**Why Sustainable Public Utilities Are A Security Issue**

# Event Transcript:

## Keynote Address

## Featuring:

**General Kenneth F. McKenzie**

***Commander, United States Central Command***

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES | MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

**Jon Alterman:**

Good afternoon and welcome to CSIS. I'm Jon Alterman, senior vice president, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and the director of the Middle East Program. I'm delighted to welcome you to a program to mark the publication of a new report, “Sustainable States: Environment, Governance, and the Future of the Middle East.” Before we get started, I want to thank His Excellency Ambassador Meshal bin Hamad Al Thani, the ambassador of the State of Qatar to the United States, for his support of the project on which the report is based. We're grateful to him for his enthusiasm for the project and for his excitement about the ideas it generated. I also want to thank the project’s advisory board of senior experts, who advised us on all aspects of the report, as well as the working group of regional experts who brought tremendous field expertise to our deliberations.

Finally, I want to thank more than five dozen experts in the Middle East whom we interviewed for this project. Their experiments and experiences animated our work and gave us a sense of just how important it could be. The importance of environmentally sustainable public utilities in the Middle East is an improbable topic for a Washington think tank study. Yet many countries in the Middle East face serious challenges providing utilities in any manner to their populations, and the failure to do so is an increasing flashpoint for public dissatisfaction. This study finds that providing more environmentally sustainable services in the Middle East would be an effective way to address many citizens’ grievances that go beyond the mere reliability of the services.

It would also help ameliorate dissatisfaction with the quality of governance and helping build trust between citizens and their governments. The study examines three sectors: power, water, and sanitation and solid waste in Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia. Although the three countries are different in many ways, each faces increasing challenges providing services to their citizens. Providing these services in an environmentally sustainable way would also crucially increase each country's resilience and diminish their vulnerability in a chronically unstable region. The study found that the provision of environmentally sustainable services would have a number of salutary effects: it would provide services economically, it would do so in ways that minimize pollution and conserve vital resources, and it would help empower local authorities that are closely connected to their citizenry.

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Perhaps more importantly, providing localized, environmentally sustainable services would address the yawning trust deficit between millions of citizens and their governments. The halo effect of effective governance would—in the estimation of the study's authors—spread to many other aspects of public life. The topic seems mundane and technical—maybe not worthy of high-level attention—but instead it should be seen as the more persistent way many citizens in the Middle East see their governments. Success in the endeavor would not only preserve the environment for future generations but also contribute to lasting social peace as well. And to address the issue of peace and security, we could not have a better keynote speaker.

General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., is the commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). He has an illustrious resume and much of what I will leave out is just as impressive of what I include. He was trained as an infantry officer, and he's commanded at the platoon, company, battalion, Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU), and component levels. His career has led him to a string of senior positions in the field, at the U.S. Central Command, and in the Pentagon. As the commanding officer of the 22nd MEU, he led the unit on combat deployments to Afghanistan in 2004 and Iraq in 2005–2006. He subsequently served as the military secretary to the 33rd and 34th commandants in the Marine Corps and the Joint Staff as deputy director of operations within the National Military Command Center.

In 2008–2009, he was director of the new administration's transition team, which was created by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. In June 2009, he reported to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul, Afghanistan, to serve as the deputy to the deputy chief of staff for stability. Upon his return from Afghanistan in July 2010, he was assigned as the Director of Strategy, Plans, and Policy, or the J5, for the U.S. Central Command. In 2014, he assumed command of U.S. Marine Corps forces in Central Command, and a year later, was appointed as the director of the J5 Strategic Plans and Policy on the Joint Staff. In July 2017, he was named the director of the Joint Staff. General McKenzie was promoted to his current rank and assumed command of the U.S. Central Command in March 2019. In his current position, General McKenzie has established a reputation as someone who is frank, open, and engaging, and we are delighted to welcome him to CSIS. General McKenzie.

**General McKenzie:**

Jon Alterman, thank you for that introduction. It's a pleasure to be invited to CSIS to talk about your recent project on sustainable states. As the combatant commander responsible for the military dimensions of U.S. policy across the Middle East and central Asia, I must admit that environmental issues don't always feature prominently among my command priorities. That said, I'm also deeply convinced that those issues ought to be prioritized to a higher degree, since failure to account for them or mitigate their effects on the operating environment can negatively impact our mission and can bring additional hardship to local populations. Environmental concerns are often a key driver of conflict because they deal with basic human needs. Water scarcity—in particular—is an area of increasing concern throughout the region and beyond.

