others to help with the search for thousands of American war remains scattered from Pacific jungles to the European countryside.

Though he said he cannot comment on the details of the cases he's worked on under his contract, Taylan said he has documented more than 80 wreck and war-related sites, including eight aircraft crashes associated with American MIA cases.

"So many organizations have something to give and share," Taylan, 37, told The Associated Press recently in between trips to Papua New Guinea. "It's an incredible turn of events to support the mission and get more MIA cases resolved."

The Pentagon lists 83,000 MIAs as unaccounted-for from WWII and the Korean and Vietnam wars. More than 73,000 are from WWII, with many of those deemed not recoverable because they were lost at sea.

In 2009, Congress set a requirement that the Pentagon identify at least 200 sets of remains a year by 2015. But less than half that number has been identified over each of the past two years.

Earlier this year, the Department of Defense unveiled its revamped Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, a move that came a year and a half after the AP obtained an internal Pentagon study that criticized previous efforts as being in danger of spiraling from "dysfunction to total failure."

In a shift many critics say is long overdue, the new agency is working with nonprofit organizations such as Taylan's Pacific Wrecks, Inc. and private firms to help with research and actual searches.

Other examples:

- An Ohio archaeology firm was hired this summer to search for the remains of 1st Lt. Ewart Sconiers, a bombardier who died in a German POW camp in Poland in 1944.

- History Flight, a Marathon, Florida-based organization, recovered the remains of 36 Marines killed on the Pacific atoll of Tarawa, one of the war's bloodiest battles. The remains were brought to Hawaii for identification in late July.

- Leaders of the University of Wisconsin's Missing in Action Recovery and Identification Project plan to meet with military officials in Washington this month to discuss collaborations utilizing the college's DNA and genetics expertise. Last year, UW-Madison helped identify the remains of Pfc. Lawrence S. Gordon, a Canadian-born U.S. soldier killed in France in 1944. The university's MIA project leaders recently met with

members of Kuentai-USA, a Japanese group that has found Japanese and U.S. MIAs on Saipan, scene of a major battle in 1944.

Hundreds of Americans are still listed as MIA in Papua New Guinea. Most were air crews who disappeared when their planes crashed in forbidding terrain that includes dense jungles and cloud-shrouded mountain peaks topping 13,000 feet (3,900 meters).

Taylan, who lives in Hyde Park, New York, began visiting the southwest Pacific after taking a trip to the Philippines in 1993 with his grandfather, a former WWII Army photographer who served there. Taylan became fascinated by the numerous wartime plane wrecks and battle artifacts still visible and started a website, pacificwrecks.com, to document wreck sites, battlefields and MIA cases across the Pacific.

Taylan has visited hundreds of wreck sites and passed along any new information he gathered to the Pentagon. He eventually joined veterans organizations and others who criticized the government for taking in some cases decades to provide families with details about their loved one's loss during WWII.

Mark Shoemaker can attest to that frustration. His uncle, 2nd Lt. Edward F. Barker, disappeared in Papua New Guinea during a training flight in 1944. A U.S. military team visited the wreck site in 1962 but found no remains. The site was revisited 40 years later, and again in 2012, when human remains were finally recovered. Barker's remains weren't identified until July, when they were returned to his hometown in New York's Mohawk Valley for burial.

Although Taylan wasn't involved in the discovery of Barker's remains, the Pacific Wrecks website had numerous details about the case, right down to the serial numbers on the fighter plane's machine guns. Taylan attended the funeral and met Shoemaker, who said he's encouraged that people outside the Pentagon are being brought in to help with MIA missions.

"The government has to be involved in some way, but there's certainly a place for these guys," Shoemaker said. "There's obviously a lot of room for improvement."

RETURN TO TOP

AIR FORCE

18. Display of air power dazzles
Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. C12 | Perry Stein

The first plane landed and Rob Ford raised his arms in victory, a Budweiser bottle in his right hand.

It was a Lockheed U-2, a slender aircraft used for extremely high-altitude missions that the events announcer said was one of the hardest in the world to land.

"I'm watching an air show," exclaimed Ford, a construction worker from Oxon Hill. "I haven't seen one of these since eighth grade."

Maryland's Joint Base Andrews on Saturday hosted its first air show since 2012, featuring a mix of vintage, stunt and state-of-the-art planes soaring above thousands of people. The once-annual display had been on hiatus amid

sequestration-related budget cuts. This year's show cost less than $1 million to stage, compared with $2.1 million in 2012.

Although the display was scaled back from earlier years, spectators didn't seem to mind. Tens of thousands of people attended the free show on the sprawling tarmac at the Air Force base, lining up against makeshift gates that separated them from the airstrip that stretched about 1,000 yards.

"My heart just basically stopped," Mary Hapner said as a stunt plane spun, leaving a curly trail of white behind it in the blue sky. Hapner's 4 1/2-year-old daughter squealed in excitement beside her as the plane continued to fly in tight circles.

"When he's doing stunts, you can't help but feel a part of it," Hapner said.

A theatrical announcer kept the crowd entertained as he narrated the four-hour event, explaining the history of the planes and the wars they fought in, with comedic interludes throughout.

At one point, a vintage yellow plane seemingly dropped and swerved erratically in the air as the pilot and announcer both pretended the pilot didn't know the basics of flying a plane. Later, some warplanes were introduced.

"From the right, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome the class of '45," the announcer said as he pointed out two planes flying in formation - a P-51 Mustang and F4U Corsair - explaining that they were once the most technologically advanced planes and had helped win World War II and also flew in the Korean War.

"It's always good to see an old aircraft that can kick it with all the F-16s," said Ethan Peterson, a plane buff and history major at Hood College who came to the show with two classmates.

Not all of the attractions were overhead. At one point, a Flash Fire Chevy - one of the fastest jet-powered trucks - sped down the airstrip at more than 300 mph, temporarily filling the air above the nearby crowds with a cloud of heavy smoke.

The air show has been a tradition in the region since the 1950s. After 2012, the base shifted the event to a biennial schedule, but budget cuts forced the cancellation of the 2014 show. Officials said they hope to host another show in 2017.

The event served to showcase the historic capabilities of the Air Force, with most of the demonstrations set to the backdrop of patriotic tunes. Many veterans and members of the military were there, and the announcer paid tribute to them throughout.

"I mean, that was cool," Mike Cook, a lieutenant commander in the Navy, said after the demonstration of the F-22 Raptor - the Air Force's newest fighter craft was so loud that children covered their ears. The Raptor shot up and appeared to nearly stop in mid-air before turning around.

And that wasn't even the finale. The event concluded with the Thunderbirds, a demonstration squad of six planes, performing synchronized aerial moves - at times flying so tightly it appeared they would clip one another.

"This was seeing the big picture," Cook said. "Seeing the capabilities the Air Force can bring to the fight. It's always enlightening."

RETURN TO TOP

19. Budget showdown worries JBLM workers, could upend Boeing tanker contract
News Tribune Online (Tacoma, WA), Sept. 19 | Adam Ashton

The latest budget impasse in Congress has civilian workers at Joint Base Lewis-McChord bracing for a possible government shutdown and the Air Force raising an alarm about a threat to a $51 billion tanker program Boeing is developing in the Puget Sound region.

JBLM's civilian workforce of up to 15,000 people would suffer most if Congress fails to pass a budget by its Oct. 1 deadline, triggering a government shutdown for the second time in two years.

Last time, the base's civilian employees had to take unpaid furlough days, a serious setback to some young families.

"We are talking about it," said Matt Hines, a civilian worker at JBLM who's also an officer for a chapter of the American Federation of Government Employees. "They have about two weeks to do something."

By contrast, the Air Force's plan to field new Boeing-made KC-46 refueling tankers would take a serious blow if Congress keeps the government running for a year at restricted levels based on 2015 spending. That kind of agreement, called a long-term continuing resolution, is an option that's reported to be on the table among senior Republican lawmakers.

It also would slash the number of tankers Boeing must deliver in the next two years and effectively break the Air Force's contract with the company, Air Force officials told lawmakers last week.

"It puts everything at risk," said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., who met with Secretary of the Air Force Deborah Lee James last week. "From a military standpoint, we need to have tankers that are safe and reliable."

The Obama administration's original 2016 budget request included $2.4 billion to buy 12 KC-46 jets from Boeing.

Boeing's contract, awarded in 2011, was the result of a hard-won fight against European rival EADS. Though expensive, it's considered favorable to the Air Force because of hard caps on spending that the company agreed to during the decadelong competition. That deal has Boeing eating cost overruns, which Air Force officials estimate top $1.2 billion so far.

Breaking the contract could mean going back to the negotiating table with a weaker hand, Murray said.

"The real effect is the Air Force would break the contract and that means more expense to the Air Force and to taxpayers," she said.

Members of Washington's congressional delegation recently have warned that a government shutdown could fall later this year. Republicans and Democrats have been sparring over funding for Planned Parenthood, whether to lift the forced federal spending cuts known as sequestration and how to pay for the defense budget.

Another option that Congress could choose is passing a short-term deal to keep the government running after Oct. 1. Such an agreement would not harm civilians who work for the military or the plan to purchase new Air Force tankers. It would delay decisions that would impact both the military's workforce and the Air Force's procurement of new jets.

Six military and defense industry advocacy groups sent letters last week to leading lawmakers pleading for a comprehensive budget deal that would allow the Pentagon to create a dependable budget. The letter warned that the kind of fix that would restrict KC-46 production also would ripple out across the services and cut other programs.

"Please come together again in a bipartisan fashion and strike a multiyear budget deal that will create stability and efficiency in our spending," said a letter signed by officials from lobbying groups for the Air Force, Navy, National Guard and three defense industry groups.

Boeing has been flying a test plane similar to the KC-46 at Boeing Field south of Seattle since May. Next Friday, Boeing is expected to fly an actual KC-46 for the first time, the Air Force announced last week.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Duke Richardson, who is managing the program, told reporters last week that full refueling tests should begin in January.

The KC-46 would replace the KC-135 refueling tanker. The Air Force has more than 400 of the older planes. Their average age is above 50 years old and they are growing increasingly expensive to maintain, according to the Government Accountability Office.

In 2013, military officials spent months readying for abrupt spending cuts that compelled them to furlough workers. This time, Murray said, "there is no preparation. I am very worried."

Hines, a retired soldier, said the past few years have been tumultuous for him and others who work at JBLM.

"Every couple years, we go through this turmoil," Hines said. "I have bills to pay like everyone else."

RETURN TO TOP

20. Air-force bases: Catch-2015

The Department of Defence can neither close bases nor keep them working

The Economist (UK), Sept. 19, Pg. 27 | Not Attributed

The cinema at Dyess Air Force Base, in central west Texas, is a splendid facility. It is entirely free for airmen and their families. Outside, there is a smart café selling snacks, sodas and, in the evenings, when children are not present, alcohol. Yet for more than two years, this centre for social life on the base sat empty, because it did not have the equipment to project films. Just a few months after the air force paid a hefty sum to refurbish the building, the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, the government-owned firm which ran the cinema, switched from analogue to digital distribution of films. When it did so, it decided it could not afford to buy a new digital projector for Dyess.

That is just one tale of the maddening bureaucracy recounted by Colonel Michael Bob Starr, the commander of the base. Another he tells is of how the Pentagon scrapped funding for his base's library. When he went to close the

library, however, he was informed that only the secretary of defence could make that decision. There was still no funding, but that didn't matter: the regulations said that the library had to stay open.

Such absurdities are hardly new to the military. Similar tales in the 1950s helped to inspire Joseph Heller's "Catch 22", a novel about the futility of war and the silliness of military regulations, in which faulty IBM machines promote majors and no one can ever go home. The scale, however, can still astound. Colonel Starr reckons that he is personally responsible for enforcing some 200,000 rules, mostly dreamed up in Washington. Pentagon management techniques, he jokes, "tend to reflect the very best lessons from the 1950s".

Yet slowly, at his base, something is changing. Under pressure to get more out of its resources, the air force is beginning to foster some independent thinking. Colonel Starr's frankness is evidence in itself: few military types would complain about their superiors so openly to a reporter. Yet Colonel Starr is unusual. He likes to quote management books. And, he reckons, to put into action the call from General Mark Welsh, the air force's chief of staff, to make the service more flexible and innovative means being a little more open about the stupid things that the air force does.

Since 2013, spending cuts as a result of the government budget sequestration have reduced the air force's budget. Big projects such as the F-35 fighter jet, or the expansion of drone warfare, swallow up much of what is left. At Dyess, which is home to a fleet of B-1 bombers and C-130 transport planes, staffing has fallen sharply, especially in areas such as aircraft maintenance. Staff sense that more cuts are coming--many, for example, are deeply worried by a proposal to take away housing allowances from the junior partner in military couples.

Colonel Starr has done much to mitigate the effects of austerity. He has started an innovation club, where junior officers and enlisted men can put forward ideas their superiors have rejected, such as storing the base's contracts digitally, instead of printing them out. He has worked with Abilene, the hot, dusty Texan city that hosts Dyess. The cinema was started up again after locals raised money to buy a new projector; the library was kept open by an agreement with the city to share facilities. Bravely, he has chosen to simply disobey some regulations which he says tie up staff pointlessly--such as one that insists that security guards should receive the same training twice.

Such victories keep the base functioning. The trouble, though, is that efficiency quickly runs into politics. The air force estimates that it has roughly 25% more infrastructure than it needs. But closing bases, or scrapping underused aircraft, is unpopular in the districts they are based in. There have been no BRAC hearings, which determine where to cut, for a decade. Congress has to vote to spend money on BRAC hearings, and congressmen can usually find reasons to avoid doing so. What cuts have been proposed, such as discontinuing use of the A-10 attack jet, known as the "Warthog", are fiercely resisted in Congress.

"Everybody will agree to reductions, as long as it is not here," says Brian Yates, a former air-force officer who now works for the Abilene Chamber of Commerce. At Abilene, locals adore the air force. The land Dyess is built on was in fact donated by the city; with its 5,000 staff (including civilian personnel) the base is by far the biggest local employer, putting some $433m into the local economy each year. Airmen tell stories about how, when they go out for dinner, strangers insist on paying their bills. In an attempt to protect against cuts, the city and the state of Texas have spent money on upgrading the road and fibre-optic connections to the base.

In May, the Texas legislature voted to create a $30m fund to be spent over two years to protect bases in the state (less than the $150m supporters wanted). Other bases have more solid protection, gripes Mr Yates. The main rival to Dyess in bombing capacity is Ellsworth, a base in South Dakota. As the only base in the state, it has two senators

looking out for it in Washington. Dyess by contrast has to compete with a dozen or so other military installations for political attention. Each year, the Abilene Chamber of Commerce leads a delegation up to Washington to wine and dine important people. With each dinner, each dollop of state money to protect bases and each postponed BRAC hearing, turning the air force into the flexible service its chiefs want will get harder.

RETURN TO TOP

ARMY

21. 'One Valid Standard'

Generals weigh in on gender integration in all combat positions -- and the importance of defining Army standards

Ledger-Enquirer (Columbus, GA), Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Chuck Williams

As the Army prepares to make its recommendation to the Secretary of Defense about opening all combat positions to women, many of the organization's top generals were speaking from the same playbook last week.

It's about standards -- not gender -- they said while at Fort Benning for the Maneuver Warfighter Conference, three days of conversation devoted annually to combat and readiness.

Those remarks come a month after two officers -- Capt. Kristen Griest and 1st Lt. Shaye Haver -- became the first women to successfully complete Ranger School, the Army's most elite combat training course, which was previously closed to women until April of this year.

Gen. David Perkins, in charge of the Training and Doctrine Command, has been heavily involved in the Army's gender integration study that was completed in advance of any recommendation. Perkins was not backing down from the gender integration discussion during his Tuesday address.

"Anyone going to ask about gender integration?" he inquired of the mostly male soldiers in McGinnis-Wickam Hall.

He then took nearly 15 minutes to outline how the Army had gotten to this point on the sometimes divisive issue.

The decision to open combat positions was made in January 2013 by then-Defense Secretary Leon Panetta. After more than a year of study, Panetta ordered each of the military services to expand all of its positions to women -- or provide reasons why certain jobs should remain exclusively male.

The Army has been deliberate in its approach to Panetta's order. Secretary of the Army John McHugh is likely to have his recommendations to Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter next week, ahead of the Oct. 1 deadline. There will also be a separate recommendation on Special Forces positions from Gen. Joseph Votel, head of U.S. Special Operations Command.

The Army could request exceptions for certain jobs, which would require a justification, or it could request no exceptions and open all the combat jobs previously closed to women.

Last week at Fort Benning, Votel did not say what the recommendation would be.

"I will tell you from an SOF (Special Operations Force) standpoint, from a SOCOM (Special Operations Command) standpoint, we value people," Votel said. "People are our most important resource. We are an organization that the nation expects to be able to go out and work in a variety of different areas with a variety of different people -- and so I would make the argument that diversity is extraordinarily important to us."

It is about standards, Votel said.

"I have talked to a range of people both in and out of the military -- particularly those that are in, and those in the SOF community -- the one thing they constantly emphasize to me is that if we do this we have to ensure that we maintain our very high standards," Votel said. "No female, no male, no one wants to be able to get into an organization having not met the standard. It will be imperative that we do that."

Deliberate approach

Perkins, in charge of the Army's Training and Doctrine Command, discussed the process that the Army undertook during the gender integration study. Part of that was creating a physical demands study for all Army combat positions.

"Our criteria was it had to be quantifiable, qualifiable and legally defensible," Perkins said.

That came down to standards, Perkins said.

"My tribe is infantry/armor," he said. "Talk to folks there and say, 'What do you think about women in combat?' The first statement is, 'I don't know, we'll see, but definitely do not change the standards.'"

That leads Perkins to ask a follow-up question.

"'My next question is what is the standard? ... So, what is the standard to be in the infantry, armor or artillery right now?" he asked. "Pretty much the standard to be in the Army. You have to pass a PT test, height, weight. ...

"What we did for two years is we exhaustively went out to every MOS (military occupational specialty) closed to women and came up with all the operational tasks you have to do in combat. Put on ruck sack, 110 pounds, 12 miles. Went to folks in Afghanistan we had to relate it to a combat standard and said, 'What is your average load?' For artillery units, we tried to find the most demanding physical thing ... rate of loading of a machine gun, extracting a wounded soldier out of a combat vehicle."

A lot of research went into those standards, Perkins said.

"Since we design our combat vehicles for the 90th percentile male, that is the 271-pound male," Perkins said. "You have to drag their body 45 feet in 30 seconds. We have never had that standard that you had to do that before you could sign and come into the Army."

'Valid standard'

All of the generals who spoke at the Warfighter Conference were careful not to get ahead of the recommendation that will come next week. But some, like Lt. Gen. Bob Brown, responsible for Army leadership development and

currently commanding general of the United States Army Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas, are willing to share their opinion. Brown was the former commanding general of Fort Benning and was charged with pulling the infantry and armor schools into the Maneuver Center of Excellence.

"I go back a long time on the gender integration," Brown said. "...I have three daughters. My oldest daughter is a senior captain, teaching at West Point, and she will be a major soon. Commanded a company, deployed twice, married to a major who deployed three times."

For Brown it is about standards.

"I have always felt that we should have a valid standard, one standard as Gen. Perkins described," Brown said.

And that hasn't always been the case.

"Surprisingly, when I was here in the Maneuver Center, we didn't have a valid standard for each MOS," Brown said. "We kind of had good ol' boy 'it's a road march at this speed.' 'Why?' 'Well, we don't know.' Now, we have a valid standard. We methodically went through it. So if you have one valid standard that can be proven that you need to do that for that military occupation or speciality. ..."

And if you meet the standard?

"Anybody who meets that standard should be able to serve," Brown said. "No question. I would think the younger generation will almost laugh at the older folks: 'What don't you get about it?' I have served with many women in combat. They are as much in harm's way as anybody. My daughter, she was one of the first intelligence officers in an infantry battalion deployed, a position previously closed to women."

That is just the point, said Sue Fulton, chairwoman of the U.S. Military Academy Board of Visitors, a West Point oversight board that reports to President Barack Obama.

"Women have demonstrated that, with the right training, they can perform even in the most physically punishing infantry jobs," Fulton said. "I expect that the service secretaries will look at the available data and conclude that there is no reason to exclude qualified women from any military job."

The Navy and Marines

The commander of the Army's 18th Airborne Corps, Lt. Gen. Stephen Townsend, admits that there are some in the Army who might have an issue with some positions being fully opened.

"I think it is about standards," Townsend said. "I think there are a lot of people out there that have some discomfort. I had to admit I had some discomfort when we started this process. The more I think about it, the more I believe in the standard."

And the impact of those standards will cut both ways, Townsend said.

"If we go to that, there will probably be some male soldiers in the infantry today that don't measure up, don't qualify to be the infantry," Townsend said. "That's OK with me. It's also OK with me if there are female soldiers who

qualify. Also, I see there will be female leaders who rise to leadership positions in the infantry. It doesn't trouble me as long as we have one standard, and everyone meets that standard."

While the Army leaders seem to be sending the same message, that is not the case with the decision that will come from the U.S. Navy about the Marine Corps. A week ago, the Marines released new data that showed men outperformed women in a host of combat-related tasks. Navy Secretary Ray Mabus said in the wake of the release of that study, that he plans to open all jobs in the sea services to women -- including those in the Marine infantry and Navy SEALs.

"When the services were asked to review opening jobs to women, they took different approaches," Fulton said. "The Army set about this based on objective data, informed by years of gender integration. They allowed women to train locally with men preparing for Ranger School, they screened based on high, gender-neutral, physical fitness standards, and they set objective parameters for success."

Not so with the Marines, said Fulton.

"The Marine Corps -- so backward that they still separate women from men in basic training -- did the equivalent of tossing women into the deep end of the pool and asking them to compete with the swim team," she said. "Now, they're trying to tell everyone that women just can't hack it, and accusing others of political motivation while they themselves are pushing everyone from junior sergeants to senators into the media to defend their all-male infantry."

Brown, who has experience executing delicate decisions, points to the merging of armor and infantry at the Maneuver Center of Excellence as a template.

He was the general charged with pulling the two cultures together.

"When Armor came down here, there was a very good plan in place," Brown said. "When I got here with this complex plan, folks said, 'It's not a big deal, armor is coming.' I said, 'How about if infantry was moving to Fort Knox?' 'Whoa, that would be tough.' 'They are feeling the same way. You've got to welcome them.'"

The merger involved give and take.

"We changed about every course in infantry a little, based on what we learned from armor," Brown said. "And armor changed their course a little based on what they learned from infantry."

That lesson can be applied to integrating combat positions, Brown said.

"So for gender integration, I say the same thing," he said. "We will be a better force for this. Diversity is our strength. The more diverse we are, the better our viewpoint we get in this complex world."

Brown played basketball at Army and sometimes looks at his military world in the same way a coach would.

"As a coach, I would be saying 'Don't be afraid of change,'" Brown said. "Embrace change. Look at how much better we will be from this integration. I have an advantage with three daughters and three granddaughters. I am a better person because of them because they will see things I won't see. Same with force as we integrate. We will get better. We will be much, much better."

RETURN TO TOP

22. General: Army plans to rely more heavily on Fort Carson soldiers to counter Russian aggression
The Gazette Online (Colorado Springs, CO), Sept. 19 | Tom Roeder

The top U.S. Army general in Europe said he will lean more heavily on Fort Carson soldiers in a bid to counter Russian aggression and assure American allies.

Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges said America is down to 30,000 troops in Europe, about 10 percent of what was in place during the Cold War. Since Russia's push into the Ukraine, he and other leaders have tried to use that small force to demonstrate American resolve.

"You have to make that 30,000 look like 300,000," he said.

That's where Fort Carson comes in. The post's 4th Infantry Division has had soldiers in Europe since February to run training exercises to bolster allies and demonstrate that the U.S. could respond quickly if there's a crisis.

"It's been a learning experience for us and we're getting better every day," said Fort Carson's commander, Maj. Gen. Ryan Gonsalves.

Gonsalves has a forward command post of 90 soldiers in Germany who has conducted more than 50 training missions. Most have been with allies in Eastern Europe and the Baltic, where Russian pressure is keenly felt.

Hodges, who visited the post last week, said the Fort Carson contingent will soon get more tools to use in that training. The Pentagon has ordered the Army to move a brigade's worth of equipment to Germany for training.

Another move, which could come in a matter of weeks, would tab more Fort Carson soldiers for European duty.

Assigning Fort Carson brigades to Europe would expand the post's role there under the Pentagon's "regionally aligned forces" plan. That plan assigns U.S.-based units to areas of the globe in case of war, allowing for focused training and overseas duty on a rotating basis.

"What we're going to see is rotational forces, hopefully from this division," Gonsalves said.

Hodges said the increased U.S. presence in Europe comes as Russia shows new military capability and new tactics that depart from the nation's Soviet past.

The general said he's been impressed by Russian communications systems and radio jammers.

"Their ability to intercept and jam communications is significant," he said.

And Russia may be developing one key commodity that only Western nations have boasted in the past: smart sergeants. Hodges said intelligence gathered in Ukraine showed that Russian sergeants were using secure tactical radios, a sign that sergeants were leading troops in an Army where, in the past, enlisted leadership was virtually nonexistent.

Growing Russian military prowess "makes it very tough for us to get into the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea," he said.

Countering Russia is difficult, though as a cash-strapped Army continues to thin its ranks.

"The Army is not big enough to do all the stuff it is required to do," Hodges said.

RETURN TO TOP

MARINE CORPS

23. Why Marines have a problem with women in combat

Lt. Col. Kate Germano, exiled former commander of the Corps' female recruit battalion at Parris Island, makes the case for change

San Diego Union-Tribune, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Gretel C. Kovach

The Marine Corps is making its last stand in the bitter debate over women in combat, fighting to retain gender restrictions on employment in frontline fighting units despite the Pentagon's new open-door policy set to take effect in the new year.

Some believe the service fired an opening shot in the battle on June 30, when it sacked the head of the recruit battalion at Parris Island, S.C., where all enlisted women are made into Marines. During her year in command, Lt. Col. Kate Germano irked her boss as she pushed for tougher standards for female recruits — and boosted their performance.

Before she was fired for what the Corps described as toxic leadership, abuse of authority and poor "playground skills," Germano had lobbied for the dismantling of the service's current system of gender-segregated boot camp instruction.

She thinks the Corps should reinstate its old methods that had men and women shoulder-to-shoulder during much of basic training, tackling the hikes, obstacle courses and classroom lectures together, as recruits do today in all of the nation's other military services.

Some Marine women disagree, including a gunnery sergeant who told The San Diego Union-Tribune that "not being around boys" helps female recruits concentrate more on the mission: "It becomes a sisterhood and makes us stronger and prouder."

What the Corps intends as a separate-but-equal training program designed to reduce distractions between the sexes and instill confidence in female recruits is actually the root of many of its problems today, Germano said in an extensive interview. Those challenges include sexual misconduct, lower marksmanship and physical fitness levels among female Marines, and hostility toward integrating women into ground-combat units.

Marine Corps Training and Education Command had no comment this past week in response to questions from the Union-Tribune about its philosophy on gender-segregated training, the stalled plan to phase in a pull-up requirement for women, gender disparities in physical fitness, prospects for adopting universal standards and recent improvements in coaching female recruits to shoot.

At boot camp, Germano said, men in the Corps start to think of their female comrades as a cut below. Women are deprived of the motivating effect of trying to keep pace with men, and both populations are ill-prepared for the mixed-gender fleet in which they will soon serve.

As much as Germano loves the Corps and its values of honor, courage and commitment that she devoted nearly 20 years to, she said the Marines are getting left behind by their fraternalism.

"This whole hyper-masculine culture is a weakness," she said. "You want to know why we have such a problem with sexual assault? It is because there is a fundamental respect lacking between male and female."

Gender war

Gen. Joseph Dunford, the Marine commandant who is moving up to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff next week, is the tip of the spear for the Corps in its bid to halt gender integration. He submitted his recommendation Thursday to the civilian head of the Navy and Marine Corps, asking for an exception to the new Pentagon policy on gender integration so female troops would continue to be barred from some frontline Marine units, The Associated Press reported, citing unnamed officials.

Dunford's position sets the Marines against their boss at the Navy Department. Secretary Ray Mabus said repeatedly before the Corps made its formal request that he thinks all troops should get a shot at proving themselves against tough new entry standards being rolled out for the infantry, reconnaissance and every other ground-combat position previously closed to women.

The Corps also appears to be striking out alone with respect to the other military services and U.S. Special Operations Command. Their leaders have described diversity as a force multiplier and suggested that women be allowed to compete for elite commando jobs such as Navy SEAL.

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine, said in a letter Thursday to Defense Secretary Ashton Carter that Mabus "openly disrespected" the Marines when he criticized their gender-integration research, "disregarding their professional judgment, their combat experience and their quality of leadership."

Hunter, a former Marine artillery officer and combat veteran who sits on the House Armed Services Committee, called for Mabus' resignation, saying he should be removed from the decision-making process on women in combat in the Corps and replaced by "a new Navy Secretary who will not be compromised by politics."

The key piece of evidence used by the Corps to assert that women don't belong in the infantry and other ground-combat units is a nearly yearlong test it conducted with a gender-integrated task force.

According to a selection of results from the controversial experiment released a week ago, the Corps found that all-male units outperformed mixed-gender ones on 69 percent of combat tasks. The women were, on average, slower and less accurate than men, and they suffered twice the rate of musculoskeletal injury.

The service said it hopes to receive clearance soon to release the full set of task-force findings. The Marine Corps research into women in combat might also include measures of unit cohesion, mental resilience and the ability to quickly make complex decisions, said a senior Pentagon official.

Current and former Marines seized on the limited summary of results to argue that the inclusion of women reduces combat effectiveness. They said nothing less than the Corps itself — and the heart of its fighting forces, the infantry — is at stake.

Critics of the Marine research, including Mabus, allege that the Corps came up with the wrong answers because it asked the wrong questions. They said the experiment, as it was designed, failed to replicate what will actually happen if women are allowed into ground-combat units.

The critique is much broader, but the central point of dispute about the Marine Corps experiment involves the difference between averages and individual outliers.

On average, the 100 or so women studied in the experimental task force had 10 percent less aerobic capacity than the 300 men who served as research subjects — a finding that corroborates a physiological gender difference long established by prior research. That fact also helps explain why women are typically less efficient at hiking with heavy loads, a basic requirement for infantry Marines.

But how many women in the task force had better aerobic capacity than men, and higher overall performance on combat skills tests? The Marines don't know, they said, because they did not analyze individual efforts in the $36 million experiment, only collective performance.

The Corps reported that women in the top 10th percentile for aerobic capacity overlapped with the bottom 50th percentile of men.

People who want to sideline women from ground-combat units see those numbers as reason for stopping gender integration, which they describe as politically correct social engineering at the expense of national security.

Proponents of the transition see just the opposite — proof that opening these units to women will increase combat efficiency if the military can choose the cream of the crop regardless of gender.

Unlike the selection process for the experimental task force, women in the Corps will compete against men for the same jobs. If the lowest-performing men are replaced by upper echelon women who are stronger, faster and more lethal shots, the overall effect should be increased combat effectiveness for the unit, the proponents' thinking goes.

Integration advocates

Germano belongs to a group of military women working to ensure the Corps is not exempted from the Defense Department transition toward a gender-neutral stance on performance standards and ground-combat jobs.

The "no exceptions" lobby also includes several of the Corps' first female attack helicopter pilots: combat veterans Kyleanne Hunter, Katey van Dam and Jeannette Haynie. They moved into the Super Cobra cockpit after the Defense Department opened air combat to women in the 1990s, volunteering to serve on the front lines in a fearsome war machine that brought them eye-to-eye with the enemy forces they stalked.

Besides Mabus, several other top defense leaders appear to be in their corner. Carter, the defense secretary, is withholding final judgment until Jan. 1, after consideration of reports from all the services, but he has made it clear in public statements that he wants all military jobs to open to women if possible.

Supporters on Capitol Hill include Rep. Susan Davis, D-San Diego, a member of the House Armed Services Committee. A staffer from her office met with Germano recently and reviewed concerns about the purpose and methodology of the Corps' experimental task force.

