

POSTURE STATEMENT OF  
GENERAL KENNETH F. MCKENZIE, JR.,  
COMMANDER, UNITED STATES CENTRAL COMMAND  
BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
15 MARCH 2022

**Introduction**

For over twenty years, United States Central Command (CENTCOM) has demanded a greater share of the Department of Defense's resources and attention—and those of the United States as a whole—than it claimed in the first twenty years of its existence. The terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 brought terror to American shores on a scale unknown since 1941 and transfixed the nation. The United States subsequently reoriented its defense establishment to confront the exigent threat of violent extremism, which had metastasized from within the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR). In 2001, a “global war on terror” began in Afghanistan and expanded to Iraq in 2003 following a campaign to liberate that country. For a generation of Americans, the very name “CENTCOM” has been virtually synonymous with the military operations in these two countries. Indeed, with the recent withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan and conclusion of U.S. combat operations and the transition to an advise, assist, and enable mission in Iraq, many Americans may assume that CENTCOM's very reasons for being have drawn to a close. That could not be further from the truth.

In fact, the proximate causes for the establishment of CENTCOM nearly forty years ago were the ascendancy of a destabilizing, virulently anti-American regime in Iran and naked Soviet military aggression in Afghanistan. More fundamentally, its establishment reflected a clear-eyed recognition by the Carter and Reagan administrations of the geostrategic importance of the broader Middle East. Spanning more than 4.6 million square miles and, with last year's addition of Israel, encompassing twenty-one countries, the CENTCOM AOR of today has for millennia been a geographic and geopolitical crossroads and site of cooperation, competition, and conflict. In the modern age, the sea lines of communication that pass through the Strait of Hormuz (SOH), Bab al Mandeb (BAM), and Suez Canal are more essential than ever for enabling global commerce, facilitating transportation of more than 20 percent of the world's and over 40 percent of China's energy supply.

Rich in cultural heritage but with unevenly distributed natural resources, the region is also beset by internal conflict and instability. It encompasses the geographic origins and spiritual centers for many of the world's largest religious populations, with active fault lines bisecting political and ethnic boundaries. Fabulous wealth in some resource-rich countries contrasts starkly with abject poverty and the absence of essential services in others. Inequity within societies gave wind to the 2011 “Arab Spring,” which largely failed to address grievances that still fester. Ongoing conflicts in Syria and Yemen and the collapse of legitimate governance in Afghanistan have undermined stability throughout and beyond the region and given rise to humanitarian, refugee, and potential environmental crises.

The conclusion of active combat operations in Afghanistan and transition to an advise, assist, and enable mission in Iraq provided an opportunity to reassess and adjust the United States' military posture in the region. Yet CENTCOM's core mission, to direct and enable military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional stability in support of enduring U.S. interests, remains virtually unchanged from the day of its establishment, and just as relevant now as then. The foundational challenges that CENTCOM was designed to confront—the destabilizing influence of Iran and strategic competition—are more salient now than ever. Meanwhile, a twenty-one-year campaign against violent extremist organizations (VEOs) has prevented further attacks on the American homeland but has not eradicated a potent threat that yet lurks in the un-governed and under-governed corners of the CENTCOM AOR. Within the Central Region, the United States faces

four of the five named threats identified in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS): Iran, China, Russia, and VEOs. Among these are a potential antagonist in any interstate, Middle Eastern conflict—Iran—and the most immediate threat to the American homeland—VEOs. These remain, therefore, CENTCOM's first and second priorities, respectively. And while we might prefer otherwise, the fact remains that China and Russia have made the CENTCOM region a primary theater of strategic competition, fostering predatory economic ties while seeking regional influence and assured access. Competing in this arena constitutes CENTCOM's third strategic priority.

Despite these continuities, inevitable and appropriate adjustments to American posture in the region are prone to misinterpretation by American partners and adversaries alike. Suspecting that the United States is eager to put the last twenty-one years—and the region as a whole—behind it, partners are hedging, and competitors are exploiting the opportunity to gain influence. From its inception, CENTCOM has been responsible for the stability and security of an “economy of force” theater—one that offered valuable returns on modest, prudent investments designed to secure and stabilize a region with outsized influence on global commerce and energy supply, and in which VEOs have proliferated and expanded globally over the past generation. Even in the midst of global competition, the Interim National Security Guidance recognizes the importance of these investments, but the impulse to compensate for a perceived overinvestment in the region these past twenty-one years bears inherent risks. Most importantly, acting on this misperception threatens to undermine the confidence of partners in the region, compromising our ability to leverage longstanding relationships and wield influence as we have historically: with a light-yet-responsive touch and with a small footprint that can rapidly expand as circumstances demand.

