



Written statement for the record
The International Rescue Committee

Submitted to the
U.S. House Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Immigration and Citizenship

Hearing on the Current State of the U.S. Refugee Program

February 27, 2020

Chairwoman Zoe Lofgren, Vice Chairwoman Pramila Jayapal, Ranking Member Ken Buck, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement for the record regarding the state of the U.S. refugee resettlement program.

The International Rescue Committee (IRC) helps people whose lives and livelihoods have been shattered by conflict and disaster to survive, recover, and regain control of their future. Working in over 40 countries overseas and in 25 cities across the United States, the IRC knows well the reasons people flee, what they experience in countries of first refuge, and the safety and security they find when they have the opportunity to rebuild their lives in new communities. In the United States, the IRC resettles refugees and provides services to promote self-reliance and the social and economic integration of refugees, asylees, victims of human trafficking and other vulnerable immigrants.

Today, we find ourselves amidst a global refugee crisis, driven by unresolved, increasingly violent conflict. The average length of conflict now stretches to 37 years, a function of change from interstate wars between states to intrastate conflicts between a proliferation of non-state and proxy actors.¹ Conflicts are also increasingly violent, forcing civilians to flee for safety. In 2019, there were 41 active, highly violent conflicts globally—up from 36 at the beginning of 2018.² Accordingly, as of 2018, a record 70.8 million people were forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations. 41.3 million of these are people internally displaced in their home country, and 25.9 million are refugees—people who have crossed borders to seek safety in another country.³

Given the length of conflicts, refugees are displaced for increasing periods of time: as of 2018, 78 percent of refugees were displaced for five or more consecutive years in a row in a neighboring country, and of this group, more than one third were in a situation lasting 20 years or more.⁴ And although the headlines

¹ Bennett, Christina. Time to let go: remaking humanitarian action for the modern era. Humanitarian Policy Group. April 2016. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/10422.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

² Global Humanitarian Overview 2020. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. December 2019. https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/GHO-2020_v8.7%2006122019%202pm.pdf (Accessed February 25, 2020).

³ Figures at a Glance. The UN Refugee Agency. June 19, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html> (Accessed February 25, 2020).

⁴ Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018. The UN Refugee Agency. June 20, 2019. Page 22. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020)

are dominated by people seeking safety in Europe or the United States, the vast majority of refugees—84 percent—are hosted in low- and middle-income countries neighboring conflict.⁵ In fact, as of 2016, 10 countries, with just 2.5 percent of global GDP, hosted over half of all refugees.⁶

Yet, in this time of overwhelming global need, pathways to safety are limited and often dangerous. Given unmitigated conflict, the options for refugees to make a safe, voluntary, and dignified return home are few, with less than three percent of refugees returning home in 2018.⁷ Enduring barriers to integration in major refugee-hosting countries mean that few refugees can rebuild their lives and achieve self-sufficiency in host countries, and millions are left in uncertain limbo. Refugee children are five times less likely to attend school than other children in the countries in which they are displaced, risking a lost generation.⁸ Nearly half of refugee-hosting countries have a complete bar to employment of refugees, and many of those that allow refugees to work impose significant de facto barriers to employment, such as strict encampment policies limiting freedom of movement or exorbitant permit fees.⁹ With limited permanent solutions, resettlement is the solution of last resort available to less than one percent of the world's refugees who are both at risk in their hot country and unable to safely return home.

But even this limited option is becoming increasingly scarce. Led by the United States' retreat from resettlement, global resettlement slots are down 50 percent, from 189,300 in 2016 to 102,800 in 2017 and just 92,400 refugees in 2018, according to government statistics reported to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). In 2019, UNHCR-facilitated resettlement met just 5 percent of global resettlement needs.¹⁰ Without renewed U.S. leadership, the gap between resettlement needs and spaces will only continue to widen.