The Marine Corps is the most male-dominated military service, with men comprising 93 percent of its force. Although most Marine men are vehemently opposed to the inclusion of women in frontline units, a minority have said female troops proved themselves during more than a decade of combat in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Lt. Col. Jeannette Haynie's husband, Lt. Col. Chris Haynie, is a Marine infantry officer who co-authored an article with her in 2012 in the U.S. Naval Institute publication Proceedings. They argued that it was time to take women out of the Marines category and jettison the last restrictions on female troops in combat, because "existing policy divides us by gender instead of uniting us as Marines."

Another person in this camp, not surprisingly, is Germano's husband of 17 years — Lt. Col. Joe Plenzler. He recently retired from the Corps after serving as spokesman for the last three commandants, including Dunford.

Plenzler launched a media counterattack after his wife was ousted from command, pushing back against what he views as a double standard in the Corps that punishes women for the blunt, take-no-excuses style of leadership that it prizes in men. As the independent Marine Corps Times put it in their cover story about Germano: "Is she too tough for the Corps?"

"Kevin Germano wouldn't have (gotten fired), but Kate Germano did," Plenzler quipped.

The Marine Corps is blinded by its "paternalistic gender bias," he added. "Having been an infantryman, I believe you can still build effective units without the rampant misogyny."

After the Union-Tribune broke the story of Germano's firing, guerrilla support for her cause among some Marine men entered the national consciousness via news outlets such as The New York Times. Elliott Ackerman, a war novelist, former infantry officer, and Marine special operations Raider, argued in an editorial that the flaw in the Corps' evaluation process for women in combat is the presumption that it's mostly about physiology.

The real barrier for the Marines is culture, Ackerman wrote. In his view, the Corps' elaborate studies are merely a smokescreen for a conservative institution clinging to its manly chest-thumping traditions.

As a platoon commander during the November 2004 battle for Fallujah, Ackerman had to deal with plenty of overweight infantrymen. Many women in support units were in better shape — as fit as the riflemen who did meet body composition standards.

"While the physical demands of serving in the Marine infantry are very real, fit men and exceptionally fit women can meet them," he said.

"Like most Marines I know, I have a deep love for the Corps and an emotional investment in its legacy. This is why I hope it expands its current analyses of hipbone densities and cardiovascular capacities, to ones that include … the challenge of changing a culture that seems unduly threatened by strong-willed female leaders like colonel Germano."

History of bias?

The Marine Corps set women up to fail long before it created the experimental ground-combat task force, Germano said. But she did not realize it until she was well into her military career as an adjutant handling personnel legal issues.

Germano grew up in Aberdeen, Md., near the base where a sex scandal in 1996 involving male staff and female Army trainees provoked national soul-searching about mixed-gender basic training in the armed forces.

More recently, a similar situation at Air Force Basic Training in San Antonio revived discussion about the risks of coed military training and the vulnerability of having a small proportion of women in uniform, since women make up about 15 percent of the armed forces.

Those problems involving other services are cited by Marine officials as another reason to retain gender segregation at their boot camp.

Germano, whose father and grandfather were career soldiers and combat veterans, tried to join the Navy after college. Based on her SAT scores, she wasn't smart enough, recruiters told her.

After walking across the hall to the Marine Corps office, Germano was asked: "Are you here for your boyfriend taking the ASVAB (military aptitude test)?"

In retrospect, that was her first clue that many Marines view women as second-class service members. But Germano relished her 10-week officer commissioning course in 1996.

Unlike enlisted training in the Corps, women in the much smaller subset of Marine officers were integrated with men from the start.

"It was very physical. I loved it," she recalled. "You do these crazy PT (physical training) events, where you have to run with basically a telephone pole. And the field exercises — generally girls don't grow up playing soldier or doing Boy Scout-type activities. OCS was the first time I had to navigate using a map or compass. I had to lead my peers, and peer leadership is very difficult.

"The commissioning course really challenges you to do things you've never done before. It tests your confidence," in a healthy way that encourages you to believe in yourself, she said.

In 2004, Germano deployed to Iraq with the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit, which played a major role in the second battle for Fallujah. As adjutant, Germano's job included the distressing task of tracking the mounting casualties.

"It was the first time I truly felt like a Marine," she recalled. "I think it was because for the first time in my Marine Corps experience, I really felt like I was on the team."

Germano flew around Iraq with her boss, Col. Lee Miller, visiting Marines who were forward-deployed. Miller, who is now a three-star general, trusted her with duties that exceeded her job description, such as planning their retrograde from Al Asad back to the amphibious assault ship Essex.

"He was the best boss I ever had," Germano said.

It wasn't until Germano encountered an older generation of higher-ranking Marines during a Pentagon staff job that she began to notice a divide between the sexes. Until then, she said, "I never either acknowledged that there was gender bias in the Marine Corps or wanted to see it."

Taking command of the San Diego Recruiting Station as a major in 2007 deepened the feeling.

Germano had eight peers, all male, among commanding officers in the recruiting district. All but one of her 13 senior non-commissioned officers supervising her substations were men. "I was never one of the guys," she said. "I wasn't a big drinker. I wasn't going to go out to bars at night."

Holding military command isn't a popularity contest, Germano said.

The station was $50,000 in the hole when she took over, troubled by adultery among some staff members and losing too many female recruits because they dropped out of boot camp, Germano remembered. By the time she left three years later, the station had been twice named station of the year in the district, as well as quality station for the western region, among other accolades.

"My focus wasn't on quantity of recruits, it was on quality. Other recruiting stations brought more kids in, but that was not my only goal," Germano said.

At her going away party, Germano joined the volleyball game. But she acknowledged in her goodbye speech that some among her staff didn't appreciate her "firm but fair" leadership style.

"Hey, I was not here to be your buddy. But I'm very proud of you," she recalled saying. "If I'm keeping you out of trouble and making sure you have quality time with your family and you're making mission, that's okay with me."

Higher expectations

Germano encourages female Marines to go head-to-head with men as they strive for excellence in their professional accomplishments.

"If you go out and you think competition with your male peers is going shot-for-shot at the bar … you're going to get in trouble," she once said, in a speech that she said was taken out of context.

After earning a master's degree and working as an aide-de-camp to Mabus at the Navy Department, Germano was selected for one of the most important positions a female Marine can hold in the Corps: commanding officer of the 4th Recruit Training Battalion at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island.

Now it was Germano's responsibility to oversee the training and welfare of all female enlisted recruits in the Corps, as well as the all-female staff of drill instructors guiding their transition from civilian to Marine.

Germano said she sought to stamp out hazing and inappropriate relationships among staff members, their spouses and recruits. Another focus was improving physical fitness among recruits, plus their low rate of initial qualification on the rifle range compared to men.

In the civilian world, women are typically regarded as easier to train in marksmanship. In the Marine Corps, range coaches were producing female Marines with an initial rifle qualification rate of about 70 percent. The rate for men was roughly 90 percent.

After making some adjustments, including better buy-in from the male marksmanship coaches and more mentoring by female drill instructors on the range, the female recruits began to hit initial qualification rates in the bottom of the 90th percentile.

That was very good, but not good enough, Germano said. "They need to be competitive with the men," achieving the same level of performance.

The key to the turnaround was raising expectations for women.

"What it came down to was coaching. The males didn't think the females ever will be able to shoot well, so they put in less effort. The other part was we just weren't demanding that (women) excel," Germano said.

To cite another example at Parris Island, Germano took away the chairs so female recruits could no longer sit and rest during formation. The men weren't allowed that luxury, so why were the women, she wondered.

"I put a stop to that, and lo and behold, we didn't have females dropping out of the formation," she said.

Germano's effort to integrate women with male recruits during basic training was less successful. Her regimental commander, Col. Daniel Haas, repeatedly shot down her requests to mix them into the program, as female recruits had been as recently as the 1990s, she said.

Haas has not responded to media requests seeking comment.

"I was being told I was too aggressive, I was too direct, too this, too that," Germano said. "Those are qualities we would expect of any male leader. We would never put that in a negative connotation in the Marine Corps."

Disputed dismissal

Brig. Gen. Terry Williams, the commanding general of Parris Island, was once a strong supporter of Germano who said she was "knocking it out of the park" despite the tension between her and Haas. Williams later dismissed her after Marine officials determined that complaints from her female staff about a poor command climate were substantiated.

The investigators also dismissed Germano's claims of a hostile work environment caused by Haas and his sergeant major, as well as gender discrimination involving under-staffing and fewer resources devoted to the female recruit battalion.

Germano said she requested copies of the investigations the day she was fired from command, but they were released to the media a week before she got to see them.

She was surprised to learn that a speech she gave female recruits telling them not to make themselves a target of sexual assault by drinking copious amounts of alcohol was interpreted as victim blaming, and she denies implying that sexual assault is 100 percent preventable — "That's ridiculous," Germano said. She didn't get a chance to refute the accusation, she said, because the man who investigated her leadership of the battalion solicited a general written statement but did not speak with her.

"The investigation blew my mind. I kept waiting to see, where does it say I slapped them or hit them? I never abused anyone," she added.

After the news broke, Parris Island officials said Germano had berated and embarrassed subordinates when they failed to meet her standards.

"This whole thing started when her Marines — her female Marines — were telling us they were being mistreated," Col. Jeffrey Fultz, the chief of staff for Parris Island, told The New York Times. "She was telling them their male counterparts will never respect them if they don't get good physical scores. You just don't do that."

Now many male Marines are making the same claim as they argue for keeping women out of ground-combat units, saying men and women should be held to the same standards, and that those requirements must not be lowered so more women can qualify.

Germano doesn't regret telling women that they need to keep up with men if they want to be respected in the Corps.

"If you're running a 28-minute three mile run and … you think they're going to follow you," you're wrong, she told recruits. "They are going to be in front of you when you finally end your run, huffing and puffing."

In the Marine Corps, "We're expected to lead from the front. … Someone senior by rank should do everything they can to be at the top of their game," she said.

Germano recently filed two complaints that are under review by the Pentagon's inspector general. The Corps has yet to respond to a congressional inquiry on her behalf submitted in July, she said.

Germano, who is 43, has been reassigned to the clemency board at the Navy Yard in Washington, D.C. She plans to go on terminal leave starting in April and retire when she hits the 20-year mark in uniform on July 1 — as she had planned before the scandal.

"I don't know if I'm tough or stupid, to be honest with you," she said, expressing her sadness over the finale of her Marine career. "I've always had a very clear, black-or-white sense of it's either right or wrong.

"I think my dad would say I was just raised to be someone who stood up for what was right, whether that was stupid or not. The last thing I want to do is glorify myself."

Getting cast out by her Marine brothers-in-arms was devastating. But Germano's husband was her savior during the darkest moments, she said, and even convinced her to climb her first mountain, the Grand Teton.

Now a publisher wants Germano to write a book about her experiences. Whatever comes next, the battle for women in the Corps that she helped bring to national awareness is far from over.

In recent years, the Corps has campaigned to expand the number of women in its ranks and push them into leadership roles. Accessions of women entering the Corps have increased by about 5 percent since 2008, the Corps noted in its summary of results on gender integration research.

In 2011, Parris Island got its first female commanding officer, Brig Gen. Lori Reynolds.

Then in July, the Corps quietly installed the first woman in command of its Officer Candidates School, putting in charge Col. Julie Nethercot, the former executive officer of the experimental task force on gender-integrated ground combat.

In 2012, Nethercot told the Department of Defense publication Stars and Stripes that a big change over the course of her career has been the question she is rarely asked anymore: what is it like to be a woman leading a male team?

"I never saw them as anything other than Marines," said Nethercot, who previously commanded 9th Communication Battalion and helped create the first full-time Marine female engagement team in Afghanistan.

Mabus wants at least one in four Marines to be women. But it's not enough to have more women in the Corps, Germano said, unless the service fundamentally revamps the way it recruits, trains and deploys them, demanding the same caliber of performance as men.

The Marines need to focus on recruiting female high school students who are star athletes, she said, and they need to work harder to help young women build upper-body strength long before they enter boot camp. The 13-week program isn't enough time for women to start pull-ups, the Marine Corps has acknowledged.

Once in the fleet, women who are expected to perform at the same level as men eventually will, Germano said.

"Marines will do whatever you want them to do," she said. "It's not rocket science, it's just standards."

RETURN TO TOP

NAVY

24. Navy announces Georgia solar farm project

Military-wide investments; Renewable energy on bases, nearby lands

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A3 | Joby Warrick

NAVAL SUBMARINE BASE KINGS BAY, Ga. - The eight Ohio-class submarines berthed here are the biggest in the U.S. fleet, with steel hulls nearly 600 feet long to accommodate up to 24 nuclear missiles. But soon they will share quarters with something far bigger: a field of solar panels so vast that 500 of the gargantuan subs could hide in its shadow.

By late next year, if all goes according to plan, some 136,000 of the glass panels will be installed on an empty corner of the Navy base, 35 miles north of Jacksonville. The solar farm will cover an area the size of 280 football

fields. And yet, by the time it's completed, it will not be the Navy's largest solar array. It may not even be the military's biggest solar facility in Georgia.

Kings Bay's solar panels are only the latest in a series of newly announced solar projects, part of a military-wide renewable-energy binge that has been gaining intensity in recent months. From Florida to California, defense officials are signing contracts with local utilities for huge solar and wind ventures inside military bases or on land nearby.

The Pentagon said it is seeking to generate its own power in part to enhance energy security at a time when traditional electric grids are under the threat of cyberattacks. But because of their sheer size, the projects are unavoidably affecting energy markets elsewhere in the country, driving down costs for renewables and dampening the demand for new power plants that burn natural gas or coal.

"We're in the middle of a perfect storm - a perfect, positive sunlight storm," said Dennis McGinn, the Navy's assistant secretary for energy, installations and environment, who helped break ground for the Kings Bay project on an overcast morning last week. "We look forward to doing a lot more of these."

How many more? The Kings Bay solar farm is the fourth such project announced for military bases in Georgia alone, with others already under construction at three of the state's Army bases. All four will be built and operated by the local utility, Georgia Power, and will collectively generate 120 megawatts of solar power, as much as a medium-size coal-fired power plant.

Last month, the Navy signed a deal to build a much larger solar farm in the Arizona desert, a mammoth, 210-megawatt project whose 650,000 photovoltaic panels will generate a third of the electricity used by 14 Navy and Marine Corps bases in the western United States. Nationwide, the Navy alone is on track to produce more than a gigawatt of electricity - 1,000 megawatts - by the year 2020, enough to supply half of the electricity for all its domestic military bases. The size of the purchase orders have spurred competition among solar vendors and driven down the costs of equipment, industry officials said.

The solar surge comes as states are grappling with how to comply with controversial new mandates to reduce emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases blamed for climate change. The Clean Power Plan regulations adopted by the Environmental Protection Agency last month requires states to cut back on pollutants from power plants beginning in 2022, with incentives to replace coal-burning with renewables such as solar and wind.

The Pentagon's emphasis on solar predates the regulations - Congress passed a law in 2009 ordering the Defense Department to shift to cleaner forms of energy - but the military's investment in renewables could make it easier for some states to comply with the rule, energy experts said. Under the Clean Power Plan, states face widely varying requirements to cut carbon emissions, from as little as 7 percent for Connecticut to a maximum of 48 percent for South Dakota.

"If the Army, Navy and Air Force met their combined announced goals of renewable energy capacity, the Defense Department could meet South Dakota's challenging emissions reduction requirements nearly one and a half times over," said Matt Stanberry, vice president for market development at Advanced Energy Economy, a nonprofit association made up of companies involved in clean-energy technologies.

Because the EPA's plan encourages the trading of credits for pollution reduction across state lines, the beneficiaries of the Pentagon's solar projects could include states far from where the solar farms are being built. "It is very difficult to say at this point that one state is necessarily advantaged over another based on where the Pentagon is making its investments," Stanberry said.

Despite heavy opposition to the Clean Power Plan by many states and electricity providers, utility companies are embracing the Pentagon's solar projects for their own reasons. Georgia Power, a Southern Co. subsidiary and the company behind the Kings Bay solar farm, will own and operate the solar panels at all four Defense Department sites in Georgia. Sister companies signed deals over the summer to build large solar arrays at military bases in Florida and Mississippi, which, as with Georgia, have Republican governors and Republican-controlled legislatures.

While the battle over the EPA's regulations rage in Congress and in the courts, Georgia Power is investing in renewable energy because it makes economic sense to do so, company chief executive Paul Bowers said. Southern Co., which once derived 70 percent of its electricity from coal, is in the middle of a major expansion of its wind- and solar-power portfolio and now uses coal for only 30 percent of the power it generates. This past week, the company inaugurated one of the country's largest battery-storage research projects where solar-generated power can be stashed away for use when the sun is not shining.

"We're delivering facts - actionable things," Bowers said in an interview. "Doing these types of renewable projects, and doing research on clean coal - these are tangible examples of things that will help us respond to any kinds of constraints on carbon emissions in this country. Whatever the targets might be, we're taking action to move down that path."

For the Pentagon, the motivations are more complex. In addition to the congressional mandate, the Defense Department is responding to two emerging threats to its operations around the world: cyberterrorism and climate change. Multiple internal studies have documented the military's vulnerability to disruptions to the power supply as well as long-term impacts from global warming.

"We describe it as a threat multiplier in many parts of the world," McGinn said of the climate challenge. "There are crises that occur across economic and political lines, and they are going to be exacerbated by increased pressure from weather events. We want to do our part to mitigate some of those effects, while also recognizing that we can't avoid all of them."

While going solar will probably yield substantial cost-savings in the long run - the Arizona project alone is expected to save up to $400 million on the Navy's power bills over the next 25 years - McGinn said that the Navy was willing to pay a premium for the other benefits that solar and wind power would bring.

"We've got a culture that is recognizing more and more the value of renewable energy," he said, "and how a diversity of sources of power will stand you in good stead when times are great and when they're not so great."

RETURN TO TOP

VETERANS

25. A Unit Stalked by Suicide, Trying to Save Itself

Frustrated by V.A., Veterans of a Marine Battalion Create Their Own Safety Net

New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Dave Phillips

After the sixth suicide in his old battalion, Manny Bojorquez sank onto his bed. With a half-empty bottle of Jim Beam beside him and a pistol in his hand, he began to cry.

He had gone to Afghanistan at 19 as a machine-gunner in the Marine Corps. In the 18 months since leaving the military, he had grown long hair and a bushy mustache. It was 2012. He was working part time in a store selling baseball caps and going to community college while living with his parents in the suburbs of Phoenix. He rarely mentioned the war to friends and family, and he never mentioned his nightmares.

He thought he was getting used to suicides in his old infantry unit, but the latest one had hit him like a brick: Joshua Markel, a mentor from his fire team, who had seemed unshakable. In Afghanistan, Corporal Markel volunteered for extra patrols and joked during firefights. Back home Mr. Markel appeared solid: a job with a sheriff's office, a new truck, a wife and time to hunt deer with his father. But that week, while watching football on TV with friends, he had wordlessly gone into his room, picked up a pistol and killed himself. He was 25.

Still reeling from the news, Mr. Bojorquez surveyed the old baseball posters on the walls of his childhood bedroom and the sun-bleached body armor hanging on his bedpost. Then he took a long pull from the bottle.

"If he couldn't make it," he recalled thinking to himself, "what chance do I have?"

He pressed the loaded pistol to his brow and pulled the trigger.

Mr. Bojorquez, 27, served in one of the hardest hit military units in Afghanistan, the Second Battalion, Seventh Marine Regiment. In 2008, the 2/7 deployed to a wild swath of Helmand Province. Well beyond reliable supply lines, the battalion regularly ran low on water and ammunition while coming under fire almost daily. During eight months of combat, the unit killed hundreds of enemy fighters and suffered more casualties than any other Marine battalion that year.

When its members returned, most left the military and melted back into the civilian landscape. They had families and played softball, taught high school and attended Ivy League universities. But many also struggled, unable to find solace. And for some, the agonies of war never ended.

Almost seven years after the deployment, suicide is spreading through the old unit like a virus. Of about 1,200 Marines who deployed with the 2/7 in 2008, at least 13 have killed themselves, two while on active duty, the rest after they left the military. The resulting suicide rate for the group is nearly four times the rate for young male veterans as a whole and 14 times that for all Americans.

The deaths started a few months after the Marines returned from the war in Afghanistan. A corporal put on his dress uniform and shot himself in his driveway. A former sergeant shot himself in front of his girlfriend and mother. An ex-sniper who pushed others to seek help for post-traumatic stress disorder shot himself while alone in his apartment.

The problem has grown over time. More men from the battalion killed themselves in 2014 -- four -- than in any previous year. Veterans of the unit, tightly connected by social media, sometimes learn of the deaths nearly as soon

as they happen. In November, a 2/7 veteran of three combat tours posted a photo of his pistol on Snapchat with a note saying, "I miss you all." Minutes later, he killed himself.

The most recent suicide was in May, when Eduardo Bojorquez, no relation to Manny, overdosed on pills in his car. Men from the battalion converged from all over the country for his funeral in Las Vegas, filing silently past the grave, tossing roses that thumped on the plain metal coffin like drum beats.

"When the suicides started, I felt angry," Matt Havniear, a onetime lance corporal who carried a rocket launcher in the war, said in a phone interview from Oregon. "The next few, I would just be confused and sad. Then at about the 10th, I started feeling as if it was inevitable -- that it is going to get us all and there is nothing we could do to stop it."

For years leaders at the top levels of the government have acknowledged the high suicide rate among veterans and spent heavily to try to reduce it. But the suicides have continued, and basic questions about who is most at risk and how best to help them are still largely unanswered. The authorities are not even aware of the spike in suicides in the 2/7; suicide experts at the Department of Veterans Affairs said they did not track suicide trends among veterans of specific military units. And the Marine Corps does not track suicides of former service members.

Feeling abandoned, members of the battalion have turned to a survival strategy they learned at war: depending on one another. Doing what the government has not, they have used free software and social media to create a quick-response system that allows them to track, monitor and intervene with some of their most troubled comrades.

Their system has made a few saves, but many in the battalion still feel stalked by suicide.

"To this day I'm scared of it," said Ruben Sevilla, 28, who deployed twice with the 2/7 and now works for a warehouse management company called Legacy SCS near Chicago. "If all these guys can do that, what's stopping me? That's what freaks me out the most. I haven't touched a gun since I got out of the Marine Corps because I'm afraid to."

The morning after Manny Bojorquez tried to shoot himself in 2012, he opened his eyes to sunlight streaming in his window and found the loaded gun on the floor. Through his whiskey headache, he pieced together that his gun had jammed and that he had passed out drunk.

A week later, he stood alongside more than a dozen other Marine veterans at Mr. Markel's funeral in Lincoln, Neb. The crack of rifles echoed off the headstones as an honor guard fired a salute.

Mr. Bojorquez offered his condolences to Mr. Markel's mother after the funeral. He thought about how life seemed increasingly bitter. The thrill of combat was gone. Only regrets and flashbacks remained.

Mr. Markel's mother pressed something into Mr. Bojorquez's palm at the funeral, a spent brass shell casing from the honor guard. Promise me, she said to him, that you will never put your mother through this. Mr. Bojorquez promised.

That began a three-year odyssey in which the deaths of his friends weighed on Mr. Bojorquez, who tried repeatedly to get help from Veterans Affairs but ultimately gave up.

"I was lost then. I still am kind of lost," he said in a recent interview. "I was just trying to look for something that wasn't there. I was trying to look for an answer that I don't have -- that no one does."

He was wearing a bracelet etched with the names of four Marines: one who died on the battlefield and three who died by their own hands at home.

'The Forgotten Battalion'

In Afghanistan, after the men of the 2/7 realized the scope of their mission, they began calling themselves "the Forgotten Battalion."

In the spring of 2008, they deployed from their base at Twenty-Nine Palms, Calif., to an untamed stretch of Afghanistan surrounding the city of Sangin.

Their job was to pacify a Taliban stronghold the size of Massachusetts that had never been controlled by coalition troops, or anyone else. Opium poppies grew in fields as vast as those of corn in the Midwest. Roads were pocked with the rusting hulks of Soviet tanks destroyed in a different war.

The Marines were spread out in sandbag outposts, hours from reinforcements, and often outnumbered. With the Pentagon focused on the surge in Iraq, equipment was scant. There was no dedicated air support, few mine-sweeping trucks, often no refrigeration. The only reliable abundance was combat.

"Machine guns, mortars, rockets, RPGs, I.E.D.s, constant fighting. It was like the Wild West," said Keith Branch of Austin, Tex., who was a 20-year-old rifleman who patrolled a village called Now Zad.

In that village alone, two Marine platoons fired more than 2,500 mortar rounds, called in 50,000 pounds of explosives from aircraft and killed 185 enemy fighters, battalion documents show.

Many of the Marines had deployed to Iraq just eight months before. At least two had been shot by snipers and one was hit by a grenade in Iraq, but they were redeployed to Afghanistan anyway. All three later killed themselves.

The I.E.D.s, or improvised explosive devices, plagued patrols. The first convoy arriving in Sangin hit two. In the next two weeks, an I.E.D. hidden in a bicycle killed a medic, an I.E.D. packed in a culvert killed three Marines in a Humvee, and an I.E.D. discovered in a dirt lane killed a specialist trained to defuse the explosives.

Manny Bojorquez spent the tour in a village called Musa Qala, where repeated offensives failed to drive out the Taliban.

One evening his squad was patrolling single file across a field when the enemy ambushed it on two sides. As the squad sprinted for cover, Mr. Bojorquez watched a bullet hit a Marine in front of him, who crumpled to the dirt. Mr. Bojorquez and another Marine grabbed the bleeding man and dragged him to a ditch.

Pressed against the ground, readying his machine gun, Mr. Bojorquez looked over and saw his teammate Corporal Markel laying down fire -- with a steady grin on his face. Together they showered the surrounding fields and houses with bullets, providing cover for a medic. But the enemy pressed harder, another Marine was hit and the outnumbered squad had to pick up and run.

"It's funny. I was never scared. You just act. But it stuck with me," Mr. Bojorquez said.

By the end of the deployment, 20 Marines in the battalion had been killed and 140 had been wounded. Many lost limbs. Some were badly burned; others were so battered by blasts that they can scarcely function day to day.

Others returned unscathed, but unable to fall in with civilian life. Members of the battalion say what they brought home from combat is more complex than just PTSD. Many regret things they did -- or failed to do. Some feel betrayed that the deep sacrifices made in combat seem to have achieved little. Others cannot reconcile the stark intensity of war with home's mannered expectations, leaving them alienated among family and friends. It is not just symptoms like sleeplessness or flashbacks, but an injury to their sense of self.

"Something happens over there," said Mr. Havniear, whose best friend from the battalion tried suicide by cutting his wrists after returning home, but survived. "You wake up a primal part of your brain you are not supposed to listen to, and it becomes a part of you. I shot an old woman. I shot her on purpose because she was running at us with an RPG. You see someone blown in half, or you carry a foot. You can try, but it is hard to get away from that."

After Mr. Bojorquez returned home, he started having a recurring nightmare. He was patrolling with his squad when bomb blasts killed everyone but him. As the dust cleared, he looked up to see enemy fighters surging forward. He often sat up in bed, thinking he was choking on his own blood.

One Mission's Toll

Beginning in 2005, suicide rates among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans started to climb sharply, and the military and Veterans Affairs created a number of programs to fight the problem. Despite spending hundreds of millions on research, the department and the military still know little about how combat experience affects suicide risk, according to suicide researchers focused on the military.

Many recent studies have focused on whether deployment was a risk factor for suicide, and found that it was not.

The results appeared to show something paradoxical: Those deployed to war were actually less likely to commit suicide. But critics of the studies say most people deployed in war zones do not face enemy fire. The risk for true combat veterans is hidden in the larger results, and has never been properly examined, they assert.

"They may have 10 times the risk, they may have 100 times, and we don't know, because no one has looked," said Michael Schoenbaum, an epidemiologist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The men of the 2/7 overwhelmingly see a tie between combat and their suicide problem. Not only were all of the men who committed suicide young infantrymen who struggled with experiences of killing and loss, they say, but it is possible to trace one traumatic moment forward and see how those involved are now struggling.

Noel Guerrero and Manny Bojorquez were best friends in the battalion. As two Mexican-Americans from the Southwest, they bonded in infantry school over a love of Mexican hot sauce. In Afghanistan, they would share bottles sent from home.

On one mission, Mr. Guerrero, then a 20-year-old lance corporal, was a machine-gunner atop a truck at the lead of a supply convoy. He said he was good at finding I.E.D.s and over six months had spotted almost a dozen that the battalion was able to avoid. But one day, the truck hit a big one, and the explosion flung him against his gun turret.

Mr. Guerrero crawled from the smoking vehicle, his head spinning. He watched his sergeant's Humvee roll in to help. Then suddenly, another blast swallowed the sergeant's truck in smoke. The truck shot up 10 feet and came down with a crash, falling to its side. Then, chaos. The driver was trapped and screaming, with his arm caught under the wreckage. A medic in the back was pinned by a seat crushed against the truck's ceiling. The sergeant was dead.

Before Mr. Guerrero could get to his feet to help, enemy fire started thudding into the ground around him. He spotted his machine gun in the dirt, where it had landed after being blown out of the truck, and with his vision still blurred, he began to return fire.

Two other Marines, Cpl. Jastin Pak and Lance Cpl. Tanner Cleveland, scrambled into the wreckage. Mr. Pak crouched over the driver, shielding him until a line of Marines could lift the truck enough to free his arm. Mr. Pak and Mr. Cleveland emerged covered with blood, clutching the wounded, then went back for the remains of the sergeant. The platoon was out of body bags, so they stuffed the sergeant's remains into a sleeping bag.

When it was all over, Mr. Guerrero picked up a cigarette that had been blown out of one of the trucks and lit it. After he exhaled, he noticed it was spotted with blood. He smoked it anyway.

Since that day, Mr. Guerrero has blamed himself for the ordeal and has tried to kill himself three times. Mr. Cleveland, 26, of Chicago, also tried suicide, and Mr. Pak, of Oceanside, Calif., hanged himself in November.

"You come back and try to be a normal kid, but there is always a shadow on you, a dark shadow you can never take away," Mr. Guerrero, now 28, said in an interview at his home in San Diego.

"Now, when I meet someone, I already know what they look like dead. I can't help but think that way. And I ask myself, 'Do I want to live with this feeling for the rest of my life, or is it better to just finish it off?' "

Lacking Data on Suicides

The first few suicides struck the men of the battalion as random. It was only over time that they came to see the deaths as a part of their war story -- combat deaths that happened after the fact.

Cpl. Richard McShan died first. He had survived a truck bomb in Iraq before deploying to Afghanistan. Four months after they returned, in the spring of 2009, he put on his dress uniform after an argument with his girlfriend and shot himself in his driveway.

In December 2009, Pfc. Christopher G. Stewart hanged himself from a door in his barracks.

In April 2010, Shawn Jensen, a sergeant who had just gotten out of the Marines and moved home to rural Washington State to work in construction, shot himself during an argument with his girlfriend and mother.

The Marines tended to chalk up these first suicides to foolish impulses or prewar problems. Then came the death that shook the battalion, and prompted many to ask whether something was wrong not just with the men who killed themselves, but with them all.

Cpl. Clay Hunt had been a sniper in the battalion. After he got out of the Marine Corps in 2009 after his second tour, his disenchantment with the war grew, and he sought treatment from Veterans Affairs for depression and PTSD.

He became an outspoken advocate for young veterans, speaking openly about his problems and lobbying for better care for veterans on Capitol Hill. In 2010, he was featured in a public service message urging veterans to seek support from their comrades.

At the same time, Mr. Hunt was fighting to get adequate care at the V.A., encountering long delays and inconsistent treatment, according to his mother, Susan Selke of Houston.

Friends said Mr. Hunt had felt directionless. "There is so much isolation and lack of purpose. We came home from war unprepared for peace, and we've had to find a new mission," said Jake Wood, who was also a sniper in the 2/7. "He struggled to do that."

Mr. Hunt shot himself in his apartment in Texas in March 2011. He was 28.

After years of lobbying by his family and veterans' groups, Congress in February passed the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans Act, which provides additional suicide prevention resources for Veterans Affairs.

