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# McKenzie suggests the U.S. may not be able to prevent Al Qaeda and ISIS from rebuilding in Afghanistan.



By Eric Schmitt

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The top U.S. military commander in the Middle East expressed reservations about whether the United States could deny Al Qaeda and the Islamic State the ability to use Afghanistan as a launchpad for terrorist attacks now that American troops have left the country.

“That’s yet to be seen,” Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the head of the military’s Central Command, said in response to a question at the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. “We could get to that point, but I do not yet have that level of confidence.”

President Biden has vowed to prevent Al Qaeda and the Islamic State from rebuilding to the point where they could attack Americans or the United States.

But General McKenzie’s response underscored how difficult that task will be and was somewhat more pessimistic than the assessments of other top Pentagon officials at the hearing.

Defense Secretary Lloyd J. Austin III said the military could monitor and strike Al Qaeda and Islamic State cells from bases far away, if necessary. “Over-the-horizon operations are difficult but absolutely possible,” he said.

Testifying alongside Mr. Austin and General McKenzie, Gen. Mark A. Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said that a “reconstituted Al Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility.”

General Milley added, “And those conditions, to include activity in ungoverned spaces, could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months.”

Eric Schmitt is a senior writer who has traveled the world covering terrorism and national security. He was also the Pentagon correspondent. A member of the Times staff since 1983, he has shared three Pulitzer Prizes. [@EricSchmittNYT](#)

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