While the U.S. has a long tradition of being the global leader in refugee protection and offering refuge to those fleeing persecution and war, this legacy is under threat. Since the establishment of the modern-day refugee resettlement program in 1980, presidents have set an average annual refugee admissions ceiling of 95,000 and resettled an average of 80,000 refugees per year. And, during times of great global need, previous administrations were responsive: President Ronald Reagan set an admissions ceiling of 140,000 for FY82 and allocated 96,000 resettlement slots¹¹ within that ceiling for Indochinese refugees fleeing violence in Southeast Asia, and President George H. W. Bush set a ceiling of 142,000 for FY93 in response to emerging needs from the Bosnian War.¹²

In stark contrast, President Trump has cut annual refugee admissions ceilings by more than 80 percent despite growing global needs: from 110,000 to 50,000 in FY17, 45,000 in FY18, 30,000 in FY19 and now 18,000 in FY20. These plummeting figures are not just numbers. They represent individuals in need of refuge for whom safe haven in the U.S. is no longer an option or an increasingly distant possibility.

For some, the Trump administration's policies to shut the door on refugees have been the equivalent of a death sentence. Take, for example, Mr. Seid Moradi—a 54-year old refugee fleeing religious persecution

⁵ Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018. The UN Refugee Agency. June 20, 2019. Page 2. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020)

⁶ Tackling the Global Refugee Crisis: From Shirking to Sharing Responsibility. Amnesty International. 2016. <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/POL4049052016ENGLISH.PDF>

⁷ Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018. The UN Refugee Agency. June 20, 2019. Page 28. <https://www.unhcr.org/5d08d7ee7.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

⁸ Left Behind: Refugee Education in Crisis. The UN Refugee Agency. Page 9. <https://www.unhcr.org/59b696f44.pdf> (Accessed February 26, 2020).

⁹ Global Refugee Work Rights Report. Asylum Access and the Refugee Work Rights Coalition. 2014. Page 5. https://asylumaccess.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/FINAL_Global-Refugee-Work-Rights-Report-2014_Interactive.pdf (Accessed February 26, 2020).

¹⁰ Less than 5 percent of global refugee resettlement needs met last year. The UN Refugee Agency. February 19, 2019. <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/briefing/2019/2/5c6bc9704/5-cent-global-refugee-resettlement-needs-met-year.html> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

¹¹ Bon Tempo, Carl J. Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees During the Cold War. Princeton University Press. Page 187.

¹² Dyssegaard Kallick, David and Silva Mathema. Refugee Integration in the United States. Center for American Progress. June 2016. Page 6. <https://cdn.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/15112912/refugeeintegration.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020)

in Iran who was approved for resettlement to the U.S. but whose travel was prevented by the Trump administration's refugee ban. As a result, Mr. Moradi was kept from reunifying with his family and receiving life-saving surgery. He passed away after waiting an additional 15 months to be resettled to the United States.¹³ Unfortunately, Mr. Moradi's story is not unique. As a result of the Trump administration's policies, countless families languish in limbo, waiting for safety and reunification with loved ones.

The drastic reduction in refugee resettlement is also threatening the sustainability of critical services refugees and other vulnerable groups receive once in the United States. Since 2016, over 100 refugee resettlement offices have had no choice but to close their doors or suspend resettlement services. The steady weakening of resettlement program infrastructure is harmful to those already in the United States seeking to rebuild their lives and give back to their community. This infrastructure, built from the strong support of local communities across the U.S., could take years to rebuild.

Moreover, for cities and communities in demographic decline, the reduction in welcoming refugees means jobs in critical industries are going unfilled.¹⁴ While resettling refugees is first and foremost a humanitarian imperative, the reality is that refugee resettlement is good for America. The rate of entrepreneurship among refugees is nearly 50 percent higher than among U.S.-born populations: in 2015, 181,000 refugee entrepreneurs brought in \$4.6 billion in business income.¹⁵ An unpublished 2017 study by the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees contributed \$63 billion in revenue over the past decade.¹⁶

This year, in addition to decreasing the *number* of refugees admitted to the U.S. annually, the Trump administration has made deep changes to the *composition* of those admitted. The administration removed regional allocations for refugee admissions, moving the USRAP yet another step away from the program established by Congress four decades ago. Regional allocations within the refugee admissions ceiling have historically aligned with populations in greatest need of resettlement and of humanitarian concern or national interest to the United States. The administration replaced regional allocations with four new allocations based entirely on groups of "special interest" to the U.S. In doing so, the administration eliminated the needs-based component of the refugee program.