"When he died, all the guys, we couldn't understand it," said Danny Kwan of San Gabriel, Calif., an ex-corporal who served two tours with Mr. Hunt. "He had done exactly what he had been fighting against."

At the time of Mr. Hunt's suicide, Mr. Kwan was fresh out of the Marines. One night when he was drunk and despondent over a recent breakup, he put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger. He jerked the gun away as it fired, sending the bullet through a wall.

"At the last moment I decided I wanted to live," Mr. Kwan said. "We all have our demons. Some more than others."

No one knows whether the battalion's suicide rate is abnormally high or a common trait of fighting units hit hard by combat, because no one monitors troops over time. In an era of Big Data, when algorithms can predict human patterns in startling detail, suicide data for veterans is incomplete and years old by the time it is available. The most recent data is from 2011.

The Department of Veterans Affairs and the Pentagon say they have introduced a new system, called the Suicide Data Repository, that is faster and more complete.

But Dr. Harold Kudler, chief mental health consultant to the department, said the military and V.A. did not share information that could allow the monitoring of combat units over time.

"Might that be a good idea? It might be a good idea," he said. "But it's not in our ability to achieve. It's not our mission."

A Pact to Help

In December 2012, Marines from the 2/7 converged on a small town in the Central Valley of California for another funeral. A former radioman named Ufrano Rios Jimenez had killed himself with a shot to the heart.

Mr. Rios had lost a leg in Afghanistan. Once home, he struggled with PTSD. But he gave up on treatment at the V.A. and turned to alcohol, painkillers and eventually heroin, according to his former girlfriend, Allison Keefer. After the suicide of a friend from the battalion, Jeremie Ross, in July 2012, he quit work and slipped into a deep depression.

At the funeral, Mr. Bojorquez stood with the others from the 2/7 as they shook their heads and discussed what to do. A battle-hardened former corporal named Travis Wilkerson spoke up.

Once a fearsome team leader in a deadly sector of Sangin, he was now working as a night manager at a sandwich shop. He was one of several men from the battalion who had changed their lives radically in search of peace, growing a bushy beard and taking a vow of nonviolence.

"Real talk, guys, let's make a pact, right here," Travis Wilkerson said. "I don't want to go to any more funerals. Let's promise to reach out and talk. Get your phones out, put my number in. Call me day or night. I'm not doing this again."

His twin brother, Tyler Wilkerson, who had served in the same platoon, stood next to him. After the Marines, he had become a Buddhist and joined Greenpeace. He said he agreed.

Then a three-tour former corporal named Elias Reyes Jr. stepped forward. He had a long ponytail and a degree in philosophy from the University of California, Los Angeles. He was hoping to attend medical school.

Enough of this, he said. One by one, the others joined the pact.

Just over a year later, Mr. Reyes killed himself. In combat, he had been flattened by explosions several times and seen friends maimed and killed.

Back home, he was getting counseling at the V.A., family members said, but faced delays and struggled to find a therapist who he felt understood him. In April 2014, he hanged himself in his apartment.

"He was very religious, a Catholic," his sister, Margarita Reyes, said. "To do what he did, he must have been in so much pain."

News of his death was one more in a mounting pile of problems for Tyler Wilkerson.

After the Marines, Tyler Wilkerson, also a Californian, became part of a commandolike team of Greenpeace protesters. The job combined his love of tactical missions and his vow of nonviolence.

But in March 2013, he was arrested after he and others trespassed to unfurl giant banners that accused Procter & Gamble, the household products company, of destroying rain forests.

In the months that followed, his girlfriend broke up with him and Greenpeace fired him, leaving him alone with wartime memories that he had tried to escape.

He fatally shot himself in October 2014, a few weeks before he was to stand trial for the Greenpeace action.

"He felt like he had lost everything," Travis Wilkerson said. "He said his life looked like this endless mountain he couldn't see the top of."

Other deaths soon followed.

A month later, a mortar man who had served three tours at war, Joseph Gellings, killed himself at his home in Kansas.

He had tried mental health treatment at the V.A., but gave up after delays and other frustrations, according to his longtime girlfriend, Jenna Passio. Instead, she said, he drank and became reclusive. She eventually left him, taking their daughter.

After their breakup, he posted to Facebook, "I'm done with life." Other Marines texted and called to check on him.

"Disregard guys, everything is fine," he replied.

A short time later he shot himself in the head as Ms. Passio looked on in horror. Realizing he was only wounded, he went into a bathroom in his home and shot himself again.

As the news rocketed across Facebook the next day, Mr. Cleveland, who had tried suicide, thought, "It's to the point now where it's like, 'Who is next?' "

It was the friend who had helped Mr. Cleveland pull body parts from a smoldering Humvee in Afghanistan, Jastin Pak. Three days after Mr. Gellings's death, Mr. Pak, 27, hanged himself from a pine tree in the mountains west of his home.

On his desk, Mr. Pak left a completed "stressful incident form" that the veterans hospital in San Diego gave him on his initial visit a few days before. It asked him to list events from combat that were causing him anguish. He filled two pages, starting with the killing of an older man in Iraq who had been unarmed and finishing with placing the remains of the dead sergeant into a sleeping bag.

Failed Therapy

After the eighth suicide in the battalion, in 2013, Mr. Bojorquez decided he needed professional help and made an appointment at the veterans hospital in Phoenix.

He sat down with a therapist, a young woman. After listening for a few minutes, she told him that she knew he was hurting, but that he would just have to get over the deaths of his friends. He should treat it, he recalled her saying, "like a bad breakup with a girl."

The comment caught him like a hook. Guys he knew had been blown to pieces and burned to death. One came home with shrapnel in his face from a friend's skull. Now they were killing themselves at an alarming rate. And the therapist wanted him to get over it like a breakup?

Mr. Bojorquez shot out of his seat and began yelling. "What are you talking about?" he said. "This isn't something you just get over."

He had tried getting help at the V.A. once before, right after Mr. Markel's funeral, and had walked out when he realized the counselor had not read his file. Now he was angry that he had returned. With each visit, it appeared to him that the professionals trained to make sense of what he was feeling understood it less than he did.

He threw a chair across the room and stomped out, vowing again never to go back to the V.A.

In recent years, suicide prevention efforts by the Department of Veterans Affairs have focused on encouraging veterans to go to its hospitals for help, but a bigger problem could be keeping them there.

In interviews, many Marines from the battalion said they received effective care at the V.A. But many others said they had quit the treatment because of what they considered long waits, ineffective therapists and doctors' overreliance on drugs.

Six of the 13 Marines from the battalion who committed suicide had tried and then given up on V.A. treatment, discouraged by the bureaucracy and poor results, according to friends and relatives.

A 2014 study of 204,000 veterans, in The Journal of the American Psychological Association, found nearly two-thirds of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans stopped Veterans Affairs therapy for PTSD within a year, before completing the treatment. A smaller study from the same year found about 90 percent dropped out of therapy.

The therapies, considered by the department to be the gold standard of evidence-based treatments, rely on having patients repeatedly revisit traumatic memories -- remembrances that seem to cause many to quit. Evaluations of the effectiveness of the programs often do not account for the large number of patients who find the process disturbing and drop out.

Dr. Kudler of the Department of Veterans Affairs said data showed that 28 percent of patients drop out of PTSD therapy, but that most veterans stay in treatment and report improvements.

He added that dropout is an issue in all mental health care, not just among veterans, and that the department was constantly trying to provide alternative types of therapy, like meditation.

Craig J. Bryan, a psychologist and an Iraq war veteran, said that "the V.A. has done more to try to prevent suicide than anyone has done in the history of the human race." Mr. Bryan, who runs the National Center for Veterans Studies at the University of Utah, added: "But most veterans who kill themselves do not go to treatment or give up. They are not interested. That is the challenge."

Mr. Bojorquez tried the system one more time out of desperation. After the spate of suicides in 2014, he called and said he needed help. The V.A. had him see a psychologist and psychiatrist.

He told them that he wanted therapy but no drugs. Too many friends had stories of bad reactions. One, Luis Rocha, had taken a photograph of all his pill bottles right before shooting himself.

"We get it, no drugs," he recalled them saying. But on his way out, after scheduling a return appointment in two months, he was handed a bag filled with bottles of pills. He calmly walked to his car, then screamed and pounded the steering wheel.

He wanted to get better, so he started taking the medications -- an antidepressant, an anti-anxiety drug and a drug to help him sleep -- but they made him feel worse, he said. His nightmares grew more vivid, his urge to kill himself more urgent.

After a few weeks, he flushed the pills down the toilet, determined to deal with his problems on his own.

Fighting the Label

Increasingly, members of the battalion felt that at home, as in Afghanistan, they were still the Forgotten Battalion. So they looked for help from the people they counted on in Afghanistan: their fellow Marines.

In November, Mr. Branch, who was completing a degree in social work in Texas, posted a request on Facebook asking the others to enter their addresses in a Google spreadsheet. That way, if a Marine in Montana was worried about a friend in Georgia, he could look on the spreadsheet and find someone nearby to help.

"All of us are going through the same struggle," Mr. Branch, now 28, said in an interview. "If we can get someone there that a guy can relate to, we hope it will make all the difference."

The spreadsheet is part of a wider realization among young veterans that connecting with other veterans -- whether through volunteering, sports, art or other shared experiences -- can be potent medicine.

One battalion member started an organic farm intended to help veterans heal by growing food. Another leads trips to bring together veterans with PTSD. Mr. Wood, 32, the former sniper, founded a national network of veterans, called Team Rubicon, that provides volunteer relief work after natural disasters.

"We did it because we really wanted to help others," said Mr. Wood, of Los Angeles. "We soon realized it would help us, too."

Less than two weeks after the Google spreadsheet was created, a text message popped up on the phone of a Marine veteran named Geoff Kamp. It was just after 11 p.m. on a Wednesday in November.

Mr. Kamp, who had turned in early to be up for his shift with the Postal Service, reached for the phone next to his bed, read the text, turned to his wife and said, "I'm going to be gone for a while."

An hour earlier, a 27-year-old Marine veteran, Charles Gerard, had changed his Facebook profile photo to an image of a rifle stuck in the dirt, topped with a helmet -- the symbol of someone killed in action. In a post, he wrote: "I can't do it anymore."

After surviving an ambush in Afghanistan where several Marines were injured, Mr. Gerard said, he was treated for PTSD by the Marine Corps. But when his enlistment ended in 2011, so did his therapy. He tried to continue at the V.A., but long delays meant it was two years before he got any treatment, and even then, he said, he found it ineffective.

He moved back to rural Indiana and worked at factories, but his anger frayed ties with his friends and family. News that comrades from the battalion had killed themselves pushed him deeper into despair. The night he changed his profile picture, his girlfriend had left him.

Within minutes, the battalion's response system kicked in. Mr. Havniear in Oregon spotted the Facebook post and called a Marine in Utah who had been Mr. Gerard's roommate. They called Mr. Gerard immediately but got no answer. Mr. Gerard was parked in his pickup by a lake outside of town with a hunting rifle in his lap.

Desperate to head off another death, they opened the Google spreadsheet and found Mr. Kamp, 90 minutes away. Within 10 minutes, he was in his truck, speeding north through the late autumn corn stubble.

Mr. Kamp had never met Mr. Gerard. But he, too, had been injured in a firefight, and been dogged by guilt and anger afterward.

"Every one of the guys that's died, I see myself in them," he said later in an interview at his home. "It's like you are always just one bad day away from that being you."

At the lake, Mr. Gerard propped his rifle against his head, closed his eyes and pulled the trigger. There was a click, then nothing.

He took a deep breath and checked the chamber. It was loaded, but the round was a dud.

He decided the universe was telling him it was not his time to die. He tossed his remaining ammunition in the lake and drove home.

A few minutes later, Mr. Kamp knocked on the door.

They talked on the couch most of the night about relationships, work, mortgages, combat, guys who did not make it home and the cold feeling after Afghanistan that you are alone even when surrounded by other people.

"We'll make it through this," Mr. Kamp told him.

Mr. Kamp eventually called the sheriff's office for help, took the rifle for safekeeping and stayed until paramedics took Mr. Gerard to the veterans hospital in Indianapolis.

In March, members of the group used their informal network to intervene with another battalion member in Louisiana. The jury-rigged system is far from ideal, they said, but they are determined to make it work.

Mr. Gerard's experience shows, however, that the system is only as good as the V.A. treatment it is intended to connect to. The night he went to the psychiatric ward at the Indianapolis veterans hospital, he said, he waited and waited for a doctor to see him. After 24 hours, he gave up and checked himself out.

"There was no one there for me," Mr. Gerard said in a quiet voice during a recent interview at his home after a 12-hour night shift at an auto plant.

He looked pale and gaunt, a far cry from the tan and muscular Marine in photos from Afghanistan. Garbage and unwashed dishes were piled up around him. The curtains were drawn.

He crushed out a cigarette. The V.A.? "I've had nothing to do with them since," he said.

A Lifesaving Call

After swearing off the V.A., Manny Bojorquez turned increasingly to friends for support. Late-night calls and texts with guys from the battalion seemed to help more than therapy ever did.

He reconnected with Mr. Guerrero, who still shared his love of Mexican hot sauce. The machine-gunner was living in California, in his last year of college, and he had a baby boy.

"The guys we served with, they are the only ones we can really talk to," Mr. Bojorquez said in an interview.

But in November, Mr. Bojorquez got a text from Mr. Guerrero that upended everything. "I don't think I can do this life anymore," it said.

Mr. Guerrero had never mentioned it to others, but he still believed his sergeant's death was his fault. If only he had yelled a warning. Or spotted the I.E.D. He was getting therapy and medication for his depression, but still often woke up with a deep dread, as if he were sitting at the principal's office, waiting to be punished. Every day, he wore a bracelet etched with the sergeant's name.

That night, Mr. Guerrero had been watching television with his wife after church when something snapped. He crumpled to the floor and backed into a corner, crying, "I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

He had not smoked since the Marines, but pleaded with his wife to go out and buy cigarettes. The panic and guilt were so excruciating that he decided the only relief was to kill himself. He went onto his porch with shaking hands to text Mr. Bojorquez to say goodbye.

Mr. Bojorquez called immediately. Mr. Guerrero picked up, sobbing, but after a few words hung up.

A fear had crept over Mr. Bojorquez over the last year that he was doomed to watch his friends die one after another until he was the only one left. At times, he saw it as another reason to kill himself. But it was also motivation to break the pattern.

He knew he had to call 911, but hesitated. The call might land Mr. Guerrero in a psychiatric ward or ruin his marriage, already strained. Worse, if the police barged in, his friend might go berserk. Someone could get hurt. But what choice was there?

The police pounded on the door just as Mr. Guerrero put a handful of pills into his mouth. He spent the next few weeks in a private inpatient treatment program for PTSD.

It was far from a cure. He said he was still deeply depressed and ashamed. He still slept on the couch instead of in his wife's bed, and he was not speaking to his parents. But he was alive.

Six weeks later, Mr. Bojorquez drove out to visit him in San Diego. The 911 call had not broken their friendship, but it had broken the long silence in which neither mentioned what he had brought home from war.

They greeted each other in a hug. During a lunch at a nearby taqueria, Mr. Bojorquez talked about the night he had put a gun to his head. Mr. Guerrero talked about watching his sergeant's Humvee explode and being so rattled afterward that he did not care that his cigarette was flecked with blood. They stayed long after the lunch crowd cleared out.

"This is good -- us here like this," Mr. Guerrero told his friend. "It's the times when I'm alone that I fear."

They had found small ways to rebuild their lives. Mr. Guerrero had become a rabid marathoner and was leading the youth band at his church. Mr. Bojorquez was studying to join the United States Border Patrol and playing on a softball team with his brother.

At dawn the next morning, Mr. Guerrero took Mr. Bojorquez on his favorite run to the top of a mountain behind his house. He had placed an old metal ammunition box at the top, where Marines could leave letters and sign their names. He dedicated it to the men of the Forgotten Battalion.

As they clambered up the trail, they talked about how hard it was to find balance.

"The death of my brothers consumes me," Mr. Guerrero said between breaths. "It gives me this dark energy. I don't know what to do, so I run. I run all the time. I pray I never run out of trails to run."

It was five winding miles to the summit. When they reached it, the two stood side by side catching their breath and looking out at the dawn spreading over the ocean. Mr. Bojorquez hung his arm over his friend's shoulder. Hummingbirds zipped through the pink light.

Mr. Guerrero broke the silence.

"I'm glad I got to share this with you," he told his friend. "I wish I could bring the whole battalion up here."

RETURN TO TOP

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. How to Close Guantánamo
New York Times, Sept. 20, Pg. SR10 | Editorial

For almost 14 years, the United States' military prison camp in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, has sat festering on the edge of the Caribbean and the Constitution. Opened by President George W. Bush in the panicky months after the Sept. 11 attacks, the detention center has had a powerful radicalizing effect, has severely tarnished America's standing as a nation of laws and has cost taxpayers more than $5.2 billion.

This travesty could and should have ended years ago. But Congress has gone to great lengths to keep the prison open. Within the executive branch, agencies have sometimes worked at cross-purposes and at times dragged their feet. In the end, however, the buck stops with the president.

President Obama made closing Guantánamo a central promise of his first campaign for the White House. But it remains unfulfilled because of his team's political misjudgments, dogged opposition in Congress and his failure to use his authority more aggressively. Mr. Obama has just over a year left to fulfill his pledge. The goal remains daunting, but it is not impossible.

The White House and the Pentagon will soon present to Congress a detailed plan for closing the prison. It will involve a ramping up of releases of those who have been cleared to leave and the transfer of the rest to prisons or military facilities in the United States. This proposal represents the best chance of breaking the political and bureaucratic logjams that have kept Guantánamo open.

As of Friday, 115 detainees remain. Nearly half -- 53 men -- have been cleared for release. The remaining prisoners include 10 who have been convicted in military tribunals or have cases before them, and 52 who have never been charged with a crime but for whom there is currently no path to freedom or due process.

"And it's not sustainable," as Mr. Obama said of the prison camp in 2013, in a nice bit of understatement. "The idea that we would still maintain forever a group of individuals who have not been tried -- that is contrary to who we are, it is contrary to our interests, and it needs to stop."

Cleared but Not Released

A team of national security officials from six government agencies, including the Pentagon, the State Department and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, has concluded that 53 of the men at Guantánamo should be released if the government finds countries willing to take them. In many instances, those determinations were made years ago.

The government offers two dubious excuses for those detainees' continued detention. One is that more than 80 percent of the cleared detainees are Yemenis who cannot be safely repatriated to a homeland roiled by war. In fact, many countries have stepped forward to offer to take in cleared detainees, including Yemenis.

The other is that by law, the secretary of defense, Ashton Carter, must personally determine that the threat posed by each new release can be managed. The Pentagon chief may well fear shouldering the blame if a released detainee is later involved in terrorist activity -- and that was certainly part of the motivation for enacting that requirement. But this does not excuse the sluggish pace with which he and the previous secretary acted.

Calling Guantánamo a "rallying cry for jihadi propaganda," Mr. Carter pledged last month to move swiftly to shut it down. Yet, as of Friday, only seven prisoners had been released since he took office in February. His predecessor,

Chuck Hagel, who was forced out of the job partly because White House officials felt he was dragging his feet on Guantánamo, approved 44 releases in two years. Mr. Obama must insist that Mr. Carter move faster.

In the meantime, there is another option for reducing the detainee population. Many detainees cleared for release have filed petitions for habeas corpus, demanding that the government explain why it is still holding them. In every case, the Justice Department has automatically opposed the petition. If Mr. Obama ordered the department to stop doing that, a federal judge could immediately release the detainees to a willing country, without requiring the defense secretary's signoff.

'Forever Prisoners'

The bulk of the rest of the detainees, 52 men, are known informally as "forever prisoners," held in legal limbo, neither charged with a crime nor cleared for release. Some have been at Guantánamo since it opened in 2002.

The government team that reviews inmates for release continues to consider cases; most recently, in August, it cleared Omar Khalif Mohammed, a Libyan held at Guantánamo since 2002.

But the process continues at a trickle. If Guantánamo is to be closed in the next year, reviews for all the men need to be accelerated dramatically.

Within this group, as many as two dozen detainees are prepared to plead guilty in federal court to crimes such as conspiracy or material support for terrorism, according to the Center for Constitutional Rights, a legal group that currently represents 11 detainees.

In the end, there will be a small number of detainees who will not be charged but who the government says are "too dangerous" to release. The government intends to continue holding them indefinitely as "enemy combatants," relying on the legal authorizations Congress passed for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is unacceptable in a country that often lectures other governments for imprisoning people without due process. If the government is unwilling to prosecute these men, it must release them.

Tried by Military Tribunals

Of the 780 men who have been held at Guantánamo since 2002, only eight have been convicted by military commissions. And courts have already vacated at least four of those convictions.

Currently, seven prisoners are being prosecuted by the military commissions, including Khalid Shaikh Mohammed, the alleged mastermind of the Sept. 11 attacks. But those prosecutions have dragged on for years, with no end in sight.

The military commissions are a legal farce and a practical failure. If the government wants to prosecute detainees, there is a well-established system in place: the United States federal courts. In contrast to the feckless commissions, federal prosecutors have won convictions in roughly 200 terrorism cases since the Sept. 11 attacks, including that of a former Guantánamo detainee, Ahmed Khalfan Ghailani, who was sentenced to life in prison for his role in the 1998 bombing of American embassies in Africa.

A plan to prosecute Mr. Mohammed in federal court in New York City in 2011 fell apart when grandstanding politicians capitalized on the administration's poor handling of it, sabotaging the clearest path to holding Mr. Mohammed accountable for the terror attacks in a fair proceeding. Of course, any evidence that had been gained through Mr. Mohammed's torture at a C.I.A. "black site" would have been inadmissible. But Mr. Obama and former Attorney General Eric Holder Jr. were confident that they had enough other evidence to make their case.

Four years later, rather than serving a life sentence without parole in a maximum-security prison, Mr. Mohammed and the other Sept. 11 defendants remain stuck in pretrial proceedings at Guantánamo.

Republican lawmakers have stood in the way of closing the prison since 2010 by passing legislation that bars the administration from transferring detainees to the United States. They have played on public fears, even though the detainees could be held securely in federal prisons at a tiny fraction of the $3.3 million a year it costs to hold an inmate at Guantánamo.

Senator John McCain, the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said in a statement that he was committed to helping the administration shut down the prison if Congress received a "comprehensive plan" that covered Guantánamo and broader detainee policy for suspected terrorists the government may capture in the future.

The strongest opposition remains in the House, where many Republicans have argued that the United States needs the ability to detain accused terrorists indefinitely. As the Pentagon has begun studying potential sites to detain Guantánamo prisoners in the United States, local politicians have protested, preposterously claiming that their presence would jeopardize public safety.

It is long past time for this nonsense to end. The Guantánamo prison camp is the most potent symbol of a disgraceful era of American history. Many people bear responsibility for its creation and its continued operation, but only one man has the power to generate the type of momentum needed to end this legal and moral abomination.

As a brother of one of the detainees, Mohamedou Ould Slahi, wrote in a letter to Mr. Obama on Friday, "there is torture, too, in not knowing if or when an unjust imprisonment will end."

RETURN TO TOP

27. Women in combat

Facts, not politics, should determine next steps

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A20 | Editorial

Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus has made clear that nothing is likely to change his intention not to seek exemptions in the opening up of military jobs to women. He doubled down in the face of a Marine Corps study raising doubts about the ability of women to serve in combat units. Mr. Mabus is right to argue that the emphasis should be on standards that ensure excellence in the military, and on whether individuals - no matter their gender - can meet those standards. But by cavalierly dismissing, even impugning, the concerns of Marine officials, he inadvertently helps those who say political correctness is driving the push for full integration of the armed forces.

The Pentagon announced in 2013 the lifting of a ban on women serving in ground-combat roles but gave the services time to request exceptions. With the deadline for those requests approaching at the end of the month, it appears likely the Army, Navy and Air Force will not seek exceptions that close off jobs, including those in demanding commando units. But Marine Corps leaders have expressed concerns about allowing women to serve in

infantry roles and, according to the Associated Press, are expected to ask that women not be allowed to compete for several front-line combat jobs. That not only would seem to put them at odds with the other services but with Mr. Mabus, who, as Navy secretary, is in charge of the Marines.

Heating up the dispute is a year-long study by the Marine Corps on gender integration that concluded that male-only units performed better overall than gender-integrated units. A summary of the report showed that male-only infantry units shot more accurately and could carry more weight, and that women had higher injury rates than men. Mr. Mabus took issue with the study, saying the fact it "started out with a fairly large component of the men thinking this is not a good idea, and women will not be able to do this" could have affected the results.

There may well be, as Mr. Mabus argued, problems with the report's methodology and its reliance on averages. But attacking the motives of Marine officials was out of line, opening the secretary up to charges that his decisions are being shaped by politics. That could unnecessarily muddy the waters on the critical issues posed by the changing role of women in the military.

Defense Secretary Ashton B. Carter has until Jan. 1 to decide what, if any, exceptions to grant. It's important he listens to all sides and evaluates all the data and that he makes clear that the judgments made are not based on politics or emotion, but on the best interest of the armed forces and the country they defend.

RETURN TO TOP

28. More waffling on Syria

Upstaged by Russia, Mr. Obama struggles to respond

Washington Post, Sept. 20, Pg. A20 | Editorial

President Obama acknowledged the obvious this week: that to resolve the massive humanitarian emergency afflicting the Middle East and Europe, "we ultimately have to deal with the source of the problem, which is the ongoing crisis in Syria." His administration then offered a remarkable illustration of why that hasn't happened. A $500 million program launched last year to train moderate Syrian rebel forces, officials conceded, had been an abject failure. But, the White House contended, the president was not at fault because he had never believed in the strategy, anyway.

There's sad truth in that. At the root of what surely will be seen as the greatest failure of his presidency is Mr. Obama's refusal to commit to a coherent plan for ending President Bashar al- Assad's murderous assault on his own people. But this is not, as spokesman Josh Earnest contended, "something our critics will have to answer for." Had Mr. Obama accepted the recommendation of his national security team in 2012 to arm and train Syrian opposition forces, or the many proposals to create safe zones where civilians could be protected from the regime's barbaric barrel bomb attacks, much of the subsequent carnage, not to mention the flood of refugees now pouring into Europe, could have been prevented.

As it is, every consequence that Mr. Obama warned might come from U.S. intervention - including the rise of Islamic jihadists who now control much of Syria's territory - has occurred in the absence of U.S. action. And the dangers are growing. Into the vacuum of American leadership has stepped Russian President Vladimir Putin, who has dispatched troops and equipment to Syria in an effort to force the world to accept his solution to the war, which is the creation of a new coalition to fight the Islamic State that includes the Assad government.

Mr. Putin's scheme is another recipe for disaster. The Assad dictatorship has been the prime source of the humanitarian crisis, and its continued existence is what drives recruitment for extremist Sunni forces such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. To bolster the regime will swell the ranks of the extremists and intensify the war. The only winner will be Mr. Putin, who aims to restore Russia as a power in the Middle East at the expense of the United States.

The administration nevertheless is prevaricating in its response. On Saturday, Secretary of State John F. Kerry said "we ought to be able to find the way forward" with Russia on a political settlement and added that Mr. Assad need not step down on "day one or month one or whatever."

By now Mr. Kerry should know better than to suppose that Mr. Putin can be induced to support an acceptable political outcome in Damascus, or that Russia will contribute constructively to the fight against the Islamic State. The United States should respond to Russia's Syria deployment not by accommodating it, but by countering it. The way to do so is to proceed with the creation of protected zones along Syria's borders, defended by rebel forces and U.S. airpower. Refugees could gather in those areas, along with moderate anti-Assad forces.

The "source of the problem" in Syria is an unrelenting war waged by a brutal regime. But it is also the failure of the United States to back up its objectives with consequential action. That is something that only Mr. Obama can answer for - and that he still has time to repair.

RETURN TO TOP

29. While Obama shrugs, Putin struts into Syria to play world policeman
Sunday Times (UK), Sept. 20, Pg. 40 | James Rubin

You have to give Vladimir Putin credit. By sending a new contingent of military forces to Syria this past week and simultaneously calling for a summit with the United States, Russia's president has not only grabbed the international spotlight but done so at Washington's expense.

Four months ago, the US secretary of state John Kerry travelled to Sochi to meet Putin in the hopes of arresting the rapid decline in relations between Moscow and the West, following Russia's military invasion of Ukraine and its annexation of Crimea.

Ever since the Sochi session, western capitals have been abuzz with talk of a new diplomatic initiative in which America, Russia, Iran and others would sit down together for the first time to find a way to end the catastrophic civil war that has raged in Syria for the past four years.

Too bad Putin never mentioned that he wanted to combine this new diplomacy with a military build-up on the Mediterranean. If nothing else, he has secured a leading role for himself in the intensifying discussions on Syria, and he is probably winning respect from leaders in the Middle East as well as Europeans desperate to stop the flow of Syrian refugees.

While Europe's leaders oppose western intervention, they also know that until the civil war ends and Isis is defeated or contained, the flow of Syrian refugees will continue.

The first refugee stop is Syria's neighbours: Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey — all of whom are now struggling to provide shelter and sustenance to several million people. From there, the path goes across the Mediterranean to Greece, Italy and Spain.

The principal player on the refugee issue — and most other issues these days — is, of course, Angela Merkel, the German chancellor. She favours diplomatic action even if that means Bashar al-Assad, the blood-soaked dictator most responsible for the destruction of his country and the exodus of refugees, holds on to power. Thus, Putin's gambit is probably resonating well in Berlin.

Most troubling of all is that no one is even looking to Washington. The Obama years have seen an abdication of the leadership role America has played in the Middle East for the past 60 years.

An early sign of this minimalist stance was the premature withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, which no doubt enabled the creation and rise of Isis, the self-styled Islamic State.

It's the same with the policy on Syria, where Washington's efforts have gone from bad to worse. Intent on avoiding anything similar to George W Bush's disastrous war in Iraq, Obama has steadfastly avoided intervention, claiming he was elected to "end wars" not involve the United States in new ones. According to one confidant, Obama justifies his callousness in private with a realist lament: "Those Sunnis and Shi'ites over there seem determined to kill each other and there's not much we can do about it."

Obama has also repeatedly denigrated the moderate opposition, waiting three years even to consider helping these victims of Assad's brutality. Probably the worst step of all, though, was the White House decision two years ago that still blights US credibility. How can Washington ever pursue diplomacy backed by force in Syria when the president allowed Assad to cross his "red line" on chemical weapons without facing the promised military consequences? Still, last week the administration may have reached a new low point. In congressional testimony, military leaders admitted that a grand total of three US-trained opposition soldiers are now operating in the Syrian theatre. This is what was achieved with years of supposed US support and the authorisation of hundreds of millions of dollars.

When asked to explain, the White House disavowed its own programme, describing the failure as proof that the president's critics were wrong to push for action in the first place. Huh? One frustrating consequence of Putin's gambit is that he has managed to confuse cause and effect with respect to the Syrian refugees. While most experts on the ground disagree, Putin (like Assad) insists the refugees are fleeing Isis, not the regime in Damascus. And, he says, that's why everyone should support his military effort to combat Isis because it will also help reduce the flow of refugees.

If only things were that simple. In reality, the opposite is true. Assad's slaughter of Sunnis serves as a rallying cry for Isis to win recruits around the world. And as long as he continues to slaughter his own people, many Syrians will choose to flee the country.

So what will happen to Moscow's initiative, Syria's bloody civil war and the refugee crisis? I doubt that anything short of a dramatic shift in western policy will affect the flow of refugees or shorten the war. Nor will Russian forces help much to defeat Isis, which still controls half of Syria and about a third of Iraq. The USled coalition has been bombing the terrorist statelet for more than a year and has little to show for it.

The military situation in the struggle against Isis is so grim that intelligence officers have apparently complained to Congress that their work is being manipulated by their political masters in order to seem more positive. Sound familiar? With Putin scheduled to give a rare speech at the UN later this month, new Russian surprises are likely.

While none of this geopolitical manoeuvring will help in Syria and Iraq, the Russian president may score a different kind of success: the weakening of the West's resolve with respect to Ukraine. My guess is that it is going to get harder and harder to maintain support for sanctions against Russia when the country is busy reinventing itself as a responsible leader, helping to solve the world's problems.