As an example, one of Egypt's top foreign policy priorities is finding a diplomatic resolution to Ethiopia's filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). It's on the Nile River, which feeds into neighboring Sudan and Egypt. Egypt characterizes the GERD issue as an existential threat. The Hindu Kush and Himalayan glaciers are quickly melting and can undermine the water supply for two billion people living across central and south Asia. It is certainly not inconceivable that issues like water scarcity could drive a conflict involving three nuclear armed states: Pakistan, India, and China.

The problem is acute within U.S. Central Command's area of responsibility. In fact, 12 of the 17 most water stressed countries in the world are in the CENTCOM region. And

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while many scholars have researched and debated the relationship between water and conflict, we've already begun to see the impact of water scarcity on local communities in the region. Many of us take for granted access to basic services, such as water, sanitation, and electricity. That's not the case in much of the world, where a lack of access to these services often gives rise to the underlying frustrations that fuel local instability, governance structures, and emboldened extremist groups that exploit community grievances. Now I realize that some Americans look at issues like this and are inclined to think, "What a pity. I'm sorry, but that's really not our problem." And here's where I think they're ill-informed.

We must show leadership in the region, or we can expect instability or other actors to fill a leadership vacuum. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that we live in an increasingly interconnected world where infectious diseases can spread easily across international borders. And they're exacerbated by inadequate water, sanitation, hygiene, and health care. China, which still relies on the Gulf for half of its energy supplies, is the most likely contender. It is eager to supplant the United States as the preferred partner in the region and is actively making inroads. China's principal mechanism for doing this is its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which offers nations like Lebanon and Tunisia, each featured in your report, the promise of quick and easy infrastructure development at the cost of long-term debt, disregard for sustainability, and eventual entanglement.

The fact that neither of these countries are major energy exporters should tell you that China's interest in the Middle East and North Africa extend well beyond oil. Straddling the world's major shipping routes, the region will remain a key terrain in a geostrategic sense long after we've completed the transition to renewable sources of energy. As such, it is one of the principal arenas for strategic competition between two systems with very different values when it comes to fair play in the international system of states, and indeed, basic human rights. Our commitment to human rights is long-standing U.S. policy. It is the American thing to do, and it's also a priority of President Biden. It's also a sound strategy—one that ensures stability in the region while upholding a rules-based international order, on which our way of life depends.

If we do not provide a vision of the future, based on human dignity and democratic values, China or others will provide an alternative vision. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic has reminded us that, again, that we live in an increasingly interconnected world where infectious diseases can spread and are exacerbated by conditions that I've already talked about. This is not tomorrow's problem. It is an urgent challenge today, as I'm sure many of the people interviewed for your report would agree. Just how urgent it is should be clear by my presence with you here today. If you've been watching the news, you're aware that my top priority at present is to complete the orderly withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan as safely and swiftly as possible. I also retain responsibility for deterring Iran from undermining the security and stability of the region and that violent extremist organizations are never again capable of launching attacks on

the United States or the homelands of our allies.

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These are tough, demanding tasks that fully occupy my headquarters. But in a certain respect, these are the most straightforward of my missions. I won't say it is the easiest because they're not and because the stakes so high. Nonetheless, we know how to use the instrument of military power in tandem with our coalition and inter-agency partners to accomplish those missions. Far harder to solve are complex environmental, economic, political, and societal problems—such as those highlighted in your report. If you wait until tomorrow to address them, you may well discover that they can no longer be solved. It's become commonplace to state that there is no military solution to problems of this kind, and while that's certainly true, it cannot become an excuse for inaction.

During a recent trip to Lebanon, I visited a USAID solar powered water pumping station and a reservoir in the Bekaa Valley and was briefed on the impact of water shortages on local communities. The visit highlighted the immense efforts undertaken by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) engaging with governments and civil society across the region in order to develop sustainable solutions to complex issues. It reinforced what I heard about water programs during visits to Jordan and Pakistan and also confirmed what I already knew: namely, that popular discontent can easily arise when governments are not able to meet a population's basic needs. In today's information environment, malign and opportunistic actors who work in the digitized shadows of social media to exploit that discontent and radicalize society's youngest members in order to further their agendas, to devastating effect in some cases.

As far as I'm concerned, this is the nexus, really, of a security developmental matter. The bottom line is, if we can develop whole-of-government, or, frankly, whole-of-society approaches with our partners in the Middle East to address these environmental and governance issues, then the likelihood of violent, sociopolitical movements and violent extremism will decrease significantly. When a country is stable politically and economically, it is less likely to exhibit violent insecurity that would ultimately require military attention. And that's sort of my bottom line. Let me pause here to emphasize the point. I'm not speaking about hypotheticals. I'm talking about the hard won and unmistakable lessons of the past decade.