These allocation categories, combined with the historically low refugee admissions ceiling, all but lock out some of the largest populations in need—notably refugees from the Middle East and from Africa. These two regions alone account for over 90 percent of the 1.4 million refugees globally in need of resettlement, with Syria alone accounting for 40 percent of all needs. Comparing admissions during the same four-month period of FY16 and FY20 shows that admissions of refugees from Africa and the Middle East have fallen 89 percent and 74 percent respectively.

To make matters worse, the new allocation categories all but guarantee that the administration will be unable to resettle all 18,000 refugees in FY20. The resettlement of refugees fleeing religious persecution and refugees in the "other" allocation¹⁷ is on pace to cap out at 5,000 and 7,500 respectively. But, admissions in the other two allocations are lagging far behind. Nearly 40 percent through the fiscal year, admissions of Iraqis who supported U.S. missions abroad (Iraqi P-2s) are just 1 percent towards their allocation of 4,000, despite over 100,000 in need of resettlement. Admissions of Central Americans are just 10 percent towards their allocation of 1,500.

¹³ A family broken after the promise of refuge. The International Rescue Committee. April 11, 2019.

<https://www.rescue.org/video/family-broken-after-promise-refuge> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

¹⁴ (Un)welcome: the state of refugee resettlement in America. The International Rescue Committee. June 2018.

<https://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/document/2854/unwelcome-irc-report-june-2018-final.pdf> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

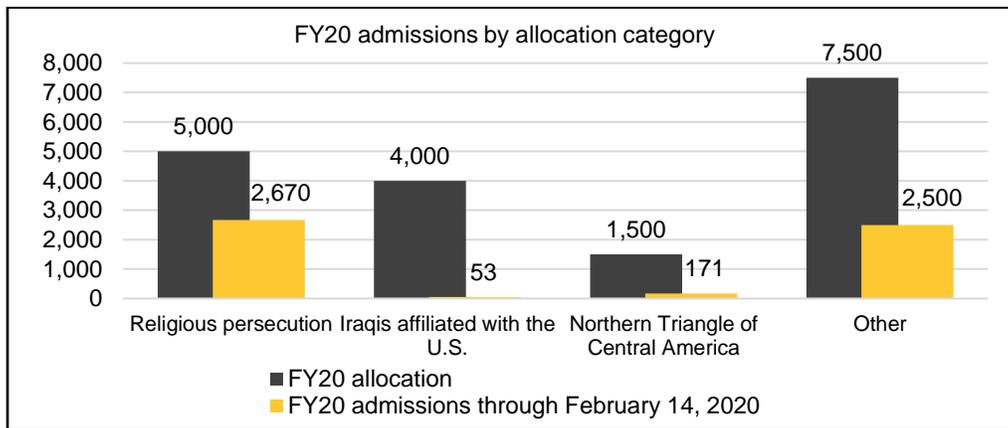
¹⁵ From Struggle to Resilience: The Economic Impact of Refugees in America. New American Economy. June 19, 2017.

<https://research.newamericaneconomy.org/report/from-struggle-to-resilience-the-economic-impact-of-refugees-in-america/> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

¹⁶ Rejected Report Shows Revenue Brought In by Refugees. The New York Times. September 19, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/09/19/us/politics/document-Refugee-Report.html> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

¹⁷ The "other" allocation consists of 7,500 slots for refugees who are referred by a U.S. embassy; refugees who qualify for family reunification; refugees in Australia, Nauru, or Papua New Guinea who benefit from an arrangement between the U.S. and Australia; and refugees who were approved for resettlement and ready to travel to the U.S. as of September 30, 2019.



If admissions continue at this pace, the U.S. will resettle just 13,200 refugees, less than three-fourths of the 18,000 ceiling. The administration must significantly increase processing of Central American and Iraqi refugees or proactively take steps to ensure flexibility across the allocation categories in order to meet the ceiling. This is a goal well within reach—last year, the U.S. resettled 30,000 refugees and historic average admissions are 80,000 annually. With so few resettlement spaces available and over 1.4 million refugees in need of resettlement, no slot should go unfilled.