--James Rubin was assistant secretary of state under President Bill Clinton

RETURN TO TOP

30. National loyalty lies in ruins in Iraq and Syria

A lackadaisical West has allowed anarchy and fear to take root, sparking the EU refugee crisis

The Independent on Sunday (UK), Sept. 20, Pg. 34 | Patrick Cockburn

Little has been done to end the four-year civil war that is destroying Iraq and Syria and which has caused the biggest mass flight of people ever seen in the Middle East. More than half of the 23 million Syrian population have fled their homes, of which four million are refugees outside Syria. There is a growing exodus from Iraq, with three million people displaced, many of whom today see that the war is not ending and that they can never again hope to live safely in their own country.

The Iraq-Syrian war is the cause of the European Union's refugee crisis and it is going to get worse. There is a bloody stalemate in Iraq, with the country divided by military frontlines more heavily defended than the frontiers of the state. The Sunni Arabs are suffering particularly badly because they are being forced to leave the previously mixed provinces around Baghdad, where they are suspected of sympathising with Islamic State (IS). They are unlikely to be able to return. Others flee provinces such as Anbar, Nineveh and Salahuddin to escape the fighting.

There are accusations of ethnic or sectarian cleansing by Shia militias against Sunni or by the Syrian Kurds against Arabs in areas under Kurdish control. IS pumps up communal hatred by its daily bombings of civilian targets. But at this stage in the war every community is so terrified of its traditional enemies that its members will run away rather than risk an uncertain fate under occupation. The Syrian Kurdish authorities are worried about whole districts becoming deserted as their inhabitants leave for the EU. IS acted similarly last year, giving absent home-owners 10 days to return or lose their property.

The war in Syria and Iraq has now gone on about as long as the First World War in Europe a century ago. Calamity though it is, efforts to end the conflict other than by military victory have been episodic and ineffective. Western powers such as the US, UK and France, along with regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, grossly miscalculated in 2011, believing that President Bashar al-Assad would fall as swiftly as Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. They were not unduly concerned when this mistake became obvious, because they were convinced that the war in Syria could be contained, and failed to see that it would destabilise the precarious peace in Iraq.

Even as barbaric sectarian war tore apart Iraq and Syria, Western powers showed a curious detachment and lack of urgency when it came to restoring peace. It is still too early to say if this lackadaisical attitude has been changed by the arrival of desperate refugees battering at the gates of the EU. Previously, it was revealing that US Secretary of

State John Kerry had devoted much more time to a patently doomed attempt to get Palestinian-Israeli negotiations under way than he had to ending the Iraq-Syrian war.

This insouciance is surprising until one takes on board that it is in keeping with Western attitudes to the transformation of the political landscape in the wider Middle East and North Africa since the end of the Cold War. There are now no less than nine ethnic, sectarian or separatist civil wars being waged in the vast area between Pakistan and Nigeria. Some conflicts are well known, such as the war in Afghanistan or the bloody raids of Boko Haram in north-east Nigeria, but who notices that 1.5 million people have been displaced in South Sudan since fighting resumed there in 2013, or that Khartoum has become a city state with only feeble control over much of the rest of Sudan?

This implosion of so many states could not have happened during the Cold War because the US or Soviet Union knew that such instability would offer an opportunity to the other superpower. Washington or Moscow would prop up ailing regimes and those regimes could barter their allegiance in order to achieve a degree of self-determination. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Western powers no longer see their vital interests as being affected by the collapse of countries such as Libya or Iraq. It is noticeable that anarchy in these two countries has little effect on the price of oil, though both countries are important producers.

Another sinister development during this era of "globalisation" and neo-liberal, free-market economics has had explosive consequences. Nationalism, national self-determination and national control of natural resources has been at a discount. But the nation state played a positive role in bringing peace and security to this region, even when it took the form of secular dictatorships.

As loyalty to these states disintegrates, it is being replaced by more primitive but powerful ethnic and sectarian allegiances. For instance, there are few people who will fight and die for Iraq, but many who will do so for the Kurdish, Shia or Sunni communities.

Free-market economics in these countries has given ideological justification for governments abandoning efforts to guarantee some sort of economic security for the population. Where power and wealth is monopolised by the ruling elite, all capitalism becomes crony capitalism and state machinery a means for officials to make money.

In Syria before 2011, for instance, central Damascus had become a delightful place to live, with wonderful restaurants and shops, but at the same time, in north-east Syria, there was a catastrophic three-year drought which the government did nothing to alleviate and which drove three million Syrians to flee to shanty towns on the outskirts of the larger cities.

Many of these places subsequently became hard-core rebel strongholds that are now shattered by government bombing and shelling.

Take another disastrous example of unthinking adherence to free-market capitalism in countries with no rule of law, rampant corruption and a dysfunctional state. In June 2014, just after the capture of Mosul by IS, I asked a recently retired Iraqi Army four-star general what was wrong with the army, and why it had disintegrated when attacked by a much inferior force. "Corruption! Corruption! Corruption!" he replied emphatically, explaining that he blamed the way in which the Americans had created the post-Saddam Hussein Iraqi Army.

To encourage free-market capitalism the Americans had laid down that all food and other non-military supplies for the army should be contracted out to private business. This had the effect of making it in the interests of every colonel, who was being paid to feed a unit of 600 soldiers, to reduce the real number of men to 150 and pocket the money to feed, clothe and equip the other 450 who did not exist. The Iraqi government admitted later the existence of 50,000 such "ghost" soldiers, but the real figure was probably much higher.

An end to Cold War superpower rivalry, globalisation and free-market economics were all portrayed as benign modernising forces over the past quarter century. But, in practice, the decline of nationalism and the national state has been replaced by nothing better and has opened the door to monstrous but fanatical movements such as IS.

RETURN TO TOP

OVERVIEW

In a Page One story, the *New York Times* said the American military's policy of instructing U.S. troops to ignore the sexual abuse of children by their Afghan allies is coming under new scrutiny, particularly as it emerges that service members have faced punishment for disobeying the order. On Yemen, two Americans held hostage for months by Houthi rebels were freed and quickly flown to safety in Oman, which helped the United States secure the release of the men. Also of note, senior intelligence officials at CENTCOM demanded significant alterations to analysts' reports that questioned whether airstrikes against ISIL were damaging the extremist group's finances and its ability to carry out attacks, according to the *Daily Beast*.

NEWS HEADLINES AT 0430

- U.S. to boost refugee intake by 30,000 over two years
- Tony Romo suffers broken clavicle in Cowboys' victory
- Apple hit by rare malware attack in China
- Greek leftist Tsipras returns to power in unexpectedly decisive vote win
- Canada Liberal leader Trudeau says would scrap F-35 program if elected

OVERSEAS HEADLINES OF NOTE

- *Haaretz*: Israeli army deploys Iron Dome battery to Sderot after weekend Gaza fire
- *Rudaw*: ISIS assault defeated in Hardan
- *Xinhua*: China, Malaysia hold joint military drill in Strait of Malacca

THIS DAY IN MILITARY HISTORY

- 1779 – The Louisiana governor and Spanish military officer Bernardo de Galvez, with the aid of American troops and militia volunteers, captures the British post and garrison at Baton Rouge

Table of Contents

TOP STORIES

3. This Is the ISIS Intel the U.S. Military Dumbed Down

TheDailyBeast.com (Exclusive), Sept. 20 | Shane Harris and Nancy A. Youssef

Senior intelligence officials at the U.S. military's Central Command demanded significant alterations to analysts' reports that questioned whether airstrikes against ISIS were damaging the group's finances and its ability to launch attacks. But reports that showed the group being weakened by the U.S.-led air campaign received comparatively little scrutiny, The Daily Beast has learned.

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A4 | Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

A small but growing number of defectors from the Islamic State are risking reprisals and imprisonment to speak out about their disillusionment with the extremist group, according to a research organization that tracks former and current militants.

5. Some Iraqis ditch fight against Islamic State for life in Europe

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Saif Hameed and Stephen Kalin

Some Iraqi soldiers are abandoning their posts and joining a wave of civilian migrants headed to Europe, raising new doubts about the cohesion of the country's Western-backed security forces in the fight against Islamic State militants.

6. West suffers new Syria setback after US-trained rebels arrested

The Times (UK), Sept. 21, Pg. 34 | Tom Coghlan

A US attempt to relaunch its much criticised rebel training programme faced a setback yesterday when a second batch of western-trained fighters were detained by other rebel groups in northern Syria.

7. Syria sees Russia game changer, US-trained rebels enter fray

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Not Attributed

Syria predicted Sunday that Russia's growing military role will prove a game changer in the fight against jihadists, as 75 rebels trained under a beleaguered US programme entered the fray.

8. Ceasefire returns to three Syria battlegrounds – monitor

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Maya Gebeily

A new ceasefire went into effect on Sunday between Syrian pro-government forces and Islamist rebels in three battleground districts, a local official and a monitoring group said.

9. Rebels see tougher war with Russians in Syria, evoke Afghanistan

Reuters (Insight), Sept. 21 | Suleiman al-Khalidi and Tom Perry

Rebels who have inflicted big losses on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad say Russia's intervention in support of its ally will only lead to an escalation of the war and may encourage the rebels' Gulf Arab backers to pour in more military aid.

10. Called to Jihad from the Heartland

Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN), Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Paul McEnroe, Abby Simons and Libor Jany

Minnesota has provided more fresh young recruits to violent jihadist groups like Al-Shabab and, more recently, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) than any other state. Over the last decade, dozens of mostly young men have abandoned the relative comfort and security of life in the Twin Cities to fight and, in many instances, die, in faraway lands.

MIDEAST

11. Leader says Yemen's Houthis to fight on, but political settlement possible

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Mohammed Ghobari

The leader of Yemen's Houthis said on Sunday his group remained open for a political settlement to end nearly six months of fighting but would resist what he called Saudi-led aggression.

12. U.N. Atomic Inspectors Visit Iran's Parchin Site

Wall Street Journal Online, Sept. 20 | Laurence Norman

The head of the United Nations atomic agency and a senior official from the organization have visited Iran's controversial Parchin military site, ending a period of almost a decade during which officials were banned from the site.

13. Iran's Rouhani says U.S.-Iran enmity eased, but distrust will remain

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Warren Strobel

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in an interview with a U.S. television network that aired on Sunday that Tehran and Washington "have taken the first steps" toward decreasing their enmity due to a landmark nuclear accord.

14. Israel Raises Syria Concerns

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A7 | Joel Greenberg

Israel joined the U.S. in expressing concerns about Russia's military buildup in Syria ahead of a planned meeting in Moscow on Monday between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Israeli officials said.

ASIA/PACIFIC

15. China's leader ready for the pomp

Los Angeles Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Julie Makinen, David S. Cloud and Paul Richter

Chinese President Xi Jinping is embarking on his first state visit to the United States this week amid economic and security tensions that many experts describe as the most serious in a decade.

16. Japan Takes Aim at Military Costs

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A8 | Eric Pfanner and Chieko Tsuneoka

Now that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has secured legislative approval to broaden the role of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, the government is taking aim at the high cost of arming them.

17. New look Australia cabinet features a first - female defence minister

Reuters, Sept. 21 | Matt Siegel

Australia on Monday swore in its first female defence minister, Senator Marise Payne, who will oversee open-ended military engagements in two countries and some of the country's most important defence contracts in a generation.

EUROPE

18. In first Ukraine trip, NATO chief tries balancing act on Russia

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Robin Emmott

With a troubled peace plan for the Ukrainian conflict nearing its deadline, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg will attempt a balancing act to reassure Kiev of the West's support without antagonising Moscow when he visits Ukraine on Monday.

19. Work: 'Strong and Balanced' Approach to Resurgent Russia

Defense News, Sept. 21, Pg. 4 | Christopher P. Cavas

Russia's provocative actions have many western countries on edge, few more so than the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. To sound out those nations, US Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work traveled earlier this month to the region and met with his counterparts from all five countries. He also met with UK and US military officials and, throughout the trip, discussed and listened to reports about what the Russians have been doing.

AFRICA

20. Fighting in Libya's Benghazi raises UN talks tensions

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Ayman El-Warfalli and Ahmed Elumami

Heavy fighting erupted over the weekend between forces from Libya's recognised government and Islamist militants in Benghazi, killing at least six and heightening tensions in U.N. peace negotiations.

21. Three blasts hit northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri – military

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Lanre Ola

Three blasts struck the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri, a military spokesman said on Sunday, a day after a new audio message purportedly from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau accused the army of lying about successes against the militants.

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

22. Darpa Project Seeks to Advance Privacy Tech

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. B4 | Steve Lohr

The Pentagon's advanced research arm is pursing privacy technology. And this time, it is technology intended to protect individual privacy rather than compromise it.

23. Guantánamo captives despair as Yemen war severs family links

Miami Herald, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Carol Rosenberg

For years, Guantánamo prison has portrayed the lives of the Army guards on mostly nine-month duty as a lonely, isolated business. Disconnected from family, they peer through cells at angry and resentful enemy prisoners. Only after hours do they phone home, check email or manage a Skype chat at Internet cafes or in the solitude of their quarters.

AIR FORCE

24. Budget Gridlock Looms over AFA

Defense News, Sept. 21, Pg. 1 | Lara Seligman

In recent years, the undercurrent at the US Air Force Association's annual Air & Space Exposition has been the sequester, with the military and industry alike decrying the impact of devastating budget cuts on readiness levels. But this year, a new shadow loomed over the conference. With less than two weeks left for Congress to reach an agreement to fund the government, the Pentagon is waking up to the possibility of an unprecedented, full-year continuing resolution.

ARMY

25. Bergdahl's disillusion emerges in testimony

Washington Post, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Dan Lamothe

Army Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl was fed up. He was five weeks into a deployment in southeastern Afghanistan and frustrated with his mission and his leaders. He and his fellow soldiers weren't going after the Taliban as aggressively as he wanted, and his sense of disillusion added to the disgust for the Army that he had begun developing while still in basic training.

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. Mr. Putin's Mixed Messages

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A20 | Editorial

President Vladimir Putin of Russia is trying to have it both ways in Syria. He is dangerously building up Russia's military presence there, while positioning himself as the world's savior against Islamic extremists and holding high-level military-to-military talks with the United States. President Obama should go one step further and be prepared to meet Mr. Putin later this month when the two are at the United Nations. If there is to be a solution to the Islamic State's advance and to Syria's war, both Russia and America will have to be involved.

27. Putin's Syria Tour de Force

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A12 | Editorial

Vladimir Putin doesn't seem to share President Obama's definition of "smarter." Ten days ago Mr. Obama declared that the Russian President's military deployments in Syria were "doomed to fail" and the Kremlin was "going to have to start getting a little smarter." Mr. Putin then began sending fighter jets, and now it looks like Mr. Obama is the one who has been taken to school.

28. Jordan Needs U.S. Drones to Fight ISIS

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A13 | Rep. Duncan D. Hunter (R-CA)

Soon after Islamic State propagandists released a video in February of a captured and caged Jordanian pilot being burned alive, the Obama administration pledged full support to Jordan -- a critical Middle East ally threatened by the terrorist army of Islamic State, or ISIS. But the administration has failed to live up to that commitment.

29. Why Obama Won't Stay at the Waldorf

Wall Street Journal (Information Age), Sept. 21, Pg. A11 | L. Gordon Crovitz

The U.S. has finally taken decisive action in answer to China's malicious cyberattacks on the government and American companies: It announced President Obama will no longer stay at New York's Waldorf Astoria. The hotel was bought by a Chinese insurance company with close ties to Communist Party bosses, making the risk of surveillance too great. The announcement ends a presidential tradition dating to Herbert Hoover, who died in his Waldorf suite in 1964.

30. Why the U.S. Can't Stop China's Cyberspies

Newsweek, Sept. 25 | Jonathan Broder

When President Barack Obama met with Chinese President Xi Jinping nearly a year ago, his visit ended with a stinging lecture. Standing in Beijing's ornate Great Hall of the People, Xi warned the U.S. not to get involved in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and scoffed at Washington's concerns over the spike in anti-American diatribes in China's state-run media. He also defended his government's refusal to renew the visas of several U.S. foreign correspondents; they had been critical of Communist Party leaders, which is against the law in authoritarian China. "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off," Xi said. Translation: "You created the problem; you fix it."

TOP STORIES

1. U.S. Troops Are Told to Ignore Afghan Allies' Abuse of Boys

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Joseph Goldstein

KABUL, Afghanistan -- In his last phone call home, Lance Cpl. Gregory Buckley Jr. told his father what was troubling him: From his bunk in southern Afghanistan, he could hear Afghan police officers sexually abusing boys they had brought to the base.

"At night we can hear them screaming, but we're not allowed to do anything about it," the Marine's father, Gregory Buckley Sr., recalled his son telling him before he was shot to death at the base in 2012. He urged his son to tell his superiors. "My son said that his officers told him to look the other way because it's their culture."

Rampant sexual abuse of children has long been a problem in Afghanistan, particularly among armed commanders who dominate much of the rural landscape and can bully the population. The practice is called bacha bazi, literally "boy play," and American soldiers and Marines have been instructed not to intervene -- in some cases, not even when their Afghan allies have abused boys on military bases, according to interviews and court records.

The policy has endured as American forces have recruited and organized Afghan militias to help hold territory against the Taliban. But soldiers and Marines have been increasingly troubled that instead of weeding out pedophiles, the American military was arming them in some cases and placing them as the commanders of villages -- and doing little when they began abusing children.

"The reason we were here is because we heard the terrible things the Taliban were doing to people, how they were taking away human rights," said Dan Quinn, a former Special Forces captain who beat up an American-backed militia commander for keeping a boy chained to his bed as a sex slave. "But we were putting people into power who would do things that were worse than the Taliban did -- that was something village elders voiced to me."

The policy of instructing soldiers to ignore child sexual abuse by their Afghan allies is coming under new scrutiny, particularly as it emerges that service members like Captain Quinn have faced discipline, even career ruin, for disobeying it.

After the beating, the Army relieved Captain Quinn of his command and pulled him from Afghanistan. He has since left the military.

Four years later, the Army is also trying to forcibly retire Sgt. First Class Charles Martland, a Special Forces member who joined Captain Quinn in beating up the commander.

"The Army contends that Martland and others should have looked the other way (a contention that I believe is nonsense)," Representative Duncan Hunter, a California Republican who hopes to save Sergeant Martland's career, wrote last week to the Pentagon's inspector general.

In Sergeant Martland's case, the Army said it could not comment because of the Privacy Act.

When asked about American military policy, the spokesman for the American command in Afghanistan, Col. Brian Tribus, wrote in an email: "Generally, allegations of child sexual abuse by Afghan military or police personnel would be a matter of domestic Afghan criminal law." He added that "there would be no express requirement that U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan report it." An exception, he said, is when rape is being used as a weapon of war.

The American policy of nonintervention is intended to maintain good relations with the Afghan police and militia units the United States has trained to fight the Taliban. It also reflects a reluctance to impose cultural values in a country where pederasty is rife, particularly among powerful men, for whom being surrounded by young teenagers can be a mark of social status.

Some soldiers believed that the policy made sense, even if they were personally distressed at the sexual predation they witnessed or heard about.

"The bigger picture was fighting the Taliban," a former Marine lance corporal reflected. "It wasn't to stop molestation."

Still, the former lance corporal, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid offending fellow Marines, recalled feeling sickened the day he entered a room on a base and saw three or four men lying on the floor with

children between them. "I'm not a hundred percent sure what was happening under the sheet, but I have a pretty good idea of what was going on," he said.

But the American policy of treating child sexual abuse as a cultural issue has often alienated the villages whose children are being preyed upon. The pitfalls of the policy emerged clearly as American Special Forces soldiers began to form Afghan Local Police militias to hold villages that American forces had retaken from the Taliban in 2010 and 2011.

By the summer of 2011, Captain Quinn and Sergeant Martland, both Green Berets on their second tour in northern Kunduz Province, began to receive dire complaints about the Afghan Local Police units they were training and supporting.

First, they were told, one of the militia commanders raped a 14- or 15-year-old girl whom he had spotted working in the fields. Captain Quinn informed the provincial police chief, who soon levied punishment. "He got one day in jail, and then she was forced to marry him," Mr. Quinn said.

When he asked a superior officer what more he could do, he was told that he had done well to bring it up with local officials but that there was nothing else to be done. "We're being praised for doing the right thing, and a guy just got away with raping a 14-year-old girl," Mr. Quinn said.

Village elders grew more upset at the predatory behavior of American-backed commanders. After each case, Captain Quinn would gather the Afghan commanders and lecture them on human rights.

Soon another commander absconded with his men's wages. Mr. Quinn said he later heard that the commander had spent the money on dancing boys. Another commander murdered his 12-year-old daughter in a so-called honor killing for having kissed a boy. "There were no repercussions," Mr. Quinn recalled.

In September 2011, an Afghan woman, visibly bruised, showed up at an American base with her son, who was limping. One of the Afghan police commanders in the area, Abdul Rahman, had abducted the boy and forced him to become a sex slave, chained to his bed, the woman explained. When she sought her son's return, she herself was beaten. Her son had eventually been released, but she was afraid it would happen again, she told the Americans on the base.

She explained that because "her son was such a good-looking kid, he was a status symbol" coveted by local commanders, recalled Mr. Quinn, who did not speak to the woman directly but was told about her visit when he returned to the base from a mission later that day.

So Captain Quinn summoned Abdul Rahman and confronted him about what he had done. The police commander acknowledged that it was true, but brushed it off. When the American officer began to lecture about "how you are held to a higher standard if you are working with U.S. forces, and people expect more of you," the commander began to laugh.

"I picked him up and threw him onto the ground," Mr. Quinn said. Sergeant Martland joined in, he said. "I did this to make sure the message was understood that if he went back to the boy, that it was not going to be tolerated," Mr. Quinn recalled.

There is disagreement over the extent of the commander's injuries. Mr. Quinn said they were not serious, which was corroborated by an Afghan official who saw the commander afterward.

(The commander, Abdul Rahman, was killed two years ago in a Taliban ambush. His brother said in an interview that his brother had never raped the boy, but was the victim of a false accusation engineered by his enemies.)

Sergeant Martland, who received a Bronze Star for valor for his actions during a Taliban ambush, wrote in a letter to the Army this year that he and Mr. Quinn "felt that morally we could no longer stand by and allow our A.L.P. to commit atrocities," referring to the Afghan Local Police.

The father of Lance Corporal Buckley believes the policy of looking away from sexual abuse was a factor in his son's death, and he has filed a lawsuit to press the Marine Corps for more information about it.

Lance Corporal Buckley and two other Marines were killed in 2012 by one of a large entourage of boys living at their base with an Afghan police commander named Sarwar Jan.

Mr. Jan had long had a bad reputation; in 2010, two Marine officers managed to persuade the Afghan authorities to arrest him following a litany of abuses, including corruption, support for the Taliban and child abduction. But just two years later, the police commander was back with a different unit, working at Lance Corporal Buckley's post, Forward Operating Base Delhi, in Helmand Province.

Lance Corporal Buckley had noticed that a large entourage of "tea boys" -- domestic servants who are sometimes pressed into sexual slavery -- had arrived with Mr. Jan and moved into the same barracks, one floor below the Marines. He told his father about it during his final call home.

Word of Mr. Jan's new position also reached the Marine officers who had gotten him arrested in 2010. One of them, Maj. Jason Brezler, dashed out an email to Marine officers at F.O.B. Delhi, warning them about Mr. Jan and attaching a dossier about him.

The warning was never heeded. About two weeks later, one of the older boys with Mr. Jan -- around 17 years old -- grabbed a rifle and killed Lance Corporal Buckley and the other Marines.

Lance Corporal Buckley's father still agonizes about whether the killing occurred because of the sexual abuse by an American ally. "As far as the young boys are concerned, the Marines are allowing it to happen and so they're guilty by association," Mr. Buckley said. "They don't know our Marines are sick to their stomachs."

The one American service member who was punished in the investigation that followed was Major Brezler, who had sent the email warning about Mr. Jan, his lawyers said. In one of Major Brezler's hearings, Marine Corps lawyers warned that information about the police commander's penchant for abusing boys might be classified. The Marine Corps has initiated proceedings to discharge Major Brezler.

Mr. Jan appears to have moved on, to a higher-ranking police command in the same province. In an interview, he denied keeping boys as sex slaves or having any relationship with the boy who killed the three Marines. "No, it's all untrue," Mr. Jan said. But people who know him say he still suffers from "a toothache problem," a euphemism here for child sexual abuse.

RETURN TO TOP

2. Two Americans held in Yemen freed with help from Oman; the fate of a third is unclear
Washington Post, Sept. 21, Pg. A9 | Adam Goldman

Two of three American hostages who were detained for months by rebels in Yemen's capital were freed Sunday with the assistance of the sultan of Oman, who helped negotiate a plan to fly them out of the country, U.S. officials said.

The men were released at the airport in Sanaa, but not without complications. The United States had hoped to secure the freedom of all three Americans, officials said, but the Shiite rebels decided to continue holding a 35-year-old American Muslim convert for reasons that remain unclear.

The men were flown to Muscat, the capital of Oman, which has forged a close relationship with the United States. Their condition was not known.

One of the men had been previously identified as Scott Darden, 45, an employee of a Louisiana-based logistics company. The other is Sam Farran, 54, a security consultant from Michigan.

"I am speechless," said Darden's wife, Diana Loesch, who was on her way to meet her husband. "I am really thankful for all the diplomatic efforts. The Omanis are very good at what they do."

A British citizen also was released, officials said. U.S. officials asked that the name of the third American, who had been in Yemen teaching English, be withheld because it could jeopardize efforts to free him.

Attempts to obtain the men's release have been complicated by the deteriorating security situation in Yemen since Shiite Houthi rebels seized power earlier this year, prompting an intense Saudi bombing campaign in support of embattled President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

The Houthi-controlled internal security branch detained Farran and Darden on March 27. Darden had contacted Farran, a former Marine, for help in finding safety when the Saudis began to bomb Sanaa.

The two had gone to a secure location but were then arrested, officials said. The circumstances of the third American's detention remain unclear.

Ned Price, a spokesman for the National Security Council, said in a statement: "We welcome the release of two U.S. citizens who had been detained in Yemen since earlier this year. As we have informed their families, these individuals departed Yemen today and have since arrived in Oman. The U.S. Ambassador to Muscat and a consular official met them upon arrival and will provide all possible consular assistance."

Price thanked the Omani government and its longtime ruler, Sultan Qaboos bin Said.

Darden was involved in overseeing the transport of humanitarian supplies in Yemen for New Orleans-based Transoceanic Development.

He speaks Arabic fluently and has worked for Transoceanic for less than a year. He is originally from Atlanta, but his family was living in Dubai.

Gregory Rusovich, Transoceanic's chief executive, said in a statement: "We cannot begin to express the sense of joy and relief we feel with Scott's release. He has been safely evacuated and will be reunited with his family very soon."

Another American, journalist Casey Coombs, also was detained by the Houthis but was released in June with the help of the Omani government.

Securing the release of the Americans was a priority for the Obama administration, which recently revamped policies for handling hostage situations after coming under widespread criticism from families of captives.

To better coordinate with other U.S. agencies and families, the administration created the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, which is led by the FBI. Last month, Secretary of State John F. Kerry appointed the first special presidential envoy for hostage affairs to work closely with the fusion cell.

--Julie Tate contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

3. This Is the ISIS Intel the U.S. Military Dumbed Down

The intelligence pros said killing certain ISIS leaders might not diminish the group and that airstrikes might not be working. The bosses didn't like those answers—not at all

TheDailyBeast.com (Exclusive), Sept. 20 | Shane Harris and Nancy A. Youssef

Senior intelligence officials at the U.S. military's Central Command demanded significant alterations to analysts' reports that questioned whether airstrikes against ISIS were damaging the group's finances and its ability to launch attacks. But reports that showed the group being weakened by the U.S.-led air campaign received comparatively little scrutiny, The Daily Beast has learned.

Senior CENTCOM intelligence officials who reviewed the critical reports sent them back to the analysts and ordered them to write new versions that included more footnotes and details to support their assessments, according to two officials familiar with a complaint levied by more than 50 analysts about intelligence manipulation by CENTCOM higher-ups.

In some cases, analysts also were urged to state that killing particular ISIS leaders and key officials would diminish the group and lead to its collapse. Many analysts, however, didn't believe that simply taking out top ISIS leaders would have an enduring effect on overall operations.

"There was the reality on the ground but it was not as rosy as [the leadership] wanted it to be," a defense official familiar with the complaint told The Daily Beast. "The challenge was assessing whether the glass was half empty, not half full."

Some analysts have also complained that they felt "bullied" into reaching conclusions favored by their bosses, two separate sources familiar with analysts' complaints said. The written and verbal pressure created a climate at CENTCOM in which analysts felt they had to self-censor some of their reports.

Some of the analysts have also accused their bosses of changing the reports in order to appeal to what they perceived as the Obama administration's official line that the anti-ISIS campaign was making progress and would eventually end with the group's destruction.

Lawmakers and even presidential candidates seized on the allegations of politicizing intelligence as the White House tried to distance itself from the very strategy it has been pursuing.

Army Gen. Lloyd Austin came under withering bipartisan criticism on Wednesday when he testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee that after spending at least $43 million over a 10-month period, the U.S. had trained only nine fighters to confront ISIS in Syria.

Senators were dumbfounded that the nearly year-long effort had produced such paltry results, calling it "a joke" and "an abject failure."

Sen. John McCain, the committee chairman, called Austin's testimony "grossly distorted" and said the general was attempting to convince senators that the military was making more progress against ISIS than he believes it is.

Asked whether he had ever ordered changes to intelligence reports, Austin replied, "Absolutely not."

The Obama administration is now considering modifying the Syrian train-and-equip program, while the White House attempts to portray the president as having always been skeptical of it.

Meanwhile, Pentagon investigators are examining the back-and-forth between the intelligence bosses at CENTCOM and the analysts, which created a paper trail. Favorable reports had fewer comments written on them, and requests that were more critical showed heavy questioning, the two officials said.

The altering of intelligence led to reports that overstated the damage that U.S. strikes had on specific ISIS targets. For instance, strikes on oil refineries and equipment were said to have done more damage to the group's financing of operations through illicit oil sales than the analysts believed. Also, strikes on military equipment were said to have set back the group's ability to wage combat operations, when the analysts believed that wasn't always the case.

The altered reports made ISIS seem financially weakened and less capable of launching attacks, the analysts allege.

The CENTCOM supervisors "did not like the reports on the impact [of the airstrikes] because they didn't believe it," one military adviser familiar with CENTCOM operations told The Daily Beast.

The Defense Department inspector general has been conducting interviews at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Fla., in order to determine who in the command's intelligence directorate may have distorted or manipulated the intelligence reports, some of which eventually made their way into materials briefed to President Obama. Investigators have pulled CENTCOM personnel one by one into private interviews to get to the bottom of the allegations and determine who was ultimately responsible for changing intelligence reports, according to individuals with knowledge of the investigation.

The inspector general has confirmed that the investigation is focused on the CENTCOM intelligence directorate, or J2. Multiple sources told The Daily Beast that the head of intelligence, Army Maj. Gen. Steven Grove, is named in

the complaint, as are several other senior officials at CENTCOM. The tone of the complaint is said to be harsh and highly critical of senior officials' leadership and actions.

The U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS has conducted 6,863 strikes in the year-long campaign in Iraq and Syria, according to Pentagon statistics.

No evidence has emerged that military commanders at CENTCOM who make decisions about airstrikes read the reports and then changed the number of strikes as a result. However, the generally optimistic reports may have stalled debate about whether the strategy needed to be reexamined or change course.

Defenders of CENTCOM noted that however optimistic the reports were, they are just one of many factors commanders would have considered when assessing a strategy. A CENTCOM spokesman said that while he couldn't discuss ongoing investigations, there's a robust system of assessing information, and it doesn't rely solely on one assessment.

"The intelligence community routinely provides a wide range of subjective assessments related to the current security environment," said Air Force Col. Patrick Ryder, a CENTCOM spokesman. "Senior civilian and military leadership consider these assessments during planning and decision-making, along with information gained from various other sources, to include the insights provided by commanders on the ground and other key advisers, intelligence collection assets, and previous experience."