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For a generation and more, we have known that we will never truly defeat the scourge of global terrorism until we have addressed the underlying circumstances that cultivate its adherence. Among those circumstances are the conditions that your report addresses. While there are not obvious military millions to improve them, their implications for national security are

unmistakable. There's probably no clearer manifestation of this problem than the vulnerability of the approximately 60,000 inhabitants of the al-Hol camp for displaced persons in Syria. This is the largest of dozens of camps that are overwhelmingly inhabited by women and children. Many were forced to flee their homes ahead of Islamic State Group (ISG) violence and some are the wives and children of ISG fighters. In the near term, al-Hol and other camps like it are vulnerable to an outbreak of disease—like Covid-19 or cholera.

These camps also pose a risk of incubating a toxic ideology that ISG will use to recruit the next generation of fighters. This is not a military problem to solve, but if ignored, it will become a military problem just a few more years from now. Outside of al-Hol camp, the nearby communities in northeast Syria regularly suffer from water shortages that have resulted in increasing cases of waterborne illnesses in recent months.

The Alouk water station in northeast Syria, which serves a population of nearly half a million people, has been an increasing source of tension in local communities due to frequent shutoffs, insufficient water to serve the communities, and growing illness due to unsanitary conditions. Recent drought conditions, coupled with a worsening economic crisis, are exacerbating water and sanitation shortfalls and threatening further instability.

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Thankfully, we were able to depend on some of our most steadfast allies in the region to not only take responsibility for their own citizens, but also to provide safe havens for those displaced by the destabilizing influences of ISG and the repressive Assad regime of Syria. In this regard, I'd like to express my gratitude to Lebanon, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, and Turkey, for their willingness to host large numbers of refugees from Syria. Unfortunately, their generosity has not made the problem of providing adequate services to their own populations any easier. To the contrary, the compounding effects of refugees, the pandemic, and climate change have released acute problems for governments that, if not addressed soon, could result in crisis. I've already noted that the absence of a conspicuous military role in addressing these challenges, but this is not always the case and I'd like to turn my attention for a moment to Lebanon.

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I was last there in March, and I saw firsthand the hard work that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) was doing in assisting the government with managing some of the humanitarian challenges they were facing—ranging from security in the aftermath of the August 2020 Beirut port blast, to Covid-19. In U.S. national security jargon, we would call that “defense support to civil authority,” or “DSCA.” It's a crucial function in Lebanon because the country is battling a serious economic crisis and crippling governance issues and they're inextricably linked. The LAF has demonstrated that it remains a central, national linchpin in a

governance system that is otherwise fragmented along confessional lines.

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In that vein, when I last met with the LAF chief of staff, General Joseph Aoun, he stressed the importance of U.S. defense and security assistance in providing equipment, education, and training to his force, as well as non-traditional train-and-equip commodities, such as medicine and food, as they work hard to support local authorities during these trying times. Even though Tunisia is outside of my area of responsibility, and instead falls under U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM), allow me to make just a couple of comments on that segment of your report. As you noted, Tunisia, the birthplace of the Arab Spring, is the only country in the region to have experienced a full transition of power as a result of the 2011 social movement. Despite that successful transition, longstanding sociopolitical grievances remain and risk derailing the progress the country has made in the last decade.

A data point in your report that caught my eye was the relatively low number of Tunisians paying municipal taxes—I think it was 27 percent. As far as the governance piece is concerned, that low number illustrates some of the challenges faced by governments trying to implement sustainable programs.

The social contract works both ways: in exchange for protection, security, and services provided, populations are expected to pay taxes. In the absences of revenues, governments are unable to uphold their end of the bargain, and that takes us to the issue of trust. The report noted that the Middle East and North Africa, as a region, experiences a high level of trust deficit. Trust, whether it's relational, organizational, institutional, or political, is a critical factor in the optimal functioning of a government.

It provides governments with the legitimacy and breathing space they need to harness funds and technical expertise that they can organize—among other things—to gain them sustainable solutions to complex environmental issues. Dr. Alterman, I'd like to close my remarks here by thanking you once again for giving me the opportunity to appear at CSIS to discuss these important issues. To reiterate what I said before, my main aim today was to stress the importance of governance in providing for sustainable solutions for pressing resource issues in the region. If we succeed in this effort, then one would hope that we would find ourselves less militarily involved in the region. Thank you very much.

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**Jon Alterman:**

Thank you very much, General, for those very thoughtful remarks. If you have a couple of minutes for questions: Among your tours, you were the deputy to the Deputy Chief of Staff for Stability in Afghanistan. As you think back to that experience, was there a time when you felt that restoring public utilities played an out-sized role in promoting stability?