The U.S. retreat from resettlement has profound implications for America’s foreign policy, national security interests, and global stability. The U.S. has often leveraged its refugee resettlement program, combined with humanitarian assistance, to encourage host countries to continue providing safe haven, as well as access to certain rights, to significantly larger populations of displaced people. When the U.S. provides concrete support to its allies, it helps to ensure regional stability in areas and stabilize key strategic allies in countries disproportionately affected by forced displacement, like Jordan, Turkey and Uganda. In the absence of U.S. leadership, the risk is forced returns that not only send refugees back to dangerous conditions, but also have the potential to further destabilize countries struggling with ongoing violence and insecurity. Of the 15 largest refugee returns since 1991, approximately one-third were followed by renewed fighting within a couple of years.¹⁸

Today, the U.S. has lost leverage and credibility to hold other countries accountable to upholding their humanitarian obligations. Take, for example, the ongoing crisis in Syria, which remains the largest displacement crisis in the world with over half of Syrians displaced. In 2020, this humanitarian crisis has only deteriorated further: violence has displaced 948,000 from Idlib province since December, over 500,000 of them children. The humanitarian response is complicated by the violence and constraints on reaching populations in need.

Syria’s neighbors in the region, namely Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, have responded with generosity by hosting 5.6 million Syrian refugees. These major refugee-hosting countries require greater support from the international community given the scale and protracted nature of the Syrian crisis. Conditions in many areas of Syria are not yet suitable for these populations to safely and sustainably return home, particularly given active conflict and reduced humanitarian access.¹⁹ U.S. humanitarian leadership is therefore more critical than ever to promote pathways to protection for Syrians, advocate for refugee-friendly policies in host countries and prevent involuntary or uninformed returns to Syria that are not in line with international humanitarian law. Otherwise, the consequences will be devastating for Syrians and for regional stability.

¹⁸ Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and Their Hosts. World Bank Group. 2017. Page 108. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/25016/9781464809385.pdf> (Accessed February 20, 2020.)

¹⁹ Emergency Watchlist 2020. The International Rescue Committee. January 2020. <https://www.rescue.org/resource/irc-emergency-watchlist-2020> (Accessed February 20, 2020).

The implications of the U.S. retreat from resettlement are similarly dire for U.S. national security. For tens of thousands of Iraqis and Afghans who have served alongside the U.S. military as interpreters, security details, and intelligence experts, resettlement fulfills America's commitment to leave no one behind. Many of these individuals face threats to their life as a result of their critical support to the United States. No more than 500 Iraqi P-2s were admitted in FY19, in contrast to over 5,100 in FY16. Admission of Afghan Special Immigrant Visas (SIV) recipients dropped 53 percent over the same period. In response to these declines, in 2019, 27 of the nation's most distinguished retired military officers called the U.S. resettlement program a "critical lifeline" for those who served alongside U.S. troops and implored the administration to "protect this vital program and ensure that the next refugee admissions goal is commensurate with global resettlement needs" (see Appendix I).²⁰ The abdication of responsibility on the part of the Trump administration threatens the national security interests of the U.S., the success of ongoing missions, and the safety of U.S. troops.

These harmful policy changes, amounting to the dismantling of the refugee resettlement program, come at a time when support for welcoming refugees is at an all-time high. Public opinion polling by Pew confirms the commitment to welcoming refugees that the IRC sees in communities across the country: 73 percent of Americans believe taking in refugees escaping war and violence is an important goal, an increase from 61 percent in 2016.²¹ This shift is driven in large part by a surge in support among Republicans, the majority of whom—58 percent—support U.S. refugee resettlement, up 18 percent from 2016. While the administration is turning a blind eye to this resounding support, state and local officials are stepping up. In response to President Trump's executive order requiring states and localities to affirmatively consent to refugee resettlement (Executive Order 13888), 43 governors, including 19 Republicans, and over 100 counties across the nation issued consent. This overwhelmingly supportive response marks a sea change from 2015, when 31 governors across the nation sought to halt admission of Syrian refugees.

As the 40th anniversary of the creation of the modern-day refugee admissions program approaches, it has never been more critical for Congress to ensure the U.S. resumes its leadership in refugee protection. Congress passed the 1980 Refugee Act with near unanimous bipartisan support to create a regularized and systematic process for refugee admissions based on humanitarian need and U.S. interests. Today, the drastic and sudden drop in resettlement—combined with the elimination of the needs-based component of the program—runs counter to congressional intent and the law.