The Pentagon investigation has led some CENTCOM analysts to fret that launching their complaint will end up tainting the credibility of their reports for years to come, the very thing they were trying to avoid by calling out their bosses.

Still others worry that the inquiry, which could take a year, will not aggressively seek to hold accountable those who changed the reports.

Several sources told The Daily Beast that Austin has warned his subordinates not to retaliate against anyone who spoke out, helping mollify a tense environment at CENTCOM.

The alleged cooking of the intel books on ISIS became a point of discussion in the second televised Republican presidential debate last week.

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee pointed to the CENTCOM analysts' complaint during a discussion of national security strategy. "If you don't have good intelligence that is reliable and honest, you won't have good intelligence and you cannot make good decisions," he said.

RETURN TO TOP

IRAQ/SYRIA

4. ISIS Defectors Reveal Disillusionment

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A4 | Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura

LONDON -- A small but growing number of defectors from the Islamic State are risking reprisals and imprisonment to speak out about their disillusionment with the extremist group, according to a research organization that tracks former and current militants.

The Islamic State considers defectors as apostates, and most of the hundreds thought to have left the group have gone into hiding.

But 58 defectors, nine of them from Western Europe and Australia, have gone public with their testimonies since last year, according to a report to be published Monday by the International Center for the Study for Radicalization at King's College London.

According to the report, some of the defectors said they disapproved of the Islamic State's hostility to other Sunni rebel groups that opposed President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and its indiscriminate killings of civilians and hostages. Others grew weary of what they saw as favoritism and mistreatment by commanders, or were disappointed that the life of a militant was far less exciting, or lucrative, than they had imagined. Two left after they found out that they had been selected as suicide bombers.

The researchers urged governments to give defectors more incentives to speak out so that their narratives could be used to dissuade potential recruits. The 58 defectors, seven of them women, spoke on separate occasions to various news organizations, including The New York Times, and the report compiles their testimony while providing context and analysis.

"The defectors provide unique insight into life in the Islamic State," the report says. "But their stories can also be used as a potentially powerful tool in the fight against it. The defectors' very existence shatters the image of unity and determination that I.S. seeks to convey."

Some of the Islamic State's "shininess is wearing off, and it's starting to look less impressive," said Peter Neumann, director of the center and professor of security studies at King's College. "So a lot of people are becoming more confident in coming out," he said.

Many are speaking out in hopes of getting favorable treatment from prosecutors and judges, Dr. Neumann added. But "if you're a government you'd want more to come out," to create more momentum and incentive for others to do so. The testimonies, he said, could be used to counter the Islamic State's slick recruiting methods, and he urged governments to "remove legal disincentives" that deter defectors from going public and to try to resettle rather than imprison them.

In the last two years, an estimated 20,000 foreigners, about a quarter of them European, have joined jihadist groups in the Middle East, the majority of them filling the ranks of the Islamic State, Dr. Neumann said. Between 25 percent and 40 percent have already returned to Europe, he said. British officials estimate that more than 300 have returned.

Defectors have said that life under the Islamic State, also known as ISIS and ISIL, was far from the utopia they had been promised.

"ISIS wants to kill everyone who says no," a 26-year-old Syrian fighter told NPR last year. "Everyone must be with them." The defector said he had paid a smuggler to take him to Turkey, where he had to hide from Islamic State

informants who prowled towns along the border. "I was thinking all the time, if they arrest me, if they stop me, they will behead me," he said.

In another case, a Western fighter named Ibrahim said he had initially joined the group because he wanted to give humanitarian assistance to Syrians and to have a chance to live in a caliphate under strict Islamic law. But he eventually left, he told CBS. "A lot of people when they come, they have a lot of enthusiasm about what they've seen online or what they've seen on YouTube," he said. "It's not all military parades, or it's not all victories."

The fighter said he saw a couple being stoned to death for adultery, and considered that just, but he did not approve of aid workers, journalists and other noncombatants being beheaded.

"My main reason for leaving was that I felt that I wasn't doing what I had initially come for and that's to help in a humanitarian sense the people of Syria," he said. "It had become something else -- so, therefore, no longer justified me being away from my family."

As disillusioned as a recruit might become, he or she must go to great lengths to leave the Islamic State, Dr. Neumann said. In one case, a fighter defected by fooling militants into thinking that he was luring his sister from Germany, even faking conversations on Facebook to show that his efforts were succeeding. He managed to flee to Turkey after telling the militants that he would pick her up on the border. "To get out of ISIS, you have to be quite shrewd," Dr. Neumann said.

One of the first to recognize the value of such narratives was the United States' Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, Dr. Neumann said. One of its successes included a YouTube video released last year that "welcomed" recruits to the Islamic State by showing images of the group's atrocities. The video has been seen 865,000 times. The unit also runs a similar campaign on Twitter under the handle @ThinkAgain_DOS.

RETURN TO TOP

5. Some Iraqis ditch fight against Islamic State for life in Europe

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Saif Hameed and Stephen Kalin

BAGHDAD - Some Iraqi soldiers are abandoning their posts and joining a wave of civilian migrants headed to Europe, raising new doubts about the cohesion of the country's Western-backed security forces in the fight against Islamic State militants.

Interviews with migrants and an analysis of social media activity show scores of fighters from the national army, police and special forces as well as Shi'ite militias and Kurdish peshmerga have left in recent months or plan to go soon.

They join more than 50,000 civilians who have left Iraq in the past three months, according to the United Nations, part of an even larger exodus from neighboring Syria and other conflict zones across the Middle East.

The inability of Iraq to retain its soldiers threatens to further erode morale in a military that has partially collapsed twice in the past year in the face of the Islamic State militant group.

It could also undermine the efforts of a U.S.-led coalition that has spent billions of dollars training and equipping Iraqi forces to take on the militants.

A spokesman for the Iraqi defense ministry said the military was not concerned about the migration of soldiers, which he put in the "tens" out of a security force estimated to number in the tens of thousands.

"The armed forces are performing their duties. There is no reason to be worried," said General Tahsin Ibrahim Sadiq.

But Saed Kakaei, adviser to the minister of peshmerga forces in northern Iraq's Kurdistan region, said while he could not provide a specific figure for how many peshmerga forces had left, the numbers were "concerning".

The soldiers' departure highlights a pervasive sense of hopelessness among many Iraqis more than a year after Islamic State seized a third of their country's territory, threatened to overrun the capital and declared a modern caliphate.

Despite driving them back in some areas, members of the security forces say they are leaving because they face daily offensives by the insurgents, sectarian violence, and economic depression.

Many in the security forces are also frustrated and disillusioned with elected officials, who they allege abandoned them on the frontlines, while failing to provide adequate resources and enriching themselves through graft.

"Iraq is worth fighting for but the government is not," said a 22-year-old SWAT policeman who decided to emigrate after his brother was killed in battle earlier this year at the northern Baiji refinery where he was also posted.

"There is no concern for us at all. The government has destroyed us," he told Reuters, saying Baghdad's failure to reinforce soldiers had caused avoidable losses in a battle that has dragged on for more than a year.

Control of neighborhoods in Baiji, about 190 km (120 miles) north of Baghdad, has changed hands many times. Authorities said in July they had recaptured most of the town, but Islamic State attacked central neighborhoods days later, forcing pro-government forces to pull back.

Others echoed the policeman's concerns. A 33-year-old special forces member who was based in western Anbar province - an Islamic State stronghold - said he had lost any reason to stay, and joined 16 fellow soldiers who smuggled themselves to northern Europe last month.

"We were fighting while the government and political parties made it their mission to make money and officials sent their children to live abroad," he told Reuters via online messaging.

"What drove us to leave was seeing our guys getting wounded, killed or maimed, and nobody cared."

Baghdad launched a campaign to retake the Sunni heartland of Anbar after the provincial capital Ramadi fell in May, leaving only a few government holdouts across the sprawling desert territory.

But fighting has progressed fitfully with sectarian tensions coming to a head and ground advances delayed by explosives planted by Islamic State along roads and in buildings.

A special operations member based in Ramadi said the elite unit alone had seen more than 100 fighters leave for Europe in the past six months. Reuters could not independently verify this.

Many soldiers who left have changed their Facebook profiles from portraits in fatigues beside tanks or holding machine guns to photos riding bikes or relaxing in parks in Austria, Germany or Finland.

"MERELY TENANTS"

Iraqis have long complained of corruption and mismanagement in the government, including the armed forces. An official investigation last year found 50,000 "ghost soldiers" on the army's books. The "ghosts", the report said, helped fuel the military's collapse in June 2014 in the northern city of Mosul.

These men were on the army payroll but paid their officers a portion of their salaries and in return did not show up for duty, enriching their commanders and hollowing out the military force.

Iraq has since come to rely heavily on Shi'ite militias and volunteer fighters, grouped under a government-run body called the Hashid Shaabi. But even some Hashid, who were called to take up arms by the country's top Shi'ite cleric, are leaving.

A 20-year-old Shi'ite fighter from the eastern province of Diyala, who declined to identify himself or the specific militia he belonged to, said pro-government forces receive inadequate support to fight Islamic State.

He recently made a month-long journey to Sweden to join two cousins who are themselves former Iraqi police officers.

"You cannot fight a war or live in a country under these circumstances," he told Reuters via Facebook from the Stockholm area. The politicians "ransacked the country in the name of religion. Iraq is not ours anymore; we are merely tenants."

Reuters could not independently verify the fighter's identity.

Hashid spokesman Ahmed al-Asadi could not provide an accurate count for fighters who had migrated, but said the government needed to do more to keep young Iraqis from leaving.

Reforms launched last month by Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi seek to end a system of ethnic and sectarian quotas that has spawned corruption and mismanagement. The reforms also aim to improve accountability in the military and other state institutions.

But the initiative, hindered by bureaucracy and political jockeying, has led to few noticeable gains on the battlefield or improvements in people's daily lives; many lack basic services such as electricity.

Though Iraqis have been fleeing poor government, violence and economic hardship for decades, recent policy shifts in Europe have presented a fresh opportunity to escape.

Looking on this summer as refugees from neighboring Syria received a warm reception in Europe, many decided to leave at short notice, using Facebook and other social media to plan their trips.

The United Nations estimates hundreds of thousands more could leave Iraq in the coming months.

But the soldiers arriving in Europe face an unknown future. A spokeswoman for U.N. refugee agency UNHCR said those judged to be former combatants would not be granted refugee status.

--Additional reporting by Isabel Coles in Erbil and Tom Miles in Geneva

RETURN TO TOP

6. West suffers new Syria setback after US-trained rebels arrested
The Times (UK), Sept. 21, Pg. 34 | Tom Coghlan

A US attempt to relaunch its much criticised rebel training programme faced a setback yesterday when a second batch of western-trained fighters were detained by other rebel groups in northern Syria.

About 70 fighters from the US-trained group, called the 30th Division, entered the Bab al-Salama border crossing north of Aleppo in a heavily armed convoy of 12 vehicles with US air cover, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

However, they faced "problems" from the Islamist Shamiya Front, a Turkish-backed rebel coalition operating against Isis around Aleppo, according to the US-trained rebels.

A spokesman for the Shamiya Front said that it had detained members of 30th Division, but only temporarily. He added that fighters from the group had been in possession of Syrian regime flags, arousing suspicion. "They were investigated and then released," Captain Mohammad Ahmad said. "The Shamiya Front has no problem fighting alongside any group that wants to fight Isis. But 30th Division aren't fighting Isis. Their war is just in the media."

Captain Ammar al-Wawi, a spokesman for the 30th Division, said that the situation remained critical.

America's policy in Syria faced savage criticism from US politicians last week after the senior US army general overseeing the $500 million programme admitted that only four or five of an initial batch of 54 rebel fighters remained on the ground in Syria. The remainder were killed, captured or fled after being attacked by the Nusra Front, which is aligned to al-Qaeda, soon after they entered Syria in July. The Nusra Front accused them of being "agents of the Americans".

The programme, which was expected to produce a force of 5,400 fighters over three years, was described as an "abject failure" by John McCain, the Republican senator.

Scrutiny of the programme comes as Washington appears uncertain how to respond to a Russian military build-up inside Syria, whose foreign minister boasted yesterday that the Russian involvement would transform the battle against Isis and the Nusra Front.

There were fresh claims of atrocities over the weekend as evidence emerged that fighters from the Nusra Front had killed up to 71 Syrian government soldiers at the Abu al-Duhur airbase in Aleppo province. Photographs showed one smiling jihadist with his foot resting on the corpse of a government soldier. Dozens of other bodies were strewn along the runway of the airbase.

Ashton Carter, the US defence secretary, and Sergei Shoigu, his Russian opposite number, began talks on Friday aimed at preventing unplanned contact between US and Russian aircraft operating against Isis over Syria.

Shia militias allied to the Iraqi government carried out systematic revenge attacks against civilians in Tikrit, Human Rights Watch has said. It claimed that the militias, many of which are backed by Iran, were responsible for an orchestrated campaign of violence after Tikrit was captured by Iraqi forces in March. It added that 160 people abducted by the militias remained missing.

RETURN TO TOP

7. Syria sees Russia game changer, US-trained rebels enter fray

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Not Attributed

Syria predicted Sunday that Russia's growing military role will prove a game changer in the fight against jihadists, as 75 rebels trained under a beleaguered US programme entered the fray.

US Secretary of State John Kerry, by contrast, said Moscow's support for the regime in Damascus only risked sending more extremists to conflict-wracked Syria and could further hamper peace efforts to end the country's years-long civil war.

"More important than the supply of arms to Syria is Russia's participation in the fight against Daesh and (Al-Qaeda franchise) Al-Nusra Front," Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Muallem said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State (IS) jihadist group.

Muallem, quoted by Syrian media in an interview with Russia Today television, said Moscow's increased role would "show up America's lack of a clear strategy" against the jihadists.

Russian President Vladimir Putin has provided vital support to his Syrian counterpart Bashar al-Assad throughout the armed revolt against the Damascus regime that erupted in 2011.

Moscow argues that any military support is in line with existing defence contracts, but reports have surfaced this month of secret deployments to Syria, where Russia has a naval facility.

Washington, which has led an international coalition carrying out air strikes against IS in both Syria and neighbouring Iraq over the past year, has repeatedly warned Moscow that bolstering Assad will only make the situation worse.

A US-backed rebel faction and a monitoring group said Sunday that 75 Syrian rebels trained to fight jihadists under a beleaguered American programme have crossed into northern Syria from Turkey.

"Seventy-five new fighters trained in a camp near the Turkish capital entered Aleppo province between Friday night and Saturday morning," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

Hassan Mustafa, spokesman for the "Division 30" unit to which some of the rebels were deployed, confirmed to AFP that the group had entered Syria.

"Their training in Turkey lasted two months and they went directly to the front lines with Daesh. They are now in the town of Tal Rifaat," Mustafa said.

According to Abdel Rahman, the group entered in a convoy of a dozen cars with light weapons and ammunition, under air cover from the US-led coalition.

Before the fresh batch of fighters, the US-led train-and-equip programme had only managed to vet and train some 60 rebels to fight IS jihadists on the ground.

The $500 million programme run out of Turkey has been fraught with problems.

Shortly after the 54 fighters embedded with Division 30 in July, they suffered a devastating assault by Al-Nusra Front.

More than a dozen of Division 30's fighters were either killed or kidnapped by Al-Nusra, which accused them of being "agents of American interests".

The United States has since used its air power to help Division 30 push back other Nusra attacks and has said Syrian troops could be targeted if they attacked the US-backed forces.

US officials have also expressed fears Russia may strike the Western-backed rebels fighting Assad and ultimately risk a confrontation with forces fighting IS.

Moscow has been pushing for a broader coalition of forces to take on the jihadists.

On a visit to Berlin, Kerry said that "continued military support for the regime by Russia or any other country risks the possibility of attracting more extremists and entrenching Assad and hinders the way for resolution".

But despite its reservations, the United States on Friday launched military talks with Russia on the four-year-old conflict that has cost more than 240,000 lives.

French Defence Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, meanwhile, arrived in the United Arab Emirates on Sunday, days after he said France would also launch air strikes against IS in Syria "in the coming weeks".

On the ground, a new ceasefire went into effect on Sunday between pro-government forces and Islamist rebels in three battleground districts, a local official and the Britain-based Observatory said.

The truce covers the two remaining villages in Idlib province in the northwest still in government hands and the rebels' last stronghold near the Lebanese border, the town of Zabadani.

"The truce in Zabadani, Fuaa and Kafraya which began at noon (0900 GMT) has held except for some sporadic fire on Fuaa in the afternoon," said Abdel Rahman.

Sunday's ceasefire is the third attempt to halt fighting in the three areas. A ceasefire last month lasted only 48 hours.

RETURN TO TOP

8. Ceasefire returns to three Syria battlegrounds – monitor

Agence France-Presse, Sept. 20 | Maya Gebeily

A new ceasefire went into effect on Sunday between Syrian pro-government forces and Islamist rebels in three battleground districts, a local official and a monitoring group said.

The truce covers the two remaining villages in Idlib province in the northwest still in government hands and the rebels' last stronghold near the Lebanese border, the town of Zabadani.

"The truce in Zabadani, Fuaa and Kafraya which began at noon (0900 GMT) has held except for some sporadic fire on Fuaa in the afternoon," said Rami Abdel Rahman, head of the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights.

He said sniper fire on Fuaa from the neighbouring village of Binesh killed one government fighter and wounded three, sparking a brief exchange of fire before calm returned.

Abdel Rahman said the agreement "did not specify an end for the ceasefire" and that the rival sides would continue negotiations for a broader truce.

A member of Zabadani town council, which has been involved in the talks, confirmed that negotiators had set no end date.

Pro-government forces launched an offensive to try to recapture Zabadani in July, prompting a rebel alliance, including Sunni Muslim extremists of Al-Qaeda, to besiege the Idlib villages of Fuaa and Kafraya, whose residents are Shiites.

A resident of the town of Madaya, adjacent to Zabadani, told AFP the situation there was "completely calm".

The ceasefire comes after the rebels launched one of their fiercest attacks to date on Fuaa and Kafraya.

The assault began on Friday with at least nine car bombs against the outskirts of the two villages -- seven of them detonated by suicide bombers.

At least 66 rebels, 40 pro-government militiamen and seven civilians were killed in the latest assault, according to the Observatory.

Sunday's ceasefire is the third attempt to agree a truce for the three areas. A ceasefire last month lasted only 48 hours.

Stumbling blocks have included the withdrawal of all rebels from Zabadani, safe passage for civilians seeking to leave Fuaa and Kafraya, and food and medical aid for those who stay on.

Elsewhere in Syria, at least five children were among 14 people killed by rebel fire on a government-held area of the northern city of Aleppo, the Observatory and state media reported.

RETURN TO TOP

9. Rebels see tougher war with Russians in Syria, evoke Afghanistan

Reuters (Insight), Sept. 21 | Suleiman al-Khalidi and Tom Perry

AMMAN/BEIRUT -- Rebels who have inflicted big losses on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad say Russia's intervention in support of its ally will only lead to an escalation of the war and may encourage the rebels' Gulf Arab backers to pour in more military aid.

Russia's deployment is prompting a reassessment of the conflict among insurgents whose advances in western Syria in recent months may have been the catalyst for Russia's decision. U.S. officials say Russian forces are already arriving.

Rebels interviewed by Reuters say they have already encountered stronger government resistance in those areas - notably the coastal heartland of Assad's Alawite sect - and now predict an even tougher war with Russian involvement.

Some see an opportunity in the Russian deployment, predicting more military aid from states such as Saudi Arabia. That signals one of the risks of Russian involvement: a spiral of deepening foreign interference in a conflict already complicated by a regional struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Hoping to galvanise more support, rebels are evoking the Soviet failure in Afghanistan as a model for their struggle, and depicting Russia as a new occupier. But they also say this means the war, already in its fifth year, will go on even longer.

"It is in our calculations that the battle will now extend for more years than it would have without the Russians," said Abu Yousef al-Mouhajer, a rebel fighting in the Latakia area where Russian forces have deployed at an airfield.

"The Russian intervention has come to save the regime," said the fighter with the Ahrar al-Sham group, part of an alliance that has advanced in the Assad-held west. Like other rebels interviewed for this article, he spoke via the internet.

U.S. officials say Russia is undertaking a significant military buildup at the airfield, including fighter jets, helicopter gunships, artillery and as many as 500 naval infantry.

While Russia has not been specific about its goals - saying its support for Damascus aims to fight terrorism - rebels in the west believe their area of operations is the priority because it poses the biggest immediate risk to Assad.

Russia operates its only naval facility on the Mediterranean in the Syrian city of Tartous near Latakia.

Islamic State, while a growing danger, is seen as a lesser threat to Assad for now, though it also seems likely to be hit.

The insurgents fighting near the coast include the Nusra Front, al Qaeda's Syrian wing, 30 percent of whose fighters are foreign jihadists inspired by the aim of battling the Alawite-led government. They include Russians, Asians and Chechens, the Nusra Front leader said in an interview earlier this year.

Moscow has said its military support for Damascus is aimed at fighting terrorism, safeguarding Syria's statehood and preventing a "total catastrophe" in the region.

It has sent greater quantities and new types of weapons to a Syrian army which has been suffering a manpower problem.

The support adds to the foreign backing Assad has already received from Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, which has been fighting alongside the army for several years. Iran has mobilised Iraqi and Afghani militias to support the government.

"MORE FEROCIOUS"

The rebels, better armed and organised, have challenged Assad like never before in both the northwest and southwest this year, with support from governments including Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. They all want Assad gone from power.

Recent gains have brought the rebels into the Ghab Plain, just east of the Alawite mountains that overlook the coast.

Rebels there report tougher resistance from government troops even before the news of the Russian deployment.

"Today we have a new type of soldier that is fighting us with more ferociousness and professionalism," said al-Mouhajer.

"The battle has changed: it's now in their Alawite home."

Another rebel said: "The more progress we make towards the coast, the more ferocious they are in battle."

Some fighters say there is no sign of increased Russian support yet. Others report more accurate air strikes and the appearance of new types of armoured vehicles.

A Syrian military source told Reuters last week the army has started using new types of weapons supplied by Russia.

"The information we have is that Russia has taken on the task of protecting the coast and it is leading the battles we are now fighting near Joreen," said a Nusra Front commander who was using his nom de guerre, Abu Anas al-Lathkani.

Joreen is a government-held town overlooking the Ghab Plain, and home to an army base. "The Russian presence will change the nature of the battle. The pace of our advances will become slightly more difficult," al-Lathkani said.

"ANOTHER AFGHANISTAN"

Damascus, an ally of Moscow since Soviet times, says it will request Russian troops to fight alongside its own if the need arises. It has denied the presence of Russian combat troops on the ground now. But Lebanese sources familiar with the political and military situation have said Russians have already taken part in military operations.

There are already signs of a rebel response.

Jaish al-Islam, one of the bigger rebel groups, has posted a video said to show a missile attack on the Latakia airfield being used by the Russians. Jaish al-Islam, widely believed to be Saudi-backed, has also launched new attacks near Damascus. Other rebels have escalated attacks in Idlib province and in Aleppo.

Another rebel said the Russians risked "another Afghanistan where they would be sending troops who would return in coffins".

U.S. and Saudi support was crucial to the success of Afghani insurgents - the Mujahideen - against the Soviets in the 1980s.

But the United States, while supplying limited military support to some rebels, has shied away from larger backing for reasons including fears that weapons will go to extremists. Notably, requests for anti-aircraft missiles have been denied.

Notwithstanding U.S. caution, some rebels believe backers such as Saudi Arabia will be forced to increase their support.

"A serious Russian intervention in Syria - beyond the reports we are hearing - will represent a continuation of the struggle," said Abu Ghiath al-Shami, spokesman for Alwiyat Seif al-Sham, a "Free Syrian Army" rebel group in southern Syria.

"Russia has no aim for a political solution. It only wants the preservation of the Syrian regime. As for the states that support us, ... I think there will be a change in their attitude towards us, via support, or perhaps a political shift."

RETURN TO TOP

10. Called to Jihad from the Heartland

How a dozen young men from Minnesota were drawn into ISIL's campaign of terror

Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN), Sept. 20, Pg. A1 | Paul McEnroe, Abby Simons and Libor Jany

The FBI finally came for Guled Omar on a Sunday morning.

A squad of agents crashed through the front door of the house on Columbus Avenue in south Minneapolis, raced up the stairs and burst into the room where the 20-year-old Omar slept. Guns drawn, they screamed for his phone, demanding that he give it up before he could alert his friends.

Similar, carefully choreographed arrests played out across the Twin Cities and in San Diego that day in April. By day's end, Omar and five other young Somali-American men from the Twin Cities were in jail, and Minnesota and its Somali community once again found themselves in the international terrorism spotlight.

No state in the country has provided more fresh young recruits to violent jihadist groups like Al-Shabab and, more recently, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Over the last decade, dozens of mostly young men have abandoned the relative comfort and security of life in the Twin Cities to fight and, in many instances, die, in faraway lands.

While the April arrests marked a major victory in federal efforts to slow the exodus of local men abroad, its impact on the families and the Twin Cities Somali-American community — the largest in the U.S. — has been profound. The FBI tried for years to convince some of the men to become government informants, and agents often followed them to and from work and school.

That sense of living under constant suspicion and surveillance can be corrosive, said Sadik Warfa, a community activist who has worked closely with the families of the defendants.

"It scared the community," Warfa said. "It is in our best interests to work with law enforcement and to build that trust, and all the trust we have been building over the years was shattered."

The case, with hours of secretly recorded transcripts and, now, heartfelt courtroom confessions, exposes how powerful the draw of jihad remains for a generation that has spent most, if not all, of its life in the United States. And it shows how difficult it is to stop.

Even as agents began tracking the activities of Omar and his friends, at least three of them slipped out of the country and made their way to Syria. Two are now reported to be dead.

Omar might have made it, too, but he and the others placed their trust in a charismatic friend from California who — in order to save himself — chose to betray them. Paid tens of thousands of dollars by the FBI, Abdirahman Bashiir would become a key witness in the case against them.

They called him "Cali."

Circle of friends

Cali was 17 and had just finished his junior year of high school when, in 2012, his father picked up the family and moved from San Diego to the Twin Cities.

Parents of his friends recall him as a polite and respectful young man who would, after playing basketball, change into the flowing, calf-length robes that devout Islamic men often wore to mosque.

Around his friends, the devoted Boston Celtics fan sported hoodies and baseball caps, shot videos of himself lip-syncing to hip-hop, and talked trash when playing video games.

Cali was a rail at 5 feet, 10 inches, 135 pounds.

On the basketball courts of Van Cleve Park and, later, at Heritage Academy of Science & Technology, Cali fell in with a group of young men who'd known each other much of their lives.

Omar, one of 13 siblings, had a keen interest in social issues, human rights, police brutality and religion. Friends said he became involved in community efforts to stem violence after a friend was gunned down in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood several years ago. An admirer of Malcolm X, Omar would tweet his disillusionment with white privilege.

He had other role models. His brother left in 2007 to fight for Al-Shabab, one of about two dozen Twin Cities recruits.

Omar was tight with two brothers, Mohamed and Adnan Farah, whom he met in elementary school on Minneapolis' North Side. Adnan, taller and younger, is friendly and gregarious, while the elder Mohamed, shorter and stockier, is more reserved and shy. The brothers were close, playing organized basketball and soccer through Somali youth leagues. They posed with wide smiles, their arms around one another, at Adnan's 2014 graduation from South High.

Mohamed, the oldest, took his six siblings to school, tutored them and did the family's shopping. He frequently asked his mother, Ayan, for a special prayer that he would become a schoolteacher.

Zacharia Abdurahman, a bookworm who loved geography, worked nights as a security guard at a battered women's shelter. After graduating from Heritage, he studied computer science at Minneapolis Community Technical College and landed a coveted programming internship at a hospital. His mother, a school bus driver, and father, an interpreter, are Sufis, a mystical branch of Islam that has been persecuted and suppressed across the Muslim world.

Hanad Musse described himself on social media as a "Servant of Allah." But his posts alternated between religious imagery and those of a typical young adult, sharing photos of a fresh new haircut or mugging for the camera with friends. Layla Ali, his mother, described how her son, raised in the United States, spent time living with her in Kenya, only to ask to return home to the Twin Cities.

"He said 'Mommy, I have to go back,' " she said in a recent interview. "I said why, and he said, 'Mommy, if I don't go back, I won't get a high school diploma. I have to go back.' "

Abdirahman Daud was the third-youngest of 12 children. Born at a refugee camp in Kenya, he arrived in the U.S. when he was 9. He didn't know the whereabouts of some of his siblings and was raised by his 34-year-old stepsister.

Jean Emmons, a youth program manager for Eastside Neighborhood Services, hired Daud as a teenage intern. For three years she watched him work in programs for Somali-American children. "He understood the value of education," she testified in court this summer. "He was a gifted athlete and in basketball games he walked away from conflict."

It wasn't long before these six young men adopted the new arrival, Cali, as one of their own. "Shout to my bro," Omar wrote in a tweet to Cali. "My long-lost twin."

Between two worlds

Their parents had fled the horrors of Somalia's civil war and eventually made their way to Minnesota.

The children often found themselves straddling two worlds — mainstream American society and their insular Muslim households. They didn't always feel welcome in either one.

When fights broke out between Somali and African-American students at Minneapolis' South High School in February 2013, Omar pleaded the case of Somali students before the assembled media.

"We're the minority here," he said. "Why are we being attacked?"

Abdurahman's father, Yusuf, recalled an incident from a year ago, when his son and his friends were spit on at a McDonald's in suburban Lakeville.

"They are angry and it grows on them, the way they feel they are treated," the father said. "People ask why these kids would think [of] what they're accused of. They are very angry from things like this."

For some, late-night basketball games were followed by trips to Denny's for suhoor, the traditional predawn meal eaten before fasting during the month of Ramadan.

At home, they spoke Somali and helped care for younger siblings; with friends they quoted rap lyrics, played video games and basketball, and offered up fervent musings on politics, Somalia and Islam.

Musse posted on his Facebook page several photos of lions — a symbol of jihad. When three Muslims were shot dead at the University of North Carolina in February 2014, Omar took to Twitter: "Can someone define the word Terrorism for me please. #MuslimLivesMatter."

And several of them knew someone who'd heeded the call to jihad.

Along with Omar's brother, Abdurahman's cousin was also recruited to Al-Shabab. Both are on the FBI's list of most wanted terrorists from Minnesota. Cali's family was connected to a controversial mosque in San Diego -— its imam was convicted of sending money to Al-Shabab and sentenced to 13 years in prison -— and his father was the target of an FBI criminal investigation that landed him briefly on the no-fly list.

Under pressure

It's unclear just how long and how closely the FBI was watching them.

Omar was in high school in 2012 when he was stopped at the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport as he tried to board a flight to Kenya. He checked no baggage and had only a carry-on gym bag packed with an iPad, a few shirts and extra shoes. He told authorities he was going to his uncle's wedding. Later, the then-17-year-old told FBI agents he was going to his own wedding arranged by two uncles.

Daud was interviewed by the FBI in January 2013 and again that December, the same day he answered questions before a federal grand jury.

In 2013, the U.S. attorney subpoenaed his Yahoo e-mail account. The next year, a relative's T-Mobile account was also subpoenaed.

"Throughout 2013 and 2014, the FBI showed a photo of Abdirahman Daud to numerous individuals in the Somali community who were interviewed by the FBI," a recent court filing by his attorney said.

Families said the FBI has long been pressuring their children to become confidential informants.

Daud's stepsister said the FBI approached her and her brother two years ago, asking them to cooperate as informants. They declined. "Our religion does not allow us to harm anyone," Farhiyo Mohamed recalled. She said she told agents, "If there's any concern that you have about us, tell us."

Ayan Farah said that after agents failed to recruit her son Mohamed as an informant, her family felt harassed. For months, agents followed her sons, parking outside their Minneapolis home, following them to school, she said.

Omar's family also felt the pressure. Hodan Omar listened through the thin walls of her mother's bedroom as federal agents alternated between pressure and promises to her younger brother.

She said it was one of several times the FBI tried to persuade him to become a confidential informant. They wanted information, she said, and were willing to pay for it in cars, cash and financial stability.