**General McKenzie:**

I'll talk specifically about my experience in Afghanistan, where you have a huge power generation problem—particularly in Kandahar in the south. I'll pick that as an example. We had a massively expensive diesel generator project—it was just stunningly expensive—to provide power. The problem was that we could never make that into a sustainable solution. First of all, Because the cost was so high, the Afghans were never going to be able to afford it. Secondly, you don't really pay for electricity in Afghanistan. It's a state where there's so many other ways to get electricity by tapping into a main somewhere—either legally or illegally. The disorganization of the society was so comprehensive that it was hard to put an electrical grid across it where you could gain government revenues that would allow them to pursue hydroelectric power. There are hydroelectric power opportunities in Afghanistan, but they were never able to connect that to a revenue system by getting people to pay those taxes. Some of it is cultural. They're not used to doing it in the past, and Afghanistan is certainly not alone in that. But that was one that was driven home to me very, very strongly. Rural electrification is actually something that is very effective in the counter-insurgency campaign because power can let people do a lot of things: for a farmer, it can mechanize farming to some degree; it can also assist in the mains of urban areas. It can do a broad number of things, but unless you're able to provide some kind of a virtual solution there, it's hard to get there.

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We failed at a lot of things in Afghanistan. I would tell you that I, personally, had a hand in failing there. It's one of the things that actually haunts me to this day.

**Jon Alterman:**

As you think back to your time in Afghanistan and in Iraq, was there a time when politics got deeply embedded in accesses to services in ways that you wish you could have changed?

**General McKenzie:**

I think you see that in Iraq today, where you've got regionalization. Some parts of the country, around Baghdad and the east, are going to get better treatment than others. The Kurds are political outliers, so they're going to get less, and that affects distribution of basic services. It also affects the way income comes into country. People sitting on oil in Iraq have got to go a long way before they're going to actually bring their oil extraction and exporting capability back. But politics plays a very direct role in that, and you would like to get beyond that. I saw that in Afghanistan, I saw it in Iraq as well, and it's unfortunate. It may be that we're never going to get completely rid of it, but if you're going to have a genuine society, people need to actually believe that they're going to get basic human services. Maybe not everybody equally, completely, all of the time, but I think we're well below that standard in both the countries that I've seen.

**Jon Alterman:**

Let me pivot to the issue of renewables. Our military has put a lot of resources into renewables, in part to avoid the need for so many convoys to support military outposts. As a commander in Iraq and Afghanistan, how do you think renewables would have changed the situation, if you were able to have outposts that were more self-sustaining—if there were more

regions of the country that ultimately were more self-sustaining?

**General McKenzie:**

Just from a very practical, tactical, military observation, it would have saved hundreds of American lives. Because we had to keep those routes open to move stuff and convoys—as you noted—we were relentlessly attacked in that. If you take that off the table, fewer Americans are going to die, and that's always a good thing. At the same time, you can also apply it to the population writ large, so from a tactical point of view, I think it's very useful. Expanding it to a higher level, I think it would also get at some of the things that we just talked about—renewable energy in particular—which would solve a lot of problems in Afghanistan. I just cite that as one example where we are going to continue to struggle. I think the struggle is only going to get worse in the next few months as we complete our withdrawal there, but there's a huge role for renewables on the ground militarily—also in terms of their ability to support a society.

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**Jon Alterman:**

Let me just connect the two streams of thought. If you have renewables—if you have more self-sufficient communities—how do you see that affecting politics? How does it affect the broader way politics work if you don't have the dependencies that current pattern lock you into?

**General McKenzie:**

Sure. In my opinion, I think that the effect would be that you would take that gun away from a political entity that wanted to use it for narrow, politically driven reasons. If you're arguing with someone, you can't cut their power off because they generate their own power, that's a lever that you can apply either in a malign way or in a directly political way.

**Jon Alterman:**

And do you see that happen a lot?

**General McKenzie:**

Yes—I think that's not uncommon. Sustainability gets to that, and it gets to that at the lowest level. You need to begin at the community level. I don't want to oversell it or make it appear rosier than it is because few things in the U.S. Central Command region are ever actually rosy.

**Jon Alterman:**

General McKenzie, thank you very much for taking time out of your busy schedule to join us. Thank you for your participation. Thank you for your wisdom and insights. We look forward to working with you and your team on these issues because I think we all agree they're going to be with us going forward as well.

**General McKenzie:**

They are, and the reason I took 30 minutes out of a pretty hectic schedule is because this is actually an important issue and your work on it is very good. I'm just glad to be able to say some things. Thanks for having me. I look forward to joining you again at some point to continue the dialogue. Thank you very much. I

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