At a time of great global need, it is incumbent upon Congress to step in and restore America's legacy of refugee protection through oversight and legislation. In order to meet the FY20 refugee admissions ceiling, the IRC urges Congress to conduct oversight into the pace of admissions across allocation categories and the administration's plans to meet the 18,000 ceiling. Congress should also ask the administration to invest the necessary resources to meet all allocations or proactively take steps to ensure flexibility across these allocations.

In order to restore and strengthen the refugee admissions program, Congress should once again step in, just as it did in 1980 to reestablish regular and predictable refugee admissions. In the face of the dismantling of the refugee admissions program, the IRC urges Congress to pass legislation that sets a minimum refugee admissions level in accordance with global need and U.S. interests. The IRC strongly supports the four pieces of legislation in Congress that establish such a minimum ceiling: the Guaranteed Refugee Admissions Ceiling Enhancement (GRACE) Act, the Refugee Protection Act (RPA), the Lady Liberty Act, and the New Deal for New Americans. Just as the 1980 Refugee Act was passed with resounding bipartisan support, we urge Members of Congress on both sides of the aisle to support these critical pieces of legislation.

²⁰ Letter to President Donald Trump from 27 retired military leaders. September 3, 2019. Published online by the New York Times. <https://int.nyt.com/data/documenthelper/1694-generals-letter-refugee/46f652adbbef5a13c2c0/optimized/full.pdf#page=1> (Accessed February 20, 2020).

²¹ Daniller, Andrew. Americans' immigration policy priorities: Divisions between – and within – the two parties. Pew Research Center. November 12, 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/11/12/americans-immigration-policy-priorities-divisions-between-and-within-the-two-parties/> (Accessed on February 20, 2020).

Appendix I: Letter from 27 distinguished retired military officers calling for robust U.S. refugee admissions

September 3, 2019

President Donald J. Trump
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We, retired General and Flag Officers of the U.S. military who served alongside our men and women in combat, write to express our grave concerns about recent reports that the administration may further reduce refugee admissions for FY2020. For decades, the refugee resettlement program has provided life-saving assistance, demonstrated our humanitarian leadership and values, supported allies hosting the vast majority of refugees, and served critical national security interests. While refugee resettlement has long received bi-partisan support, with a historic average admissions goal of 95,000 refugees annually, America's legacy of welcoming refugees is now on the line. Refugee admissions have been reduced to historic lows, with the FY19 refugee admissions goal at just 30,000, leaving thousands in harm's way. Further cuts would undermine commitments made to allies and partners on the ground, our national security missions overseas, and the domestic infrastructure here in the United States that supports the successful integration of refugees, including those who served alongside U.S. troops. We urge you to protect this vital program and ensure that the next refugee admissions goal is commensurate with global resettlement needs.

U.S. military, diplomatic, and intelligence operations abroad rely on the support of thousands of interpreters, translators, advisors, engineers, and others to fulfill their objectives. When their lives and those of their families are threatened because of this support, the U.S. refugee resettlement program provides a critical lifeline. Over nearly two decades, thousands of Iraqis and Afghans have put their lives on the line to support U.S. efforts overseas. The Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) and Iraqi direct access (P-2) programs were created to uphold our nation's commitment to leave no one behind, providing safety to those partners and their families who risk retribution for their support. We have personally borne witness to how these programs ensure the safety of our servicemembers and success of U.S. missions.

In conjunction with U.S. foreign aid, refugee resettlement offers concrete support to our allies and frontline nations hosting more than their fair share of refugees. Providing safe haven to the most vulnerable refugees--those that cannot be safe in their countries of first refuge--demonstrates America's humanitarian leadership and supports regional stability by preventing premature returns back to war-torn or unstable countries. When America turns its back on refugees, we are challenged to call on our allies to accept them, ultimately risking premature returns, like those of Syrians back to an unstable Syria, Somalis back to an unstable Somalia and Afghans back to an unstable Afghanistan. Such premature returns not only put refugees in harm's way, they also further cycles of instability and insecurity in critical regions, increasing pressure on military action.