"They offered them all of these things that were like, unimaginable; tell them that their families would live a good life only if they worked for them," Hodan Omar said. "My brother was denying that he knew anything about it. … I guess that's when they decided that they would just follow him."

The FBI was scrambling, setting up surveillance operations across the metro area. At least a dozen of the agents involved in "Operation Rhino" — the office's counterterrorism efforts against Al-Shabab — now found themselves investigating this new group of men seemingly bent on getting to Syria.

Expectations were high. The Minneapolis office is in daily contact with FBI headquarters and high-level officials in the U.S. Department of Justice who track terror investigations.

Local FBI agents knew that if they had any hopes of disrupting a Minnesota-Syria pipeline, they needed to penetrate an already-wary Somali community. They needed an inside man, but this group of friends was tight.

Meeting, planning

Guled Omar was deeply affected by the conflict in Syria, often posting on Facebook about the atrocities committed by the forces of Syrian President Bashar Assad. In December 2013, Omar posted a photo of a young boy lying in the road, a rock as his pillow. "May Allah show mercy to the people of [Syria], and the rest of the [Muslim community]. I can care less about anyone else my own people are in such distress."

Months later, Omar and his friends decided it was time to act.

In the spring of 2014, they began meeting to discuss how to leave the country unnoticed, and how to pay for their travel. They pumped themselves up by watching violent jihadi videos and ISIL propaganda and followed known ISIL fighters on Twitter.

The meetings included Abdullahi Yusuf, a skilled basketball player known as "Bones." There was also Abdi Nur, Musse's cousin, whom they called "Curry."

Omar introduced Hamza Ahmed to the group and told them to make him feel welcome. Daud told the guys to download a messaging app that "the Feds don't know about."

Also at the meetings was Cali's cousin Hanad Mohallim, another San Diego transplant. He was the first to go.

Mohallim was soft-spoken and thoughtful and appeared to be on the right path until he moved to Minneapolis, family friends said. In videos posted on social media, he joked about "life in the projects" of Apple Valley.

"Just another day in the life of a gangsta in the hood for me …" Mohallim says to the camera.

In March 2014, Cali drove his cousin to the Twin Cities airport, where he boarded a flight for Turkey. From there, he made his way to Syria, along with three of his cousins from Edmonton, Alberta.

The FBI didn't know it, but another plot was unfolding.

A lucky break

The following month, Yusuf applied for an expedited passport in Minneapolis. He said he was going to visit a friend in Istanbul whom he met on Facebook. He avoided eye contact and was clearly nervous, and he aroused a clerk's suspicion by what he couldn't say.

He didn't know where he would be staying. He couldn't give a name or address of his new friend.

After Yusuf left, the clerk called the FBI. Soon, surveillance teams began tracking him. They looked on as he picked up his new passport. A month later, he deposited $1,500 into his bank account. The next day he bought a plane ticket to Istanbul with the money. The source of the cash remains unknown.

On May 28, Yusuf's father dropped him off at Heritage, but he left the school an hour later and walked to a nearby mosque. A blue Jetta picked him up and dropped him at a light-rail station less than 5 miles from the airport. He took the train the rest of the way.

Agents stopped him after he passed through security. They asked whom he planned to visit.

Nobody, he replied. But, according to court documents, he carried phone numbers for contacting members of ISIL once in Syria. The agents let him go, and he went home.

Agents began tracking the blue Jetta that had dropped off Yusuf at the station. They learned that, a week earlier, the car had been involved in an accident. The driver was Nur. But by the time agents knew his name, it was too late. A day after Yusuf was stopped, Nur boarded a flight for Istanbul.

"I Thank Allah For Everything No Matter What!" he posted to his Twitter account the day he left.

A week later, he called family to say he had reached his destination and would no longer be in touch. It was a Turkish phone number. He later texted his sister through Kik, an online messaging app. "You can't come looking for me its too late for that. we will see other in afterlife inshallah."

The sister, Ifrah Mohamed Nur, walked into the Fifth Precinct police station to report her brother missing, then later went to see the Farah brothers. They couldn't tell her what happened to her brother or they would all face harm, they said. The tickets just show up, and nobody knew when.

Once overseas, Nur rallied his friends to join the cause, even offering to provide contacts for fake passports.

Another gone

That same month, Omar, Cali and another friend, Yusuf Jama, planned their own route to Syria. They would travel to San Diego before heading south to Mexico and on to the Mideast. At least four men from the Twin Cities had used Mexico as their jumping-off point to Somalia in 2009. To pay for his trip, Omar took $5,000 out of his federal student loan account.

In late May, Omar loaded his gear into Jama's car for the drive to San Diego, but he was stopped by his family. The three men abandoned the plan and Omar redeposited the cash and returned to his job as a security guard.

Two weeks later, Jama — whose cousin had left the Twin Cities to fight in Somalia in 2012 — tried again, this time on his own. In early June he bought a round-trip airline ticket from JFK airport to Istanbul. After taking a Greyhound bus to New York, he was gone.

A little more than a week after he disappeared, Jama called home. He was using the same Turkish telephone number Nur had used.

"He called me, but he didn't tell me where is he," his mother, Alia Salim, tearfully recounted. "I don't know if it's Syria, I don't know if it was somewhere else, but he called me. He said, 'Mom, I left the country and I don't want to come back.' "

Months later, she got a call from her other son living in Somalia. Jama was dead, he told her.

From late May through mid-June, five men from the Twin Cities had tried to escape the country. Nur and Jama made it out. Omar and Cali were at a standstill and Yusuf was in law-enforcement limbo.

Getting ready

By the fall of 2014, Yusuf worried that he would soon be arrested. He and his friends accelerated attempts to leave.

They practiced warfare at a paintball park south of the Twin Cities.

Witnesses say some young men would speak of martyrs or scream "Allahu akbar" — Arabic for "God is Great" — as they fired at one another on the course.

Omar, later discussing the outings in a recorded conversation, said, "We was literally treating it like it was real war, bro."

After an Oct. 16 incident, in which paintball ammunition had gone missing, Musse and Abdurahman agreed to stay away from the park.

On Nov. 6, Abdurahman, Musse, Ahmed and Mohamed Farah hopped on a Greyhound bus to New York, ready to follow the route that had worked for Jama.

That same day, Omar tried to fly to San Diego, but the FBI stopped him at the airport. He again had no checked luggage and carried only his passport. He took to Twitter to vent.

"I committed no crime but I was denied my flight to California today this is because I am young Somali Muslim male!" he wrote. "I promise to take this to court!"

Privately, though, he urged Musse and the others to abort their plans to avoid getting caught.

"I said 'Hanad, please don't go. Please don't do this right now, don't do this …' " Omar would later recount in a recorded conversation. "He's like, 'Yo what the hell's your problem bro, you a punk man!' "

Once in New York, the other four booked flights for Nov. 8.

Farah and Ahmed planned to fly to Istanbul, with Farah going on to Bulgaria and Ahmed backtracking to Madrid. Abdurahman and Musse were bound for Athens, through Moscow. Ahmed was on the plane when authorities pulled him off just before takeoff.

"The truth is I really didn't know these people," Ahmed later told agents. But video from the bus station in Minneapolis showed Ahmed and Farah arriving in the same car. Records showed that the men exchanged hundreds of text messages and calls.

The four men were given letters from the U.S. attorney's office informing them that they were targets of a federal criminal investigation into terrorism offenses.

Later that month, Yusuf was arrested. Charges detailed how the FBI had been watching him since the passport application. But his friends remained determined to get away.

Betrayal

That fall Cali received word that his cousin Mohallim, whom he had driven to the airport, and three Canadian cousins were killed fighting in Syria.

One of those cousins was reportedly friends with Douglas McCain, a 33-year-old New Hope man who in August 2014 became the first American killed while fighting for ISIL in Syria. Records would later show that Cali had planned to ask McCain for help making his way into Syria.

It's not clear when Cali found himself jammed up by FBI agents and prosecutors, but at some point he lied to agents, then lied again to a federal grand jury.

By January of this year, Cali faced a choice: risk prison for lying and committing perjury, or cooperate with agents. He chose the latter. He was given a code name, "Rover." He was put on the FBI's payroll and agreed to wear a wire just as his friends were starting to worry about others turning them in. But they didn't suspect Cali.

In February, Ahmed was arrested and charged with lying to agents after the canceled JFK flights. The same month, Yusuf pleaded guilty.

Omar worried what Yusuf might say. Yusuf "told them there are meetings," Omar said. "That's the worst thing. I was mad as hell."

Musse worried about Ahmed: "If he gives a deal right now, we can get locked up the next day."

Still, they planned. "Nobody is stopping me from that border," Omar said. "Any [one] tries to touch me, bro, I swear it's a fight. … I'm going to shoot them."

In a separate conversation, Mohamed Farah told Cali he was prepared to kill an FBI agent.

"If our backs are against the wall, I'm gonna go kill the one who punks me," Farah said.

When Cali said he could get fake passports for the group, Daud gave him a photograph and a down payment. Daud would drive them to San Diego, where he'd sell his car.

As the plans to travel to Mexico via California firmed up, Daud's hopes were buoyed. "This is the perfect time … this shows Allah I'm not about this life," he told Cali. "We just need to execute."

Abdurahman exuded equal confidence in a March phone call to Nur, their friend who made it to Syria. "We're not too far bro, we gonna be with you, bro. Soon."

But as the time to leave approached, Abdurahman backed out, asking for his passport photo back. Musse did, too, after his father learned of his plans.

Three would go to San Diego: Daud, Mohamed Farah and Cali.

In the hours before they left, Daud spoke with an ISIL member in Syria who gave him detailed instructions on how to sneak into the country once they made it to Turkey. They left Minneapolis the evening of April 17.

"I'm going to spit on America at the border crossing," Daud said.

"Even if I'm caught, I'm done with America," Farah said. "Burn my I.D."

They talked about what they'd do when they made it to Syria, even naming two FBI agents in the investigation. Farah said he would send the agents a Twitter message asking, "What up suckas?"

Within two days, they picked up their fake passports in San Diego and were arrested.

Soon after, agents in Minneapolis splintered the door at Omar's home.

Friends don't call

After a summer of pleading innocence, some of the men are starting to turn. Musse and Abdurahman changed their pleas to guilty this month. They face up to 15 years in prison and have named their friends in court as co-conspirators.

On Thursday, Yusuf Abdurahman looked on as his son, dressed in a navy jail jumpsuit and sneakers, spent nearly an hour entering a guilty plea before U.S. District Judge Michael Davis. Tears welled in Yusuf's eyes as his son described how he began reading the Qur'an with his father as a boy, and that devout Muslim faith drove his longing to fight alongside ISIL terrorists. As court adjourned, both father and son stood up. Zacharia looked over his shoulder at his family, nodded and gave a slight smile.

Others are refusing to negotiate and a February trial is scheduled. Defendants and their attorneys declined to comment.

Abdullahi Yusuf, who has been cooperating with authorities, was allowed to live in a halfway house and undergo deradicalization in lieu of prison time, but has since returned to jail for violating his probation after a boxcutter was found in his room.

Cali remains under FBI protection. He's been paid more than $41,000 to date. His family declined to comment.

He was seen around San Diego in the past few months, attending Ramadan prayers at a mosque in the City Heights neighborhood, an ethnically diverse enclave that is home to many of the city's 10,000 Somali immigrants. Residents there say his family was forced to temporarily move back to San Diego to escape the cold stares from former friends and even relatives who accused him of betraying his community.

Ikraan Abdurahman, Zacharia's 17-year-old sister, has a difficult time reconciling the brother depicted in court documents with the one she knows: a peaceful, quiet, hardworking young man who, in many ways, had a typical American upbringing. There was summer camp in Maple Plain. Camping and horseback riding in state parks.

"He's as 'American' as it gets," she said. Her family and the others have felt isolated since the arrests, she said. "Somali people are afraid. They don't call us as much as they used to. There is a fear that the FBI will be listening to the call."

Throughout the summer, Andrew Luger, the U.S. attorney for Minnesota, tried to explain to the Somali community that none of the defendants were entrapped by the informant in the course of the 10-month investigation. "This was their choice," he said.

The same day that Musse pleaded guilty this month, Luger announced nearly $1 million in public and private funding for programs to help counter extremism in the Somali community. Some local Somali leaders reacted with suspicion, saying the programs are just another way for the government to spy on their people.

And despite bringing down this conspiracy, federal authorities acknowledge that terror groups are still actively recruiting in the Twin Cities. Community leaders say federal authorities have told them at least 100 local young men are in the extremist recruiting pipeline, a figure Luger denies.

Abdisalam Adam, a local imam who sits on the task force working with Luger on the new programs, acknowledged that with each arrest, pain and surprise continue to reverberate through the Twin Cities Somali community. People worry at times whether they, too, will be labeled as terrorists. But he, like others, is pragmatic.

"My sense is this is something the government has to do."

At midday last week, the shades were drawn in the living room of the Farah home in north Minneapolis. The parents, Abdi and Ayan, thought aloud about the fate of their eldest sons, while two of their youngest boys eavesdropped. They said Adnan and Mohamed were offered deals by the government — plead guilty in exchange for up to 15 years in prison for Adnan, perhaps longer for Mohamed.

Abdi took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. It was too much time behind bars, and they were far too young. So far, they were rejecting any offers, he said.

"We're taking it to trial for both of them."

RETURN TO TOP

MIDEAST

11. Leader says Yemen's Houthis to fight on, but political settlement possible

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Mohammed Ghobari

SANAA - The leader of Yemen's Houthis said on Sunday his group remained open for a political settlement to end nearly six months of fighting but would resist what he called Saudi-led aggression.

In his first televised speech since an Arab alliance led by Saudi Arabia began military operations in Yemen, Abdel-Malek al-Houthi also called on Yemenis to demonstrate in Sanaa on Monday afternoon to mark the anniversary of his group's capture of the capital.

"We call on our people, all strata of our people, to maintain their moves to confront this criminal aggression," Abdel-Malek said, adding that "political solutions were still possible".

More than 4,500 Yemeni have been killed since the Saudi-led alliance began military operations in March, in what they said was an attempt to stop the Iranian-allied Houthi group from expanding in Yemen and to restore President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi, who had been pushed into exile in Saudi Arabia.

A delegation from the group, which belongs to Yemen's Zaydi sect of Shi'ite Islam, flew to the Omani capital Muscat earlier on Sunday for talks with the United Nations special envoy to Yemen, Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, on efforts to reach a deal.

The United Nations last week announced peace talks in the region, but Hadi's administration said it demanded the Houthis first publicly accept a U.N. Security Council resolution calling on the group to quit cities it seized since last year and allow the government to return to Sanaa.

Abdel-Malek also accused Saudi Arabia of barring most Yemeni pilgrims from travelling to the kingdom to perform the annual haj pilgrimage, which starts this week.

RETURN TO TOP

12. U.N. Atomic Inspectors Visit Iran's Parchin Site

Yukiya Amano to meet with high level Iranian officials as part of past nuclear work probe

Wall Street Journal Online, Sept. 20 | Laurence Norman

The head of the United Nations atomic agency and a senior official from the organization have visited Iran's controversial Parchin military site, ending a period of almost a decade during which officials were banned from the site.

In a statement Sunday, the International Atomic Energy Agency said that its director-general, Yukiya Amano, and its head of safeguards, Tero Varjoranta, were at Parchin as part of the probe into Iran's past nuclear work.

Mr. Amano also met during his weekend trip to Tehran with Iranian President Hasan Rouhani, the head of Iran's atomic agency, Ali Akbar Salehi, Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Iranian lawmakers.

“Discussions with high-level Iranian officials focused on the continued implementation of the road map to resolve all past and present outstanding issues," the IAEA said in a statement, referring to Iran's past and present nuclear work.

The IAEA has long been denied access to Parchin, a military site where Iran is alleged in the early 2000s to have conducted tests on explosives that could be used to build a nuclear weapon.

Iran says that its nuclear program has always been purely peaceful and that evidence that it may have worked on nuclear-weapons technology in the past has been forged.

Under an agreement between Iran and the agency in July, it was agreed that Mr. Amano would be able to visit Parchin.

However, critics of that agreement have said that is not nearly enough access for the IAEA to get a real understanding of the work Iran did at Parchin. It remains unclear if a bigger team of IAEA officials will get access to Parchin during the agency's five-month probe into Iran's past nuclear activities.

Iran must cooperate with the investigation in order to get sanctions on the country lifted as part of a broader nuclear agreement between Iran and six major powers.

The IAEA said it wouldn't give any further details Sunday. Mr. Amano is to meet with the agency's board of governors on Monday.

Iran's official Islamic Republic News Agency reported that Mr. Amano had made a “protocol" visit to the Parchin site as a guest of the Islamic Republic. Behrouz Kamalvandi, a spokesman for the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, said he visited workshops at the site that were the subject of “baseless claims." He didn't elaborate on the nature of those claims.

--Asa Fitch contributed to this article

RETURN TO TOP

13. Iran's Rouhani says U.S.-Iran enmity eased, but distrust will remain
Reuters, Sept. 20 | Warren Strobel

WASHINGTON - Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said in an interview with a U.S. television network that aired on Sunday that Tehran and Washington "have taken the first steps" toward decreasing their enmity due to a landmark nuclear accord.

But Rouhani told CBS' "60 Minutes" program that despite the nuclear agreement, "the distance, the disagreements, the lack of trust, will not go away soon."

The United States and Iran have been at odds since Iran's 1979 Islamic revolution. Deep differences remain over Middle East conflicts, as well as what Washington sees as Iran's support for terrorism and poor human rights record.

"What's important is which direction we are heading?" Rouhani added. "Are we heading towards amplifying the enmity or decreasing this enmity? I believe we have taken the first steps towards decreasing this enmity."

The nuclear accord reached in July between Iran and six world powers eases crippling sanctions on Iran in return for limits on its nuclear work.

The accord's opponents in the U.S. Congress were unable to muster the votes to block it by last week's legislative deadline for action.

Rouhani, who was interviewed in Tehran, expressed confidence that Iran's parliament and Supreme National Security Council would likewise approve the accord.

"The majority of our people, in opinion polls, have a positive view of the agreement," he said. "Institutions like the parliament and the Supreme National Security Council, are usually not far removed from public opinion and move in that direction."

The powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, some of whose members have publicly criticized the deal, "will respect this agreement" once Iran approves it, Rouhani predicted.

The Iranian president, expected to travel to the United States next week for the U.N. General Assembly, suggested he would not oppose some sort of U.S.-Iran prisoner swap.

Iran is holding several Americans, including Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian, who has dual U.S. and Iranian citizenship. Iranian officials have said they want freedom for Iranians held in the United States, some of whom have been jailed on charges of circumventing U.S. sanctions on Tehran.

Asked if he would support a prisoner exchange, Rouhani told CBS: "I don't particularly like the word exchange, but from a humanitarian perspective, if we can take a step, we must do it. The American side must take its own steps."

In the Syrian conflict, Iran has backed President Bashar al-Assad, and Rouhani said Assad should stay in power at least until Islamic State militants are defeated. "How can we fight the terrorists without the government staying?" he asked.

The weekly chant of "Death to America" in Iran "is not a slogan against the American people," Rouhani added.

"The policies of the United States have been against the national interests of Iranian people," he said. "We cannot forget the past, but at the same time our gaze must be towards the future."

RETURN TO TOP

14. Israel Raises Syria Concerns
Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A7 | Joel Greenberg

JERUSALEM -- Israel joined the U.S. in expressing concerns about Russia's military buildup in Syria ahead of a planned meeting in Moscow on Monday between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Israeli officials said.

"Once we understand exactly what Russia intends to do in the arena and exactly what it plans to move into it, whether infantry or air forces, or others. . .we'll know what needs to be done," Yossi Cohen, Mr. Netanyahu's national security adviser, told Israel Radio on Friday.

He said senior Israeli army officers would be part of the delegation to Moscow.

The Israeli government has sought to avoid taking sides in the Syrian conflict, saying it is solely concerned with the effect of the fighting on Israel's security.

Israeli officials have repeatedly voiced concern that advanced Russian weapons supplied to Syria could end up in the hands of militant groups involved in the fighting there.

Israel conducts routine surveillance missions over Lebanon to monitor the activities of Iran-backed Hezbollah, which along with Russia supports President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

Mr. Cohen added that the Israeli team wanted "to clarify with the Russian side their intentions and possible implications for Israel, and the required coordination between us in the future, should it be necessary."

In a major military escalation in the region, Russia has moved jet fighters to a base in Syria for the first time, U.S. defense officials said on Friday. The deployment came hours before U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter spoke with his Russian counterpart, a conversation designed in part to help avert a confrontation between American and Russian forces.

In London on Saturday, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry also raised questions about Russia's intentions in Syria, and urged Moscow to help bring Mr. Assad to the table for serious negotiations about a political transition as world powers seek a solution to the crisis. Mr. Kerry added that the U.S. would accept a resolution to the Syrian war that allowed Mr. Assad to remain in place for a period before stepping down. Washington had insisted Mr. Assad should step down before a transition government takes over, leading to free and fair elections.

A U.S.-led coalition has been carrying out airstrikes against Islamic State in Syria and Iraq for a year. Like the U.S., Israel is worried the positioning of Russian fighter jets and surface-to-air missiles in Syria could lead to inadvertent confrontations with its own missions over Lebanon and Syria, where Israel enjoys overwhelming air superiority.

Israeli aircraft have also bombed targets in Syria described as stockpiles or convoys of advanced weapons, including sophisticated Russian-made surface-to-air missiles thought to have been be destined for Hezbollah in

Lebanon. Israeli officials have described the advanced antiaircraft systems as "game-changing" because they would challenge Israel's air superiority in the region.

An announcement last week of Mr. Netanyahu's visit to Moscow said he would raise "the threats posed to Israel by the increased flow of advanced war materiel to the Syrian arena, and the transfer of deadly weapons to Hezbollah and other terror organizations."

Along with combat aircraft and an air-defense system, the Russian buildup at a base near Latakia, Syria, has included tanks, armored personnel carriers and artillery, American officials said. Russian officials have described the buildup as defensive and part of Moscow's routine military support for the Syrian government.

Israeli forces have on several occasions struck Syrian army positions near the Israeli-held Golan Heights after rockets fired by militants and errant shells from the fighting in Syria have landed in Israeli-controlled territory.

Hundreds of Syrians wounded in fighting between rebels and government forces have been taken to Israel for treatment, in what has been described as a purely humanitarian effort.

--Jenny Gross in London contributed to this article

RETURN TO TOP

ASIA/PACIFIC

15. China's leader ready for the pomp

Appearances will be key to Xi during a U.S. visit also filled with tension over security and economic issues.

Los Angeles Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Julie Makinen, David S. Cloud and Paul Richter

Chinese President Xi Jinping is embarking on his first state visit to the United States this week amid economic and security tensions that many experts describe as the most serious in a decade.

Arriving in Seattle on Tuesday, he'll glad-hand with titans of industry like Warren Buffett, Apple's Tim Cook and Disney's Bob Iger. In Washington, he'll receive a 21-gun salute on the White House lawn and have a formal dinner with President Obama. In New York, he'll deliver a speech at the United Nations.

For Xi, the optics of those appearances -- and the opportunity to make personal connections with America's business and political leaders -- are key.

But bubbling beneath the surface of Xi's visit will be mounting friction over cyberattacks, as well as military issues, territorial claims, economic reforms and human rights concerns. These sore points have risen into public view in the weeks leading up to the summit, lowering expectations for any major breakthroughs on issues of substance.

Facing a slowing economy and in the midst of a contentious campaign to root out corruption in the Communist Party, Xi is keenly interested in using the summit to showcase himself as a strong leader, and having Chinese citizens perceive the summit as a harmonious meeting between equals. Chinese officials are closely focused on minute details of what kind of video and photo coverage the trip will generate for audiences at home.

"The pomp in this is going to be every bit as important as the substance," said Christopher Johnson, a China specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

What the Obama administration will be able to point to as a win, though, remains to be seen. Concern has been mounting on Capitol Hill about computer hacks blamed on China; American business groups are making noisy complaints about what they see as threatening and unfair Chinese policies; and some GOP presidential contenders have even called for the president to downgrade or even scrap Xi's visit.

U.S. officials are hoping they will get a public pledge from Xi that China will help hold Tehran to its commitments in the Iran nuclear deal. The Obama administration is eager for such a public endorsement at a moment when critics of the agreement are predicting that Beijing and other countries will cut corners on the deal in their eagerness to start buying more oil from Iran and doing more business with the nation.

"This would be validation from an important partner on the deal," said Johnson.

Obama and Xi are also expected to say they are cooperating on stabilizing the world economy and markets at a jittery moment -- a statement that would be welcomed by foreign leaders and investors. The two leaders will discuss the Bilateral Investment Treaty that's been under negotiation for years. Those talks have bogged down, with American business leaders complaining that China has yet to sufficiently pare its "negative list" of the economic sectors that will be off-limits to American involvement.

"There's probably not much to talk about on the treaty," said Kenneth Lieberthal, a China specialist at Brookings Institution.

U.S. officials warned that China's rapid military modernization is aimed at projecting power in East Asia and at raising the risks the United States faces if it intervenes in maritime hot spots, such as the South China Sea or the Taiwan Strait, where Beijing has long-standing territorial claims. Chinese officials say Xi will raise the issue of Taiwan in his talks with Obama.

"China is incrementally and unilaterally changing the status quo through coercion, intimidation, even force," said Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Armed Services Committee, at a hearing Thursday. "Its goal appears clear: the assertion of sovereignty over the South China Sea."

Beijing has spent the last two years building large artificial islands on once-tiny reefs and rock outcroppings in the South China Sea and is now building airstrips and other facilities on the islands, apparently to use as military outposts.

For now, U.S. officials believe they can pressure China to scale back its island-building by galvanizing other Asian governments against it. In recent months, the U.S. has encouraged Japan to begin naval patrols in the South China Sea, where it doesn't normally sail, and provided ships and other equipment to the Philippine and Vietnamese coast guards.

The biggest cloud hanging over the summit, however, has been the issue of espionage and other Chinese cyberattacks. U.S. intelligence officials have linked China's security services to the theft of medical data from health insurance giant Anthem and travel records stolen from United Airlines. Those breaches, officials believe, were conducted by Chinese criminal hackers on behalf of the Chinese government. In addition, China is believed to

have orchestrated the cyberlooting of security clearance files and personnel records from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management.

After news reports broke this month that the White House was drafting sanctions against Chinese businesses and individuals for hacking, China hastily dispatched a senior official, Meng Jianzhu, to Washington to head off the possibility of an embarrassing announcement in the days before Xi's visit.

Meng held four days of meetings with FBI Director James B. Comey, Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson and national security advisor Susan Rice. The meetings took on an especially urgent tone as Meng prepared to depart. U.S. and Chinese staff worked together in a Washington hotel until 4 a.m. on Sept. 12, hammering out an agreement aimed at forestalling sanctions in exchange for Chinese promises to cooperate more in investigations of cyberattacks.

The negotiators tentatively settled on the outlines of four areas of agreement, that, if adopted, would for the first time establish rules of the road for the two countries on cyberattacks and how they can cooperate when there are investigations of misconduct in cyberspace. Two U.S. officials described the negotiations on condition of anonymity in discussing the closed-door deliberations, but would not reveal the details of the agreement. The late-night haggling session could form the basis for an announcement on cybersecurity cooperation during Xi's visit, if both sides agree to make it public.

But some U.S. officials are concerned that China won't follow through with its promises after Xi's visit, leaving open the possibility that sanctions could be imposed later.

On Wednesday, Obama took a tough stance, warning that the U.S. would take action if attacks con- tinue.

"We are preparing a number of measures that will indicate to the Chinese that this is not just a matter of us being mildly upset, but is something that will put significant strains on the bilateral relationship if not resolved," Obama told executives at the Business Roundtable group in Washington.

"We are prepared to take some countervailing actions in order to get their attention," he said. "My hope is that it gets resolved short of that."

If the U.S. goes forward with sanctions against Chinese businesses and individuals, it would be the first use of a presidential order signed in April giving the U.S. Treasury authority to freeze bank accounts and property of individuals and foreign entities that engage in commercial espionage online or destructive cyberattacks. The sanctions would also prohibit U.S. companies from doing business with listed individuals and entities.

Beyond computer hacking, Obama is expected to challenge Xi on China's recently adopted and proposed laws dealing with its national security and limiting the activities of foreign nongovernmental organizations.

The NGO regulations could limit the operations of U.S. universities that have a presence in China, as well as other American nonprofit groups that work in areas including the environment, health and civil society. These groups -- supported, somewhat unusually, by U.S. business interests -- have applied significant pressure on the administration to speak out on the matter.

"Obama's probably going to address this very robustly," said Johnson of the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "It'll probably be a testy issue."

In a sign of some cooperation before the visit, the U.S. repatriated one of China's most-wanted fugitives, Yang Jinjun, who faces corruption charges.

Still, Clayton Dube, head of the U.S.-China Institute at USC, said he believes U.S.-China frictions are greater than they've been in the last 10 years.

"I think there's a very real set of issues that really defy easy resolution," he said. What makes the situation even more complicated, added Dube, is that economic and business relations -- which for years have served as a sort of ballast in the relationship -- have also gotten rockier.

"You've got the business community -- which was previously lobbying for the U.S. government to tread lightly, to facilitate greater exchange to not get in the way -- now it's asking the U.S. government to do what it can to alleviate issues and do what it can. When you have business communities mobilizing on things like proposed NGO law, that's unusual," he said.

"When you have so much concern about difficulty protecting one's network, IP, trade practices or negotiating secrets, when there's this much worrying going on, it really speaks to a new era in U.S.-China relations."

--Makinen reported from Beijing and Cloud and Richter from Washington. Times staff writer Brian Bennett in Washington contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

16. Japan Takes Aim at Military Costs
Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A8 | Eric Pfanner and Chieko Tsuneoka

TOKYO -- Now that Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has secured legislative approval to broaden the role of Japan's Self-Defense Forces, the government is taking aim at the high cost of arming them.

New laws, which Mr. Abe's governing coalition pushed through parliament over the weekend, permit the government to provide limited military aid to allies overseas for the first time since World War II.

The laws are part of a more muscular stance that includes a move last year to lift restrictions on exports of Japanese-made weaponry.

A new military procurement agency, whose goal is to shake up the industry and make it more competitive, starts work in October.

Weapons makers seem reluctant to change. "The Japanese defense industry needs to find a way to make cheaper stuff," said Jon Grevatt, an analyst at IHS Jane's. "But market forces in play in Japan haven't encouraged this."

Since World War II, the industry has reflected the modest ambitions of the officially pacifist military. Even under Mr. Abe, growth in military spending is running in the low single digits.

For Japanese military contractors, making weapons is a sideline, typically representing 10% or less of their overall business. Their sole arms customer has generally been Japan's defense forces because until last year, exports were banned with a few exceptions, such as technology partnerships with the U.S.

Japanese weapons makers like the current arrangement. Japan's annual military procurement budget of 1.3 trillion yen ($10.8 billion) is around one-tenth recent U.S. levels, so the work provides only modest profits and growth opportunities. But risks are limited, too.

Taxpayers, on the other hand, carry an added burden. A Japanese Type 90 tank costs about 800 million yen or $6.7 million, compared with $4 million to $5 million for a comparable M1A1 Abrams tank in the U.S.

The Defense Ministry's new Acquisition, Technology and Logistics Agency will oversee weapons deals, setting specifications, overseeing manufacturing and managing costs. Until now, separate units of the Self-Defense Forces created wish lists and the government wrote the checks.

The government wants overseas sales to provide more work for weapons builders -- thereby generating economies of scale, sustaining the industry in the global market and lowering Japan's procurement costs.

Japanese military contractors seem reluctant to commit significant resources to developing overseas business and unwilling to embrace the role of arms exporter in a country where Mr. Abe's policy shift drew protests.

"They are in a state of shock, but unless they overcome this barrier, they won't grow into a global, international industry," said Toru Hotchi, a Ministry of Defense official with responsibility for procurement.

Representatives of leading defense contractors referred questions to Keidanren, the Japanese business lobby.

Satoshi Tsuzukibashi, who coordinates defense policy at Keidanren, said weapon makers are holding back because of uncertainty over the rules.

The government plans to review potential export deals case-by-case and says it won't allow sales to countries that are involved in international conflicts or that plan to re-export the weapons.

Exports of sensitive technologies are also subject to special clearance.

"Japan is just responding to requests from foreign countries," Mr. Tsuzukibashi said. "The Japanese attitude is passive."

He said contractors want the agency to scrap what he called unfair contract terms, under which arms makers don't get to share in the benefits of cost cuts but have to absorb overruns.

Even with more clarity on exports, Japanese defense firms could struggle to compete against focused Western giants such as Lockheed Martin Corp., Northrop Grumman Corp., Boeing Co. or Airbus Group SE, whose military businesses were bolstered by a series of mergers that began in the 1990s.

A similar consolidation in Japan appears unlikely, in part because arms contractors are usually small parts of large conglomerates. Executives of Western defense firms say they are uninterested in takeovers because of high labor

costs and regulatory difficulties. And the creation of a larger Japanese contractor could alarm the country's neighbors.

A Ministry of Defense strategy paper last year stops short of recommending full-scale consolidation.

RETURN TO TOP

17. New look Australia cabinet features a first - female defence minister
Reuters, Sept. 21 | Matt Siegel

SYDNEY - Australia on Monday swore in its first female defence minister, Senator Marise Payne, who will oversee open-ended military engagements in two countries and some of the country's most important defence contracts in a generation.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull last week ousted long-time rival Tony Abbott as leader of their ruling Liberal Party, citing a chaotic management style and dismal poll numbers.

Turnbull's cabinet which was sworn in on Monday features five women, more than double the previous number.

In a symbolic break from the past, Turnbull jettisoned several ministers seen as close to aging former Liberal Party prime minister John Howard.

Payne, most recently human services minister and a former chair of parliament's foreign affairs, defence and trade committee, as well as its human rights subcommittee, replaces Kevin Andrews after less than a year in defence.

Defence has been a revolving door portfolio over the past five years and badly needs stability as it sets about reforming a bureaucratic procurement pipeline, said Andrew Davies, director of research at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Abbott centralised decision making in his office and locked his defence ministers out of major decisions such as choosing the A$50 billion ($35.80 billion) replacement for the Collins Class submarine fleet, Davies said.

"The good news for her is that the core business of the defence department, which is running military operations, seems to be going pretty well," he said.

"But it's the long lead time stuff. The getting approvals of major projects through and then managing them, I think that's where the major bureaucratic heartache is going to be."

The Royal Australian Air Force is taking part in the U.S.-led coalition campaign against Islamic State targets in Iraq and Syria. Australian troops are also helping to train Iraqi ground forces.

In August Abbott announced that two naval shipbuilding programmes, the A$20 billion SEA5000 Future Frigate project and the SEA1180 Offshore Patrol Vessels, would be brought forward to guarantee the continuous domestic construction of surface warships.

But the jewel in Australia's defence crown is the SEA1000 Future Submarine project, one of the world's most lucrative defence contracts and a thorny political topic.

Abbott and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe enjoyed a close relationship that saw Japan emerge as the early front runner for the programme, and his removal is seen as a setback for their bid.

Japan's reluctance to commit to building the submarines entirely in Australia, where manufacturing jobs are a hot political topic, has seen it lose ground to German and French proposals.

Payne joins a small number of woman defence ministers around the world and becomes the first to fill the role in an English speaking nation. Germany, Norway and the Netherlands all have female defence ministers.

RETURN TO TOP

EUROPE

18. In first Ukraine trip, NATO chief tries balancing act on Russia

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Robin Emmott

BRUSSELS - With a troubled peace plan for the Ukrainian conflict nearing its deadline, NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg will attempt a balancing act to reassure Kiev of the West's support without antagonising Moscow when he visits Ukraine on Monday.

Ukrainian diplomats say Stoltenberg's visit, his first there, is symbolic in their quest for Western integration as Russia backs a rebellion in eastern Ukraine 18 months after it seized Crimea.

They plan to sign a new doctrine in Stoltenberg's presence identifying Russia as an aggressor.

"This visit will be a milestone," said Ukraine's acting ambassador to NATO, Yehor Bozhok. "In Soviet times, we were ready for an attack from the West. Reality now demonstrates that the threat comes from the East," he told Reuters.

But Stoltenberg, a former Norwegian premier who a year into the top NATO job has toned down the strident criticism of Russia by his predecessor, is wary of raising tensions. He is highly unlikely to heed Kiev's calls for defensive weaponry supplies.

Stoltenberg sees Ukraine as the most complex of Europe's many crises and backs the 11-step Minsk peace deal signed in February that set an end-year deadline for implementation.

Stoltenberg also sees the alliance's role as mainly limited to helping rebuild the armed forces of Ukraine, which is not a NATO member, after years of mismanagement.

Ukraine dropped its bid to join the organisation in 2010 to please Moscow, but now says NATO membership as the only way to protect its territory. NATO wants to avoid provoking Moscow.

Russia opposes any potential expansion of NATO to former communist areas of eastern and southeastern Europe, part of a battle for influence between Brussels and Moscow that lies at the heart of the conflict in Ukraine.

"I am really afraid that the situation can deteriorate," Stoltenberg said in July of the conflict in eastern Ukraine that has killed some 8,000 people. "That's something we have to try to avoid because the situation is demanding enough as it is."

RUSSIAN 'ATTACK'

While violence is at its lowest ebb since the Minsk ceasefire was signed seven months ago, Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko has warned that the decision by separatist rebels to hold their own elections could invalidate the whole peace plan.

Poroshenko is also under pressure from Europe to reform faster to receive potentially billions of euros in donor funds.

"The list of things Ukraine needs to do is endless. You can always do more. But on the other side (Russia), the list hasn't even begun to be filled in," said a senior EU diplomat whose government is among those most critical of Russia's actions.

In another sign of his balancing act during his two-day visit, Stoltenberg will inaugurate exercises between Ukraine and NATO, but they are not military, rather civil protection.

In the pro-European west of the country, they will focus on de-mining, forest fires and a simulated blast at a factory.

Still, Stoltenberg will be the first NATO secretary general to sit in on a National Security and Defence Council meeting in Kiev, Ukraine says, and will likely witness Poroshenko sign the new military doctrine into law.

The octrine "defines the Russian Federation as a military adversary" and "assumes the high probability of large-scale use of military force against Ukraine," a statement says.

Stoltenberg will also oversee the opening of a bigger NATO liaison office in Kiev with full diplomatic status.

Yet even that gesture brings complications. The office has been described by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin as a new "NATO embassy", underscoring the country's long-term aspiration of joining the U.S.-led alliance.

RETURN TO TOP

19. Work: 'Strong and Balanced' Approach to Resurgent Russia
Defense News, Sept. 21, Pg. 4 | Christopher P. Cavas

LONDON — Russia's provocative actions have many western countries on edge, few more so than the Nordic countries of Finland, Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland. To sound out those nations, US Deputy Defense Secretary Robert Work traveled earlier this month to the region and met with his counterparts from all five countries. He also met with UK and US military officials and, throughout the trip, discussed and listened to reports about what the Russians have been doing.

But the primary questions remain: What are Russian President Vladimir Putin's goals? How far will Russia go? After Putin's actions in Crimea and eastern Ukraine, are other countries and regions next? Defense News spoke with Work here at the end of his Nordic and UK visits, just before returning to the US on Sept. 12.

Q. What's your assessment of where the Russians could be going? Is it just Ukraine? What's their potential to expand into other theaters?

A. What I believe that Russia wants is to be treated as a great power with global interests. It is manifesting that in a number of ways, many of them, we think, are very unhelpful. It started off with the illegal annexation of Crimea and then the destabilization of Ukraine. A major, major effort in the Arctic to reestablish its Cold War bases, and then a lot of sea and air activity in the Baltic states and then the high north. Most recently he's making noise that he wants to help his ally [President Bashar al-]Assad in Syria.

I think that Russia understands the rip line of a NATO Article 5 trigger. [The NATO treaty's Article 5 provides that if a member or ally is the victim of an armed attack, the attack is considered as an attack upon all members.] In other words, if they tried to invade a NATO country, I think they absolutely understand that that would evoke an extremely powerful response. I do not personally believe that they are contemplating that, but it's also clear that they are signaling that they have interests in this area and they are going to aggressively protect them as they see fit.

As [US Defense] Secretary [Ash] Carter has said, we want to respond to this in a strong and balanced way. The strong part of it is to the European reassurance initiative, with all of the different exercises and equipment and activity sets. All of the things that we have done to demonstrate that, look, this type of behavior we believe is destabilizing. What we're really seeking is a peaceful region. The balance part is we still want to cooperate with Russia, and there are mutual interests. Space is one in which we continue to cooperate, and the International Space Station. We cooperate on counter-terrorism matters sometimes.

The strong part is to demonstrate to Russia that their activity we find to be unacceptable — quite alarming to many of the nations along the eastern NATO flank and alarming to our NATO allies and our friends and partners of the northern flank. This strong and balanced part is trying to say, Russia, let's find a way in which we can tamp down the possibility of miscalculation and let's work to find things that we can do together and come back to a, for lack of a better word, a détente. It's a Cold War word that I don't like to use, but it's a place where we can operate together without having so much tension.

Q. The rise of China as a military power coupled with Russian resurgence has reset the global strategic laydown. What is that situation?

A. As Secretary Carter likes to say, we now worry about four contingencies and one condition. The four contingencies being a contingency in the Western Pacific involving either North Korea or China, a contingency in Europe involving Russia, a contingency in the Middle East involving Iran, and then the condition of fighting against ISIL [the Islamic State group]. In the 1990s the United States was unquestionably the sole super power, but 15 years into the 21st century we have two large states that have very, very advanced capabilities. It's important for us to work our way through the rising China and the resurgent Russia, so that we maintain peace and stability in both the Western Pacific and in Europe.

Q. During the Cold War the US provided major military assistance to its allies. Is there any thought to reconstituting some of those programs?

A. Our bedrock policy is that we would like every NATO member to spend 2 percent of their gross national product on national defense. Only four now do so. The remaining have pledged to do so. Europe is economically sound. They should be able to spend, we think, 2 percent on their national defense given the three challenges on their flanks — to the south with the mass migration caused by the disruption of ISIL, to the east and to the north to aggressive Russian activities. We believe that it's in the interest of NATO in the military aspects of that alliance to be able to confront those three threats, so we would like to see all of our allies meet their commitment.

Building partnership capacity has always been a part of our strategy. It always will be. So in cases where countries don't have the wherewithal to build certain capabilities, we are going to help in that regard, but in terms of large grants of money, that I don't see right now in the near term. We want to work with NATO for them to build up their own defenses and then for us to build partnership capacity, and of course exercising with them all of the time and grooming interoperability.

Q. The Chinese and the Russians have started to cooperate on specific programs. There was just an amphibious exercise in the Sea of Japan, and a Chinese squadron entered the Bering Sea. How will Russo-Chinese cooperation affect the strategic situation?

A. At varying levels of discussion there's been a longtime, strategic dialogue between the two nations. Both object to what they see as hegemony by the United States. Both are UN Security Council members. Both have nuclear arsenals. Both have national interests on the global stage. It is natural for them to bump up against the United States sometimes. We disagree on some things, we agree on others. At some places where they disagree with the United States, they have a common disagreement, and they sometimes come together to talk. I don't see any type of a formal alliance on the horizon, but I would not be surprised by informal cooperation, exchange of technologies, exercises.

Q. Chinese President Xi Jinping is coming this month to the US. He is not, however, the personification of the Chinese resurgence and growth — the government has been acting out a long, planned and thought-out rise. The Russian rise seems to be tied to the personality of Mr. Putin, that without him this might not be happening. Would that be a fair assessment?

A. I think that the biggest part of Russian resurgence was the rise in oil prices, and this settled their economy that went through such a wrenching disruption in the 1990s — began to settle, so that there was economic stability and a growth in Russia they had not seen in the '90s.

Now that was coupled by President Putin who believed, rightly or wrongly, that NATO and the United States were disregarding Russian vital interests. He said, I don't want to tolerate this anymore. I want to regain the prestige that Russia had as a world power in the Cold War. Now some people believe that it is really focused on Putin. I believe there is as likely a case that Putin merely reflects what many of the Russian intelligencia and public believe. If you take a look at his strong approval ratings, it seems to me that the Russia people say we want to be a strong nation again, we want to be taken seriously on the world stage, and we like what President Putin is doing. I just don't think it's one person. Would Russia behave differently if President Putin was thrown out of office? I think that's an open question. I'm not willing to say that, if President Putin went away, the antagonism we are now faced with by Russia would automatically go away with it.

[Political scientist] John Mearsheimer describes a great power as a state that could take on the leading global power conventionally and has a nuclear deterrent that is survivable from a first attack. In that very narrow definition, what we have in the 21st century is a rise of great power politics where the United States is dealing with two large states with interests that they're going to jealously guard. It's up to the United States and those two countries to work together. We are never going to agree on everything, but we all have a vested interest in maintaining peace and stability because the contemplation of having a major disruptive conventional war that has the danger of becoming nuclear is just too terrible for any of us to think about. It's important for all three of our leaders to continue to talk and work together, cooperate in those areas where we have mutual interest, and in areas where we don't to make sure that we don't miscalculate and threaten the peace.

Whenever you have these large states, I believe that this is unfortunately kind of the natural way of going about things, the jostling. I still believe that the United States is the leading world power, but you have a rising China and resurgent Russia, and they're flexing their muscles. Over the next several decades those relationships are going to be very, very important.

RETURN TO TOP

AFRICA

20. Fighting in Libya's Benghazi raises UN talks tensions

Reuters, Sept. 20 | Ayman El-Warfalli and Ahmed Elumami

BENGHAZI, Libya - Heavy fighting erupted over the weekend between forces from Libya's recognised government and Islamist militants in Benghazi, killing at least six and heightening tensions in U.N. peace negotiations.

Benghazi is just one front in a wider conflict in Libya, where a battle between two rival governments and their armed allies is pushing the North African state to economic collapse four years after the fall of Muammar Gaddafi.

At least six people were killed and ten wounded when fighting broke out on Saturday west of Benghazi between General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army forces and fighters allied to Islamic State, a medical source and local residents said.

The fighting involved artillery shelling and air strikes, they said.

Mohamed Hejazi, spokesman for Haftar's forces, said they had launched a campaign against positions in Benghazi, which has been caught up in fighting for more than year.

Western governments see the best solution in a United Nations-backed peace deal to bring the two sides together in a united power-sharing agreement. But fighting and pressure from hardliners on both sides have complicated negotiations.

The United Nations and U.S and European envoys criticised the increase in hostilities just before the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Adha, and urged the two factions to finish the U.N.-backed deal. U.N. envoy Bernardino Leon had set Sunday as a deadline for negotiations to conclude.

"This escalation of violence underscores the urgent need to complete the political dialogue process as soon as possible," a U.S.-EU joint statement said.

Four years after their uprising toppled Gaddafi, two loose factions of former rebels and their political allies who once fought together have turned against each other in an battle for control of the OPEC state.

Tripoli was taken over a year ago by Libya Dawn, an alliance of Islamist-leaning brigades and former rebels from the powerful city of Misrata who set up a self-declared government in the capital and reinstated a former parliament known as the General National Congress or GNC.

Since then, Libya's internationally recognised government and the elected parliament, the House of Representatives, has operated out of the east of the country, backed by Haftar's forces and a loose alliance of other armed factions.

Islamist militants and migrant smugglers have taken advantage of the turmoil to gain ground even as the United Nations and the European Union warn the country is edging toward becoming a failed state.

U.N. talks are continuing in the Moroccan city of Skhirat, but both factions from the House of Representatives and the GNC Tripoli parliament warned of growing tensions after the increase in Benghazi fighting.

"Our team in Skhirat is studying suspending our participation in the peace talks because of the military escalation in Benghazi," Abdulrahman Swahili, a GNC parliament member told Nabaa TV.

RETURN TO TOP

21. Three blasts hit northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri – military
Reuters, Sept. 20 | Lanre Ola

MAIDUGURI, Nigeria - Three blasts struck the northeastern Nigerian city of Maiduguri, a military spokesman said on Sunday, a day after a new audio message purportedly from Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau accused the army of lying about successes against the militants.

A hospital source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said at least eight dead bodies had been recovered after the blasts in a mosque and areas near the building on the edge of the city center, with many more feared dead and around 50 people injured.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the explosions. However, they bore the hallmarks of the Islamist militant group which has waged a six-year insurgency to form a state adhering to strict Islamic laws, a conflict that has killed thousands.

The audio recording, said to be of Boko Haram's leader, criticized Nigeria's military for saying it had recaptured villages that had fallen into the group's hands.

"They have lied about us saying that they have retaken our territories, taken weapons and driven us away," says the recording posted online on Saturday. "They are actually the ones whom we have driven away. They are all liars."

Maiduguri, the city hit by Sunday's triple blast, is the capital of the group's Borno state birthplace.

"There were three improvised explosive devices explosions at Gomari and Ajilari general area in Maiduguri at about 7:21 p.m. (3:21 p.m. EDT)," said military spokesman Colonel Sani Usman.

"Although details are not clear, it is important to note the attacks signify high level of desperation on the part of the Boko Haram terrorists," he said.

Suspected members of the group have killed around 800 people in Africa's most populous nation in a spate of bombings and shootings since President Muhammadu Buhari was inaugurated as president on May 29, vowing to crush the militants.

At the start of 2015 Boko Haram controlled vast swathes of territory across three states in the northeast.

Nigeria's army, aided by troops from Chad, Niger and Cameroon, said it pushed Boko Haram out of most of that land earlier this year. Since then, the group has carried out its attacks on public areas such as mosques and markets.

When asked about the audio recording purportedly of the sect's leader, Colonel Usman said it was "the rant of a drowning man" before adding that experts were trying to establish whether it is Shekau's voice.

Reuters could not independently verify the authenticity of the audio message.

Nigeria's military has repeatedly claimed that Shekau has been killed over the last few years only for him to resurface in new videos and recordings, although security sources have said he may have been replaced by impostors.

Last month Chad's President Idriss Deby said Shekau, who has not appeared in a video since February, was wounded and had been replaced as leader by Mahamoud Daoud, of whom little is known.

--Additional reporting by Isaac Abrak and Alexis Akwagyiram

RETURN TO TOP

DEFENSE DEPARTMENT

22. Darpa Project Seeks to Advance Privacy Tech

New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. B4 | Steve Lohr

The Pentagon's advanced research arm is pursing privacy technology. And this time, it is technology intended to protect individual privacy rather than compromise it.

The new emphasis is a very different path from the one taken after the Sept. 11 attacks, when the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or Darpa, embarked on the Total Information Awareness program. It was to be an all-seeing digital surveillance system to hunt for terrorists. The outcry from privacy advocates prompted Congress to shut it down. But the technologies developed by Darpa made their way into the intelligence agencies and the electronic-spying program that so disturbed Edward J. Snowden, who leaked tens of thousands of documents.

The new Darpa program is called Brandeis, a nod to the guiding principle of the research initiative. Louis Brandeis, a progressive lawyer who became a Supreme Court justice, was the co-author with Samuel D. Warren of an influential essay, "The Right to Privacy." Published in Harvard Law Review in 1890, it forcefully made the case that safeguarding privacy was essential to individual freedom.

The Brandeis manifesto was published two years after the introduction of the Kodak film camera, a privacy-threatening technology of its day. It could quickly capture images, recording people in normal poses and spontaneous moments. The previous wet-plate, lithographic cameras required their subjects to present themselves in frozen stillness. But with a hand-held Kodak camera, photo snappers were suddenly taking pictures of people in public places -- downtowns, ballrooms and beaches. The "camera fiends" were seen as a menace, and banned from beaches and from the Washington Monument for a while.

But while the times and the technology have changed, the fundamentals have not, according to John Launchbury, the Darpa program director for Brandeis. Privacy, he said, is a value at the heart of a free society, and an engine of progress.

"Privacy is a key enabler to things we care desperately about, like democracy and innovation," Dr. Launchbury, a computer scientist and cryptographer, said in an interview on Friday.

Brandeis was one of several emerging-technology programs highlighted at a three-day conference last week in St. Louis, where Darpa invited 1,200 scientists and technologists from academia, large companies and start-ups. The event was part of the agency's drive in recent years to woo leading researchers and entrepreneurs to collaborate with Darpa. That effort has been a hallmark of the tenure of Arati Prabhakar, a trained physicist and former Silicon Valley venture capitalist, who became the head of Darpa in 2012.

Brandeis is just getting underway. The companies and universities joining the program have been selected. But most are still negotiating contract terms, with only a few announced, including SRI International and Stealth Software. The kickoff meeting for the participants will be in October. The program will run for four and a half years, and its budget will be "tens of millions of dollars," Dr. Launchbury said.

Many companies and university researchers are working on privacy-protecting technologies. Yet Darpa will support early stage research in areas like advanced cryptography, a field known as multiparty differential privacy, and machine-learning software that can learn and predict a person's privacy preferences -- a clever digital assistant for privacy protection. The latter would be a big change from the complex privacy settings on search engines and websites now, which is a major reason much of the online population just accepts the default settings.

The free flow of data, Dr. Launchbury noted, should be enormously valuable across every industry and scientific discipline. But that will only happen in an environment of trust, where, he said, the prevailing attitude is that "you feel so in control of your data that you enable greater sharing at your discretion."

Today, the data world is pretty much wide open, and entire industries rely on mining and marketing people's data. If people have the ability to limit which of their digital footprints can be seen or tracked, doesn't that undermine the business model of many ad-based Internet companies, including Google and Facebook?

Not necessarily, Dr. Launchbury replied. "It would be a matter of, You can use this data for these purposes in exchange for a set of free services," he said. "At least then it's a negotiation."

Naming the program Brandeis suggests a recognition that technology will be only a part of the answer to privacy challenges. So will an evolving legal framework and public attitudes.

"Privacy is such a huge space," Dr. Launchbury said. "What we're working on here is not a solution. But we're hoping to develop a new technical capability and society can decide whether it wants to use it."

RETURN TO TOP

23. Guantánamo captives despair as Yemen war severs family links
Miami Herald, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Carol Rosenberg

For years, Guantánamo prison has portrayed the lives of the Army guards on mostly nine-month duty as a lonely, isolated business. Disconnected from family, they peer through cells at angry and resentful enemy prisoners. Only after hours do they phone home, check email or manage a Skype chat at Internet cafes or in the solitude of their quarters.

In stark contrast, for the captives who've spent more than a decade in detention, the disconnect from home and family is much greater and getting worse. Sixty percent of the prisoners are Yemeni, from the Red Sea nation shattered by civil war and air strikes. Their country is imploding, and so is their precious link with family.

"It's the biggest issue that everyone's talking about, and it's been this way for months," said attorney Pardiss Kebriaei, who recently visited with two Yemenis at Guantánamo. "It's not helping an already desperate situation."

Spiraling violence in the ancestral homeland of Osama bin Laden has partially paralyzed the work of the International Committee of the Red Cross — the U.S. military's partner in connecting captives and their families — cutting contact with wives and children and stirring anxiety in the cellblocks.

On the prison's free satellite TV, they see their country in chaos from car bombs, air strikes and homelessness. It magnifies their sense of helplessness in a place where early interrogation techniques were designed to do just that — make them feel helpless.

The Pentagon has 115 captives at Guantánamo today, nearly all held by the United States for more than a decade. Sixty-nine of the captives are Yemeni — 42 of them approved for repatriation to security arrangements, if their nation stabilizes.

The Soufan Group, a think tank with expertise in Yemen, estimated recently that more than 2,000 civilians there "have been killed through inaccurate coalition bombing and indiscriminate Houthi shelling." Aid workers are not immune. Two Red Cross workers were shot dead earlier this month.

So Red Cross communications between Yemen and the U.S. Navy base in Cuba have suffered with the growing warfare. Sometimes it's too perilous for family members to reach Red Cross offices in Sanaa, Aden and Taiz. At other times, it's too risky for the aid agency to go to the Guantánamo detainee's relatives to arrange the phone call, something the U.S. military requires for a captive to get a call from home.

"There are currently areas in Yemen where we don't have access because of the immense security risks involved," said Nourane Houas, the Red Cross protection coordinator for Yemen, in an email from Sanaa. "It's frustrating that the fighting prevents us from doing more. And we know it's frustrating for the detainees, as well as their families."

Twice since late March, the Red Cross had its Washington, D.C., office notify the military at Guantánamo that a captive's family member had died. The prison, in turn, had to notify the prisoner. The agency wouldn't elaborate on whether the kin had died of natural causes or in the war. Nor would it say what prevented the prisoner from hearing directly from home.

The lost links are "a huge issue" for Yemeni captive Sanad al Kazimi, 45, who hasn't heard from his wife and four kids since February, according to his lawyer Martha Rayner. They apparently fled Aden and are OK, according to a message he got at the prison via the Red Cross.

But "he's extremely stressed about it. I saw him in early August, and he's struggling to cope with this on top of all the other stress of being indefinitely detained," Rayner said. Kazimi has been a prisoner of the U.S. military or CIA since his 2002 capture in Dubai and wants to talk with his family to ask directly if they are OK.

Part of the problem is that, just like for the hundreds of guards who do temporary duty at Guantánamo, phone and video calls are emotional lifelines for the prisoners — those approved to go and those who aren't. Red Cross links have brought prisoners photos of babies born during their time in captivity, word of the deaths of parents and, since 2008, phone calls from home as a perk for cooperative captives.

For their first six years at Guantánamo, the prison only permitted the Red Cross to bring messages between the captives and their kin. Then, as now, U.S. military staffers read the mail and censored information they didn't think the prisoners or their families should know.

Then, with the blessing of Adm. James Stavridis at the U.S. Southern Command, the Red Cross started family phone calls in April 2008. Video calls for some came later.

Prisoners who spent years in CIA "black sites" were excluded. For the rest, calls worked like this: A captive was taken to a special cell and shackled to the floor at a prearranged time for the call from home. Prison staffers listened in and could cut the line if conversation strayed into forbidden topics. On the other end, Red Cross delegates verified that family was on the call, either from an ICRC office or from a relative's home. No recording was allowed.

Then this summer, a U.S. Navy medical officer at the prison's psychiatric ward offered that instability in Yemen had become a key source of stress for the prisoners. Military mental health professionals were devoting "a lot of counseling time dealing with that." Now detainee lawyers, in a rare example of harmony, echo that prison doctor on the No. 1 source of anxiety.

Into this vacuum, some of the detainees' lawyers now call their clients' families, using Arabic translators to help track them down before each visit. For years, lawyers brought treats to the meetings — Big Macs from the base McDonald's or traditional foods for a taste from home. Since May, the military has forbidden food at meetings. So now all the attorneys can offer is word from home.

"I always do that before a visit to Guantánamo because the guys are really, really worried," said David Remes, who represents 18 Yemenis. "The detainees don't know if their families are alive or dead. This problem compounds misery upon misery."

On one occasion, Remes recalled, he was chatting with the sister of a captive named Muhammed Khusruf, 65, in troubled Taiz when the woman politely tried to break off a conversation: "Do you mind if I hang up? We're being shelled right now."

Remes made contact later so he could tell his client that his sister Fatima was fine.

Similarly, the Red Cross sometimes sends messages to the prison that it has heard from captives' families, and that they are alive.

Which raises the question: If an attorney can call a captive's kin, why can't the prison? Lawyers who do it want the prison to waive the Red Cross role, something the commander has sometimes done, and use their 2,000-strong staff to try to connect worried Yemenis with family.

Yet if prison leadership is troubled by it, or doing anything to bridge the divide, there's no sign of it.

"Any incident or set of circumstances related to the health or safety of detainees' family members can create anxiety for the detainee and potentially impact their behavior," Navy Capt. Chris Scholl said by email from the prison. "Therefore, we work hard to mitigate such incidents or circumstances."

He did not elaborate but said there was no plan "at the present time" to offer calls beyond those initiated by the Red Cross.

The lawyers call the prison's posture callous, particularly since the overwhelming majority of Yemenis are cleared for release — on paper that says they can be repatriated once the security situation settles down, or once a third country will agree to resettle them. Family reunification is considered key to a successful, peaceful re-entry into society; yet some cleared captives don't know if their family has survived the latest explosion.

Scholl offered no explanation of why the prison wants Red Cross delegates on the other end of the line.

But the staff may still be smarting from what happened in 2009 when an al Jazeera reporter, who had been imprisoned at Guantánamo himself, interviewed a young captive by phone. Prison officials apparently thought the reporter was the captive's uncle. And the since-repatriated, 21-year-old captive from Chad described allegations of abuse.

"All the detainees want to know is how are you doing? Are you OK? Are you in danger?" Remes said. "I have clients who haven't spoken with their families since the violence began in July 2014."

Yemen expert Charles Schmitz, who has worked as a court-approved Arabic-English translator, said developments back home must be alarming to disconnected detainees.

"They're stuck in Cuba, they can't do anything for their families, and their families are in danger," he said.

Family comes first, but the politics of the moment complicates matters. Lawyers for some Yemenis who can't go home want their clients sent to Saudi Arabia's rehabilitation program as a way out of Guantánamo. But Saudi Arabia is carrying out the bombing campaign against the Houthi, prompting Schmitz to observe that in their opposition to the Houthi, "Saudi Arabia and al-Qaida are on the same side of the conflict, as is actually the United States with its support of the Saudis."

RETURN TO TOP

AIR FORCE

24. Budget Gridlock Looms over AFA

Defense News, Sept. 21, Pg. 1 | Lara Seligman

NATIONAL HARBOR, Md. — In recent years, the undercurrent at the US Air Force Association's annual Air & Space Exposition has been the sequester, with the military and industry alike decrying the impact of devastating budget cuts on readiness levels.

But this year, a new shadow loomed over the conference. With less than two weeks left for Congress to reach an agreement to fund the government, the Pentagon is waking up to the possibility of an unprecedented, full-year continuing resolution.

Last week, top Air Force officials hammered home the message that if the Pentagon is forced to operate under a stop-gap spending measure next year, the service's ability to buy new aircraft and modernize its existing fleet is in peril.

A full-year CR would actually be worse than sequestration-level budgets in fiscal 2016, Secretary Deborah Lee James said in an interview with Defense News. A long-term CR would impact about 50 large and small Air Force programs, she said.

"A full-year continuing resolution or any form of a long-term CR would actually [be] less money than sequestration-level budgets in terms of our top line number, and it would impact, we estimate, on the order of 50 programs in the Air Force," James said, "Seventy-five percent of which are smaller programs, but that doesn't mean they are not important, because they are, and 25 percent would be larger programs."

James pointed to the B-2 communications upgrade, the Huey helicopter replacement and several space programs as examples of major initiatives a CR could derail, adding that a stopgap spending measure would also limit resources for other service priorities. A CR by law prohibits new-start programs and limits resources for platforms currently in production to prior year funding levels.

If the Pentagon is forced to adopt a CR, the Air Force's effort to upsize its nuclear, cyber and maintenance forces are also at risk, James said.

Gen. Ellen Pawlikowski, head of Air Force Materiel Command, stressed in an interview with Defense News that a major challenge under a CR would be keeping up with aircraft depot maintenance. If the Air Force is trapped at last year's budget for flying hours and weapon system sustainment, work begins to pile up at the depots, creating a backlog for years to come.

"If those numbers don't have the appropriate ramp up, that means that I will not be able to put the throughput through the AOCs, which means that coming out of it I'm going to have some real issues in '17 because I'm going to have planes that should have gone through depot that didn't go through depot," she said. "It is going to create a backlog, if you will, on those programs."

The Air Force can choose to seek exemptions from the CR for its top priorities. But the service has only so much negotiating power, and some programs may fall through the cracks.

KC-46 Contract Breach

Should a CR take effect Oct. 1, arguably the Air Force's most pressing concern is the possibility it will be forced to break a contract with Boeing on the KC-46 tanker.

Brig. Gen. Duke Richardson, the program executive officer for the Air Force's next-generation tanker, told an audience at the convention that a CR would create a "very large problem" for the program.

But how big a problem wasn't clear until after his speech, when he told Defense News that the CR could potentially break the contract with Boeing.

According to Richardson, the contract requires the Air Force to award eight aircraft at minimum in the second low rate initial production lot, planned for FY-16. But if a CR scenario occurs, the Air Force is by law limited to last year's funding levels. In FY-15, the Air Force only budgeted for seven aircraft in LRIP 1. If the service is only allowed to buy seven aircraft again in FY-16 due to a yearlong CR, that would breach the terms of the contract, Richardson said.