For these reasons, we urge you to protect this vital program and ensure that the refugee admissions goal is robust, in line with decades-long precedent, and commensurate with today's urgent global needs.

Thank you for your attention to this critical matter.

General Keith B. Alexander, USA (Ret.)
Director, National Security Agency ('05-'14); Commander, US Cyber Command ('10-'14)

General John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.)
Commander, NATO International Security Assistance Force and Commander, US Forces Afghanistan ('11-'13)

Admiral Thad W. Allen, USCG (Ret.)
Commandant, US Coast Guard ('06-'10)

Lieutenant General John M. Bednarek, USA (Ret.)
Chief, Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq ('13-'15)

General John F. Campbell, USA (Ret.)
Commander, International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan and NATO's Resolute Support Mission ('14-'16)

General Peter W. Chiarelli, USA (Ret.)
Vice Chief of Staff, US Army ('08-'12)

General Wesley K. Clark, Sr., USA (Ret.)
US Commander-in-Chief, US Southern Command ('96-'97); US Commander-in-Chief, US European Command ('97-'00); Supreme Allied Commander Europe ('97-'00)

General Martin E. Dempsey, USA (Ret.)
Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff ('11-'15)

Major General Paul D. Eaton, USA (Ret.)
Commander, Iraqi Army Training Program ('03-'04); Senior Advisor, VoteVets Foundation ('14-present)

Admiral Thomas B. Fargo, USN (Ret.)
Commander, U.S. Pacific Command ('02-'05)

Admiral Edmund P. Giambastiani, Jr., USN (Ret.)
Vice Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff ('05-'07); Commander, US Joint Forces Command ('02-'05); NATO Supreme Allied Commander Transformation ('03-'05)

Admiral Jonathan W. Greenert, USN (Ret.)
Chief of Naval Operations, US Navy ('11-'15)

Lt. General Frank G. Helmick, USA (Ret.)
Commanding General, XVIII Airborne Corps ('09-'12)

Lt. General Mark P. Hertling, USA (Ret.)
Commanding General, US Army Europe ('11-'12)

Lt. General Claudia J. Kennedy, USA (Ret.)
Deputy Chief of Staff for Army Intelligence, US Army ('97-'00)

Admiral Samuel J. Locklear III, USN (Ret.)
Commander, US Pacific Command ('12-'15)

Lt. General Douglas E. Lute, USA (Ret.)
Special Assistant to the President and Senior Coordinator for Afghanistan and Pakistan, National Security Council, The White House ('09-'13)

General Stanley A. McChrystal, USA (Ret.)
Commander, International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan ('09-'10)

Admiral William H. McRaven, USN (Ret.)
Commander, US Special Operations Command ('11-'14)

Admiral Michael G. Mullen, USN, (Ret.)
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff ('07-'11)

Admiral Robert J. Natter, USN (Ret.)
Commander, Fleet Forces Command and Commander, US Atlantic Fleet ('00-'03)

General John W. Nicholson Jr., USA (Ret.)
Commander, NATO's Resolute Support Mission and Commander, US Forces Afghanistan ('16-'18)
General Raymond T. Odierno, USA (Ret.)
Chief of Staff, US Army ('11-'15), Commanding General, US Forces in Iraq ('08-'10)

General David H. Petraeus, USA (Ret.)
Director, Central Intelligence Agency ('11-'12); Commander, Coalition Forces in Afghanistan ('10-'11) and Iraq ('07-'08)

Admiral James G. Stavridis, USN (Ret.)
Commander, US European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander, Europe ('09-'13);
Commander, US Southern Command ('06-'09)

General Joseph Votel, USA (Ret.)
Commander, US Central Command ('16-'19)

General Anthony C. Zinni, USMC (Ret.)
Commander in Chief, US Central Command ('97-'00)

CC: The Honorable John R. Bolton, U.S. National Security Advisor
The Honorable Michael R. Pompeo, Secretary of State
The Honorable Mark T. Esper, Secretary of Defense
The Honorable Alex M. Azar, Secretary of Health and Human Services
The Honorable Kevin H. McAleenan, Acting Secretary of Homeland Security