Even if the Air Force gets some relief from Congress, the service could be forced to pay a fine, Richardson added. If LRIP 2 does not hit the "sweet spot" of 12 aircraft in FY-16, the Air Force will pay a per-year penalty.

A CR "breaks the contract, so we would have to reopen it up," Richardson said. "We don't want to do that, we think the terms of the contract are favorable."

When pressed on whether the Air Force would rebid the program if a breach is forced, Richardson declined to answer, saying: "I don't want to answer a hypothetical until it actually happens."

The Air Force is likely to seek relief from a CR for the tanker, analysts said, particularly given the favorable terms of the contract. The service's liability for the engineering and manufacturing development phase of the tanker program is capped at $4.9 billion; anything over is paid by Boeing. So far, technical issues have cost Boeing $1.2 billion in pretax overages on the program.

"This is arguably the most favorable and most important contract at risk … I don't think Airbus is suddenly available to make a tanker," said Rebecca Grant, president of IRIS Independent Research. "It's uncharted waters if they break the contract, and I think everyone from Congress on down should do everything they can to make sure they don't break the contract."

Boeing must deliver 18 operational tankers to the fleet in August 2017. Despite the technical challenges and repeated delay of a critical milestone — first flight — Richardson said he remains confident the company will meet the deadline.

"They are applying company resources to make this program and so they are committing to us that they are going to meet the August of '17," Richardson told Defense News. "They've got a pretty good cache of resources at their disposal, so I think if they apply those resources they can do it. We're not going to back away from helping them meet it. I'm not ready to entertain what happens if they don't meet it."

Richardson noted during the panel that Boeing Defense recently brought in Scott Fancher, senior vice president of Boeing Commercial, to help with the tanker program after a mislabeled chemical was mistakenly loaded into the test aircraft's refueling line during testing. The accident caused the company to delay first flight, planned for late August or early September, by one month.

First flight will now take place Sept. 25, Richardson announced during the panel. Afterward, he emphasized the need to begin flying the aircraft before the end of September in order to meet major test points and reach a Milestone C decision — formal approval for production — as planned between January and April 2016. With the latest delay, Milestone C is slipping to the end of April, he told reporters.

"I am cautiously confident," Richardson said during the presentation, although he added: "There's no doubt that the schedule margin is gone on the program, and I think that if you look at what the secretary, the chief [of staff] have been saying, they are not happy with where we are at on the schedule and neither am I."

The Air Force is still reviewing Boeing's master schedule to make sure the program is on track to meet its deadlines, an initiative James announced late last month, Richardson told Defense News.

F-35 Production & Software Development

The CR also threatens to derail another major Pentagon recapitalization program: the F-35 joint strike fighter.

Next year, the Air Force plans to buy 44 F-35As, 16 more than the service bought this year. Meanwhile, the Marine Corps is slated to buy three additional F-35Bs next year compared to this year, Lt. Gen. Chris Bogdan, head of the F-35 joint program office, told reporters during the conference. If the Pentagon is trapped in a yearlong CR, the JPO won't be able to buy these additional 19 aircraft in FY-16, Bogdan said.

"If we are capped at the '15 dollars, those 16 Air Force model A airplanes and those three Marine Corps airplanes, they are orphans, I can't buy them," Bogdan said. "I won't have the authority nor the money to buy them in FY-16, so we will have to figure out something because those airplanes are being built right now."

Lockheed Martin is in the midst of building the Lot 10 aircraft, and is slated to deliver the jets within two years, Bogdan said.

If a CR occurs and the F-35 program does not get relief, the Air Force may be forced to move the buy to the next fiscal year, Bogdan said.

"We've got to do something because there's 19 US service airplanes that are at risk now for a full-year CR, and that's just not good," Bogdan said. "It's not good for industry, it's not good for the services, it's not good for us."

At $100 million each, those 19 aircraft are worth on the order of $2 billion — a significant amount of money for Lockheed and the lower-tier suppliers to lose, Bogdan stressed. Plus, the government will likely incur an added cost if the JPO is forced to push the buy.

Development of the jet's follow-on Block 4 software, which will come online sometime in the 2020s, would also feel the impact of a long-term CR, Bogdan said. The JPO is slated to spend about $120 million on planning for the as-yet undefined Block 4 in FY-16, about three times as much as the joint office is spending this year, he said.

"If a continuing resolution occurs, we will be capped at that in '16, and that's about a third of what we intended on spending in 16 to do that planning to get to follow-on development," Bogdan said.

Space

Failure to pass a 2016 budget would also stall several new classified and unclassified programs aimed at improving the government's space protection activities, according to the head of US Air Force Space Command.

"We have some significant space recommendations that are in the '16 President's Budget, many of those are classified, we wouldn't be able to get started on those," Gen. John Hyten told reporters during the conference. "All that stuff just gets put on hold — that's just bad."

The Pentagon is pushing a strategic effort to boost its space surveillance and counterspace spending by $5 billion in the face of a growing threat from Russia and China to US operations in space. Much of these dollars would go to classified programs.

The CR could also derail a new effort to create a US-based alternative to the Russian-made RD-180 engine the US military currently uses for space launch.

--Aaron Mehta and Andrew Clevenger contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

ARMY

25. Bergdahl's disillusion emerges in testimony
Soldier was seeking to air grievances when he left post, was captured
Washington Post, Sept. 21, Pg. A1 | Dan Lamothe

JOINT BASE SAN ANTONIO-FORT SAM HOUSTON, Tex. - Army Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl was fed up. He was five weeks into a deployment in southeastern Afghanistan and frustrated with his mission and his leaders. He and his fellow soldiers weren't going after the Taliban as aggressively as he wanted, and his sense of disillusion added to the disgust for the Army that he had begun developing while still in basic training.

Looking to make a stand, Bergdahl hatched a plan: He would run away from his platoon's tiny outpost in Paktika province late on June 29, 2009. He would stay away from the Army a day, maybe two, and then reappear about19

miles away at a larger installation and demand to air his grievances with a general. He knew that the region was crawling with insurgents, but he had "outsize impressions of his own capabilities," according to an investigating officer, and was determined to create enough chaos to get the attention of senior commanders.

Those were among the details that emerged in a preliminary hearing here late last week. The soldier, carrying just a disguise, a knife and some provisions, was captured by insurgents by 10 a.m. the following morning, beginning four years and 11 months of captivity and torture by the Haqqani network, a group affiliated with the Taliban, according to Maj. Gen. Kenneth Dahl, the senior officer who carried out an investigation of Bergdahl's actions and interviewed him at length.

The case against Bergdahl, who is charged with desertion and misbehaving before the enemy, is the most closely scrutinized desertion prosecution in the military in decades - perhaps since that of Pvt. Eddie Slovik, a soldier who became the only American executed for desertion since the Civil War. The officer overseeing the Bergdahl hearing, Lt. Col. Mark A. Visger, is expected to make a recommendation in the coming days to U.S. Army Forces Command, at Fort Bragg, N.C., about whether Bergdahl should be court-martialed.

Bergdahl, now 29 and a sergeant, was recovered in May 2014 in a controversial swap in which the White House approved the release of five Taliban detainees from the military prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. They are now in Qatar.

Emotional testimony has underscored the relentless brutality that Bergdahl had to endure, as well as the chaos caused by his disappearance and the lingering resentment of some of his comrades.

The case has also raised questions about the Obama administration's handling of it, which included inviting Bergdahl's parents to speak at the White House after the soldier was recovered, with national security adviser Susan E. Rice saying he served with "honor and distinction."

The White House has since concluded that it badly misplayed the optics of Bergdahl's release, according to administration officials. Bergdahl's parents were in Washington the day he was recovered, and a quick decision was made to include them in a Rose Garden announcement, with little thought given to the ramifications of making Bergdahl appear to be a hero, the officials said.

Bergdahl joined the Army a few years after washing out of initial training for the Coast Guard. The Washington Post reported previously that it was for psychological reasons, but Bergdahl's lawyer and Dahl were more specific in the hearing: The future Taliban captive was diagnosed with depression and sent home after he was found in distress in a Coast Guard barracks, sitting on a floor with blood in his hands, possibly from a bloody nose, Dahl testified.

"He wasn't ready for it," Dahl said of life in the Coast Guard. "He was overwhelmed, found himself in the hospital and was released."

Bergdahl received a waiver to enlist in the Army. He was physically fit and well regarded for his work ethic, but quickly became disenchanted with his fellow soldiers and the Army's training program. Among his gripes: He couldn't believe higher-ranking soldiers wanted him to lock his wall locker to prevent theft and saw pre-deployment training at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, Calif., as "lame," Dahl said.

Bergdahl was assigned to the 25th Infantry Division's 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, of Fort Richardson, Alaska. There, he took offense to a motivational speech made by the senior enlisted soldier to the entire battalion. The command sergeant major said in jest that, like other soldiers, he liked to pillage and plunder, but Bergdahl took it literally, Dahl said.

In Afghanistan, there was another misunderstanding, Dahl said. Soldiers from Bergdahl's unit weren't all wearing their whole uniforms one day, a violation that upset then-Lt. Col. Clinton Baker, Bergdahl's battalion commander.

Baker launched into a tirade to get his point across, kicking rocks in the process. Bergdahl was convinced that Baker had disturbed an Afghan grave, a suggestion that perplexed the others present, Dahl said.

The general found that Bergdahl's childhood living at "the edge of the grid" in Idaho in relative isolation hurt his ability to relate to other people. As a result, he was an extremely harsh judge of character and "unrealistically idealistic," Dahl said.

"I think he absolutely believed that the things he perceived were absolutely true," he added.

Bergdahl could have gone to a number of people in his chain of command with concerns about his platoon. But he thought that they were in the Army for the money, or otherwise incapable of responding, Dahl said.

In some ways, the soldier did consider others before running away from Observation Post Mest, Dahl said. He told Dahl that he picked the night he disappeared in part because he knew another platoon already would be on the way in the morning to relieve Bergdahl's, thus providing additional manpower to deal with his vanishing. He didn't want to take his 5.56mm squad automatic machine gun with him alone outside the wire because he figured it would draw attention, but also decided against stealing a 9mm pistol because that would have gotten a fellow soldier in trouble, Dahl said.

Bergdahl's disappearance was noticed around dawn, when he was due to take a guard shift. Capt. John Billings, his former platoon leader, testified that he was in shock that one of his men could have vanished, and initially thought his soldiers were pulling a joke on him. Reality eventually set in, though, and he informed his company commander, then-Capt. Silvino Silvino.

"I felt sick to my stomach," said Silvino, now a major. "I didn't know what was going to come after that. . . . I instructed him to go look high and low, and everywhere he could."

Coalition forces across eastern Afghanistan altered their operations that summer looking for Bergdahl, exposing soldiers to additional and dangerous missions. That remains a sensitive point, amid allegations from Bergdahl's fellow soldiers that at least six U.S. troops died because of his actions. Dahl said he examined a variety of evidence, and found nothing that connected the deaths directly to Bergdahl. But the search-and-rescue operations undoubtedly altered security in the region, military officials said, and plunged the units involved into hastily planned missions.

Baker, the former battalion commander, recalled that one platoon conducted 37 consecutive days of operations - long enough that new socks and T-shirts had to be delivered to the soldiers, since theirs were rotting on their bodies.

Bergdahl, meanwhile, was already in Pakistan. He was relentlessly beaten in captivity with rubber hoses and copper cables. He repeatedly tried to escape, said Terrence Russell, an official with the Pentagon's Joint Personnel Recovery Agency, who interviewed Bergdahl after his return.

Bergdahl was moved to at least six different locations, including one referred to as a Taliban prison. After escaping once for nearly nine days, Bergdahl was put in a 7-foot cage, blindfolded and left there for most of his last 3½ years in captivity, Russell said.

Bergdahl has been accused often of cooperating with the insurgents or even seeking them out, but Russell said there is no evidence to support those claims. The Haqqani network forced him to make videos that were released online.

Russell grew visibly agitated while describing the conditions Bergdahl faced, wiping tears away at one point. While the sergeant has been accused of many things, Russell said, he was "an organization of one," with no fellow prisoners who could keep his spirits up.

"He did the best job he could do," Russell said, "And I respect him for it."

Bergdahl's attorney, Eugene Fidell, argued during closing arguments at the preliminary hearing that his client should not be court-martialed for either of the charges he now faces. There is probable cause, Fidell acknowledged, to charge him with a lesser offense, being absent without leave for one day, but the moment he was taken captive, Fidell said, that designation should have ended. The maximum penalty for being AWOL for one day is 30 days of confinement.

An Army prosecutor, Maj. Margaret Kurz, said that Bergdahl's actions hurt the Army, his fellow soldiers and the mission in Afghanistan, and he must be punished.

"One does not just walk away into the Afghan wilderness," she said, "and then return as though nothing happened."

--Karen DeYoung contributed to this report

RETURN TO TOP

NOTABLE COMMENTARY

26. Mr. Putin's Mixed Messages
New York Times, Sept. 21, Pg. A20 | Editorial

President Vladimir Putin of Russia is trying to have it both ways in Syria. He is dangerously building up Russia's military presence there, while positioning himself as the world's savior against Islamic extremists and holding high-level military-to-military talks with the United States. President Obama should go one step further and be prepared to meet Mr. Putin later this month when the two are at the United Nations. If there is to be a solution to the Islamic State's advance and to Syria's war, both Russia and America will have to be involved.

Mr. Putin is expected to use his speech to the United Nations General Assembly to make the case for an international coalition against the Islamic State, apparently ignoring the one already being led by the United States. But his buildup also serves his effort to save his imperiled client, President Bashar al-Assad, and may also be intended to establish a Russian military outpost in the Middle East.

No one should be fooled about Russia's culpability in Syria's agony. Mr. Putin could have helped prevent the fighting that has killed more than 250,000 Syrians and displaced millions more, had he worked with other major powers in 2011 to keep Mr. Assad from waging war on his people following peaceful antigovernment protests. The brutality of Mr. Assad, a member of a Shiite sect, against the majority Sunni population has enabled the Islamic State, made up of Sunnis, to take control of large parts of Syria. Mr. Assad would probably be gone without the weapons, aid and other assistance from Russia and Iran.

Mr. Obama considers Mr. Putin a thug, his advisers say, and Mr. Putin considers Mr. Obama weak. Mr. Obama has had little to do with Mr. Putin since the Russian leader invaded Ukraine and annexed Crimea. Some administration officials worry that agreeing to a meeting, which the Kremlin apparently requested, will play into Mr. Putin's hands. But it would be a mistake for Mr. Obama not to engage, especially on an issue this serious and when tensions are rising. If Mr. Putin does not come to the meeting prepared to be a problem-solver, it will be obvious and Mr. Obama should call him on it.

The truth is, both men are in a bind. America's fight against ISIS is failing; a stark indicator was the Pentagon's admission that its $500 million program to train moderate Syrian opposition forces to fight ISIS has only four or five fighters who are actually on the battlefield. Meanwhile, Mr. Putin's ally, Mr. Assad, is in danger of falling, which would destroy the last threads holding the state together, open the door to a takeover by the Islamic State and jeopardize Russia's last foothold in the Middle East. Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin should be able to find common cause in battling the Islamic State, which is destabilizing the region and training a generation of foreign fighters, some of whom have already returned home to Europe, Russia and Central Asia.

The Islamic State cannot be confronted effectively unless there is a political settlement in Syria between Mr. Assad's regime and opposition forces. The main impediment has been Mr. Putin's insistence that Mr. Assad remain in power. But Russia previously agreed on the need for a transition in Syria and a compromise seems obvious.

Secretary of State John Kerry, speaking in London on Friday, made it clear that America would be looking for "common ground" in Syria, which could mean keeping Mr. Assad in power temporarily during a transition. The Russians should accept that Mr. Assad must go within a specific time frame, say six months. The objective is a transition government that includes elements of the Assad regime and the opposition. Iran should be part of any deal.

America should be aware that Mr. Putin's motivations are decidedly mixed and that he may not care nearly as much about joining the fight against the Islamic State as propping up his old ally. But with that in mind there is no reason not to test him.

RETURN TO TOP

27. Putin's Syria Tour de Force

Before: Russia is 'doomed to fail.' Now: Obama is happy to talk

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A12 | Editorial

Vladimir Putin doesn't seem to share President Obama's definition of "smarter." Ten days ago Mr. Obama declared that the Russian President's military deployments in Syria were "doomed to fail" and the Kremlin was "going to have to start getting a little smarter." Mr. Putin then began sending fighter jets, and now it looks like Mr. Obama is the one who has been taken to school.

That's the only way to read Secretary of Defense Ash Carter's call on Friday to Russian counterpart Sergei Shoigu to explore what a Pentagon spokesman called "mechanisms for deconfliction" in Syria. In addition to the jets, Russia is sending T-90 tanks, howitzers, troop-transport and attack helicopters, a company of armed Marines, and further equipment to establish an air base near the coastal Syrian city of Latakia. Mr. Shoigu describes the build-up as "defensive in nature."

Sure, as in Ukraine. Along with Iran, Russia is the Bashar Assad regime's principal sponsor, providing weapons, diplomatic protection at the United Nations, and now direct military support. Mr. Putin sees an opportunity to rescue his client in Damascus, strengthen ties with Iran, establish a large military footprint along the eastern Mediterranean, further reduce U.S. influence, and create diplomatic leverage that he can use to ease Western sanctions imposed in response to his invasion of Ukraine. On present course he'll accomplish all of the above.

A typical U.S. President would be angry and embarrassed. But Mr. Obama has gone from warning Russia that its intervention could "risk confrontation" with the U.S., to seeking face-to-face talks with Moscow in order to find "common ground," as Secretary of State John Kerry said in London last week.

There is a need to make sure U.S. jets don't become targets of Russian anti-aircraft missiles, but Mr. Kerry is walking into another Putin snare. After failing at two previous attempts, the Secretary of State wants to restart peace talks in Geneva to reach a political settlement for the Syrian civil war -- and this time he's willing to be especially flexible about Mr. Assad's grip on power.

"We're not being doctrinaire about the specific date or time, we're open," he said, discussing the timetable for the Syrian dictator to step down. Mr. Assad, he added, would not have to leave "on day one or month one or whatever. There's a process by which all the parties have to come together and reach an understanding of how this can best be achieved."

That sounds like an Administration moving to reverse its demand for Mr. Assad's ouster. It also coincides with the Administration's admission that its feeble attempts to arm a credible opposition to the Assad regime have failed -- a failure for which White House spokesman Josh Earnest had the ill grace to blame on critics of Mr. Obama's Syria policy.

Mr. Kerry says the new focus is targeting Islamic State and hoping that the 50-year-old Mr. Assad will shuffle himself off-stage, perhaps to return to his former ophthalmology practice. What the Secretary didn't explain is why Mr. Assad's opponents would stop fighting when their central goal is to oust the dictator and crush his power base. Nor did he explain how the Obama Administration intends to foster a political settlement in Syria that would necessarily involve groups such as Islamic State, the al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front, and the Iranian-backed Hezbollah.

The only hope the U.S. now has of a decent settlement in Syria is to create no-fly and no-drive zones, on the model of what the U.S. did in northern Iraq in the 1990s, with the explicit aim of protecting civilians and arming a credible militia to destroy Islamic State and the Assad regime. Syrians would fight for such a group if they were convinced the U.S. was committed to victory. That's not going to happen while Mr. Obama is President, but it's the right formula for the next one.

Meantime, Mr. Putin must be amazed at his luck in having Mr. Obama as President. Look for Russian negotiators to link talks over Syria to U.S. support for the government in Kiev, or military deployments in the Baltics, or enforcement of the nuclear agreement with Iran. Mr. Putin will keep stealing Mr. Obama's lunch money as long as this weakest of Presidents lets him.

RETURN TO TOP

28. Jordan Needs U.S. Drones to Fight ISIS

The Obama administration has been inexplicably deaf to the kingdom's pleas

Wall Street Journal, Sept. 21, Pg. A13 | Rep. Duncan D. Hunter (R-CA)

Soon after Islamic State propagandists released a video in February of a captured and caged Jordanian pilot being burned alive, the Obama administration pledged full support to Jordan -- a critical Middle East ally threatened by the terrorist army of Islamic State, or ISIS. But the administration has failed to live up to that commitment.

Despite repeated requests and impassioned pleas, the administration has refused to sell Jordan the drones -- specifically, remotely piloted Predator and Reaper aircraft -- that will allow deeper infiltration into ISIS territory to conduct surveillance and strikes. These systems, as U.S. operations against al Qaeda in Africa and elsewhere have shown, are crucial in fighting terrorists.

Why Jordan, an important U.S. ally, is being denied these systems is a puzzle. On its flank are Syria and Iraq, two countries largely overrun by ISIS. Jordan also shares borders with Saudi Arabia and Israel, which makes it a buffer of sorts between the Jewish state and its enemies. Like much of Europe, Jordan is struggling to deal with Iraqi and Syrian refugees, now 10% of its population and growing. If Jordan is overrun by ISIS and its extremist allies, the destabilization of the region would accelerate.

The reasons to support Jordan with drone technology could not be more apparent. What might be causing the administration to hold back?

The export of drones is most often restricted under the Missile Technology Control Regime -- a voluntary agreement among 34 countries intended to prevent the proliferation of technology capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction. While unmanned systems are "licensed for export only on rare occasions," the control regime doesn't forbid the export of drone technology. And if ISIS's threatening the stability of much of the Middle East and a massive refugee crisis spilling over into Europe doesn't qualify as a "rare occasion," what does? The Obama administration and its successors are free to allow sales of unmanned aviation vehicles to Jordan or other U.S. allies.

The administration's hesitation has weakened its influence in the region and created a vacuum that is being filled by others. China recently unveiled its version of the Reaper drone, the Caihong 5, capable of carrying bombs and missiles and traveling up to 2,100 miles. Jordan has expressed interest in buying the Caihong 5 if the U.S. refuses to export the Reaper. Recent news reports say Israel has agreed to sell drones to Jordan, specifically the Heron TP, although Israeli officials haven't confirmed the sale.

Damage has been done to U.S. relations with Jordan, but the simple act of approving drone exports would prevent further harm. If Jordanian policy, like President Obama's, is to "degrade and ultimately destroy" ISIS, why is the Obama administration refusing to provide an ally with the tools to do just that?

--Mr. Hunter, a Republican congressman from California, is a member of the House Armed Services Committee

RETURN TO TOP

29. Why Obama Won't Stay at the Waldorf

Avoiding the Chinese-owned hotel because of security concerns. Well, it's a start

Wall Street Journal (Information Age), Sept. 21, Pg. A11 | L. Gordon Crovitz

The U.S. has finally taken decisive action in answer to China's malicious cyberattacks on the government and American companies: It announced President Obama will no longer stay at New York's Waldorf Astoria. The hotel was bought by a Chinese insurance company with close ties to Communist Party bosses, making the risk of surveillance too great. The announcement ends a presidential tradition dating to Herbert Hoover, who died in his Waldorf suite in 1964.

Blacklisting the Waldorf is the only concrete step the administration took in the run-up to this week's state visit by China's President Xi Jinping. Officials spent several weeks leaking plans for serious sanctions against China, only to back off.

Such passivity predates China's hacking into personnel files of more than 20 million federal employees. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in 2013: "We have to begin making it clear to the Chinese that the U.S. is going to have to take action to protect not only our government but our private sector from this kind of intrusion."

When Mrs. Clinton said that, every large federal department and defense and technology companies had already been hacked, with China as the main culprit. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce learned something was wrong when one of its printers started producing output in Chinese. More recently hackers have targeted airlines, health-care businesses and news publishers.

A U.S. prosecutor last year charged five Chinese military officers for stealing information from U.S. firms for Chinese state-owned enterprises, but there is no way to bring them to trial. Even Mr. Obama's top aides express frustration. National Security Agency chief Michael Rogers said this month the Chinese "have paid no price" for increasingly brazen cyberattacks. Director of National Intelligence James Clapper told Congress that U.S. cyberpolicy lacks "both the substance and the psychology of deterrence."

The White House has made itself a target of ridicule. The Lawfare blog at the Brookings Institution held a contest soliciting nominations for the "most interesting, vulnerable, hackable" government database that the People's Liberation Army "should steal next," in the hope of alerting database managers and counterintelligence officials. Winners included Pentagon databases identifying U.S. personnel and their family members around the world.

Last week Mr. Obama tried to reassure the Business Roundtable: "We are preparing a number of measures that will indicate to the Chinese that this is not just a matter of us being mildly upset," he said. "We are prepared to take some countervailing actions to get their attention." Spokesman Josh Earnest said Mr. Obama was being "intentionally nonspecific." Meantime, U.S. companies are as helpless on their own against state-sponsored cyberattacks as 18th-century clipper ships were against the Barbary pirates before the Marines cleared the seas.

China recently demanded that Apple, Google and other U.S. companies make their products "secure and controllable" by Beijing as a precondition of operating in the country. That is more cooperation than those

companies offer Washington. The FBI tried but failed to get Apple and Google to ensure that communications on their devices can be produced under court order in cases of crimes or potential acts of terror.

Cyber should be a hot topic in the presidential race. Jeb Bush declared last week in a white paper on the subject: "We need to recognize the reality that today we are under cyberattack and we are not keeping up with the threat." He tied cyber to broader Internet issues. The U.S. "must retain a strong position in Internet governance," he wrote, announcing his opposition to the Obama plan to give up U.S. oversight of the Internet and give China and other authoritarian regimes the potential to censor the Internet globally.

"We should use offensive tactics as it relates to cybersecurity, send a deterrent signal to China," Mr. Bush said in last week's Republican debate. A president has the power to act if there is the will. The Treasury Department can freeze financial and personal assets of individuals and companies committing commercial espionage.

At a meeting in Beijing last year with Secretary of State John Kerry, a Chinese reporter had the best suggestion for an American cyber offense, urging that the U.S. support "Chinese who aspire for freedom" by helping to "tear down the great Internet firewall." Cyberattacks by the U.S. to undermine Beijing's enormous apparatus for digital censorship would be a good start. They would punish the government, benefit ordinary Chinese citizens and remind China that the U.S. still has some spine.

RETURN TO TOP

30. Why the U.S. Can't Stop China's Cyberspies
Newsweek, Sept. 25 | Jonathan Broder

When President Barack Obama met with Chinese President Xi Jinping nearly a year ago, his visit ended with a stinging lecture. Standing in Beijing's ornate Great Hall of the People, Xi warned the U.S. not to get involved in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement and scoffed at Washington's concerns over the spike in anti-American diatribes in China's state-run media. He also defended his government's refusal to renew the visas of several U.S. foreign correspondents; they had been critical of Communist Party leaders, which is against the law in authoritarian China. "Let he who tied the bell on the tiger take it off," Xi said. Translation: "You created the problem; you fix it."

Xi's reprimand last November underscored the enduring paradox of U.S.-Chinese politics. The two countries have mutual interests and cooperate on a variety of issues—from climate change to counterterrorism. But they're also fierce rivals with little patience for each other's historical claims or ideological conceits. And as the two leaders prepare for their meeting in Washington in late September, that mixture of pragmatism and pugnacity still defines their relationship. At the end of Xi's visit, which will include a gala state dinner at the White House with alternating toasts, the two leaders are likely to cite a long list of issues they agree upon, including the Iran nuclear accord and the need for Beijing's continued reforms toward a consumer-driven economy. But on the major issues that deeply divide them, little progress is likely. And even though Xi may have fumbled the handling of China's recent stock market crash, experts in the U.S. don't believe he's lost any leverage with Obama. "People should be modest in their expectations" for the summit, says Jeff Bader, the top China expert on the National Security Council during Obama's first term.

Case in point: cyberspying. For years, Beijing's hackers have been breaching the computer networks of U.S. companies, stealing their intellectual property and giving their commercial secrets to Chinese firms, according to U.S. officials. Former National Security Agency Director Keith Alexander says this cybercrime has led to "the greatest transfer of wealth in history," costing the U.S. economy an estimated $250 billion a year.

Though the Obama administration hasn't publicly named China as the culprit, Director of National Intelligence James Clapper has fingered Beijing as "the leading suspect" in the June breach of the Office of Personnel Management, in which someone stole the personal information of 22 million current and former federal employees. Clapper and other intelligence officials say that kind of government-to-government cyberspying is fair game and something the United States does as well. But they draw the line at Beijing stealing commercial trade secrets, saying that sort of behavior violates an unwritten code of conduct in the world of espionage.

China, of course, denies that its cyberspies turn over the secrets they uncover to Chinese companies, claiming that private hackers are to blame. And these officials point to recent Chinese legislation that targets such criminals. Yet Chinese officials say commercial intelligence is a valid target for their spies. "I saw this argument floated two years ago in discussions with the Chinese," recalls James Lewis, a former senior State Department official who has dealt with China on espionage-related issues. "The Chinese said, 'No way. We get it—you want to define the rules of the game so you win. We don't find that very appealing.'"

Fed up with China's hacking, some U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials favor imposing sanctions in advance of Xi's visit against Chinese individuals and companies responsible for cyberattacks on U.S. corporations. "This would be a demonstration that the U.S. government is willing to introduce some friction into the relationship right before the summit," says Robert Knake, who recently stepped down as the White House's director for cybersecurity policy. "The Chinese government just might say, 'This is just not worth it anymore. Look what it's doing to the U.S. relationship, and look what it's doing to our companies, which will have a harder time competing abroad, getting international financing, closing deals abroad.' At least, that's the hope."

But others say the administration will likely wait until after Xi's visit to determine if punitive measures are needed. Some China experts warn that whatever the timing, sanctions will provoke an angry Chinese response. In the wake of the U.S. indictment last year of five Chinese army officers for hacking into the networks of several major American corporations, Beijing pulled out of a working group to address cybersecurity issues. It's unclear how China would respond to sanctions, but it could trigger a cycle of retaliation at a time when global markets are increasingly concerned about the future of the Chinese—and global—marketplace. In fact, some experts fear any new tensions could undermine what they hope will be one of the summit's most important outcomes—a statement by both leaders indicating that the world's two largest economies are not descending into a bruising economic slugfest. "People may care about disputed rocks in the South China Sea, but they care a lot more about their 401(k)s," says Bader, now a China scholar at the Brookings Institution.

In a move to counter the prospect of sanctions, China is co-hosting a September 23 forum in Seattle during the first leg of Xi's visit. He, along with top Chinese technology officials and executives, has invited the leaders of the major American tech companies, including Apple, Facebook, Google and IBM, to discuss doing business in China, the world's largest Internet market. Though Beijing prevents Facebook and Google from operating on Chinese soil, the prospect of that changing will make the invitation hard to refuse. And U.S. officials worry the gathering will undermine Obama's ability to pressure China on commercial cyberspying.

U.S. experts say the only way to resolve the espionage dispute is some sort of give-and-take between the two countries. But the U.S. would have to identify not only what it needs from the Chinese but also what Washington would be willing to give up in exchange. One possible carrot: stopping U.S. electronic spy flights along China's coast. Yet short of a complete halt to China's cyberespionage against U.S. companies, it's not clear what Washington would be willing to accept in return. "We need a real strategic dialogue that talks about how we come

to a stable arrangement between opponents," says Lewis, who now directs the technology and public policy program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank. "That's what we have to recognize. We're not friends anymore."

In the meantime, the Pentagon's cyberwarriors are preparing for battle against their counterparts in China. In a September 8 statement, Admiral Michael S. Rogers, commander of the new U.S. Cyber Command, said "intellectual property and personal information" are vital American assets his soldiers will protect from foreign cyberspies. "When the Pentagon steps up and says we're going to protect intellectual property and personal information, that's throwing down the gauntlet against" Chinese hackers, says Justin Harvey, chief security officer for Fidelis Cybersecurity, a computer security company whose clients include the U.S. Army and Commerce Department.

Perhaps, but when Obama and Xi meet in Washington, don't expect the same sort of tough talk from the White House. The Chinese leader won't have much patience for American lectures or reprimands. Even with its economic problems, China remains America's largest importer, the third largest market for American exports and an increasingly central player in the global economy. And that means Obama is likely to tread carefully around his visitor from Beijing once again.

RETURN TO TOP