CENTCOM plays an integral role in reassuring these partners and allies of the U.S. commitment to regional stability and to advancing shared interests, including by participating in operations and exercises throughout the region. Israel's shift from the EUCOM to CENTCOM AOR opens the doors to numerous strategic opportunities—including by enabling CENTCOM to more closely align our regional partners against common threats, such as those posed by Tehran. The United States remains steadfast in its commitment to Israel's security and to supporting Israel's right to defend itself, and CENTCOM will continue to support the expansion of Israel's military ties with regional counterparts through training, joint exercises, and other defense cooperation efforts.

The normalization agreements between Israel and the Gulf are historic, and they follow in the footsteps of the peace treaties signed by Egypt in 1979 and Jordan fifteen years later. Both Egypt and Jordan remain strategic partners. Egypt maintains a strong defense relationship with the United States on counter-terrorism (CT) and maritime and border security efforts, and provides critical access, overflight, and Suez Canal transit for U.S. forces. Our decades-long partnership enables us to work with Egypt on areas of disagreement while continuing to address challenges throughout the Middle East and Africa together. Jordan is likewise one of our most committed partners in the Middle East, as well as being a key partner in the Defeat-ISIS coalition. The close partnership with Jordan is essential to U.S. operations across the region.

Maintaining our influence and safeguarding American interests requires a whole-of government approach and the agile deployment of limited resources to blunt challenges and seize opportunities as they emerge. But it further demands a demonstrable commitment to regional partners, upon whom security in the CENTCOM AOR must ultimately depend.

### **Iran**

The greatest single day-to-day threat to regional security and stability remains Iran, which challenges the United States and its allies by pursuing regional hegemony, breaching its Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) commitments, and posing a conventional threat to partner nations while facilitating and conducting coercive and malign activities. With the largest military in the Middle East, Iran has developed and amassed sophisticated ballistic missile forces and is at the cutting edge in the development of aerial and maritime unmanned systems. With their potent offensive capabilities, these weapon systems enable Iran to threaten its neighbors and menace the

free flow of commerce throughout the region, negatively affecting global trade and the world's energy supply. Over the past year, Iran used these weapons to attack and seize merchant vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, Gulf of Oman, and northern Arabian Sea.

Iran views the United States as its greatest enduring threat and obstacle to regional hegemony; it continues a multi-faceted approach to remove U.S. forces from the region while avoiding escalation into a major conflict. Though it has not conducted direct attacks on U.S. forces since January 2020, Iran continues to threaten current and former U.S. officials and enable its proxies to conduct implausibly deniable attacks on deployed U.S. forces. The risk of miscalculation and escalation remains high because of Iran's strategic calculation that it can simultaneously and discretely engage in diplomacy with and a proxy campaign against the United States. Moreover, Iran's command and control of its proxy and affiliated militias has changed following the 2020 death of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani, which may create challenges for Tehran's ability to govern the initiation and escalation of violence directed at U.S. and Coalition Forces. Iran continues to violate sanctions and embargos, proliferate weapons to its network of proxies and affiliates, terrorize mariners, and seize shipping in international waters. While Iran is not currently pursuing nuclear weapons, it has developed ballistic missiles that could be configured to deliver them and has conducted numerous launches to test those missile systems. These actions continue to demonstrate Iran's defiance and willingness to undermine international norms with threats against U.S. interests and those of our partners and allies.

#### **Iranian Activities in Iraq**

In Iraq, Iranian-Aligned Militia Groups (IAMG) increased attacks throughout the first half of 2021, targeting U.S. forces with unmanned aerial systems (UASs) for the first time. In early July, IAMGs paused such attacks in the hope that the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue and forthcoming Iraqi elections would eject American forces through political and diplomatic means. As it became clear that Iran-aligned Shia groups had performed poorly in the October election, IAMGs directed violence against fellow Iraqis, further undermining those groups' standing and influence. When the Strategic Dialogue yielded only the end of an American combat mission rather than a withdrawal, IAMG leaders threatened a resumption of attacks on any Americans remaining in Iraq beyond 2021. In early January 2022, IAMGs briefly surged attacks against U.S. targets in Iraq and Syria but have since largely restrained operations against U.S. forces—likely due to sensitivities related to the formation of the new Iraqi government. Coalition forces remained postured to respond should the IAMGs become more aggressive.

The danger posed by IAMGs has not passed. As a coalition government forms in Iraq, IAMGs continue to evaluate their options and marshal—with covert Iranian assistance—the means of resuming complex UAS and rocket attacks against their fellow Iraqis, as well as U.S. and Coalition forces. Regardless of who forms the government, IAMGs are likely to continue sectarian, criminal, and anti-U.S. activities that destabilize Iraq. Iranian Activities in Syria and Lebanon In Syria, Iran and its proxies have been less restrained in attacks against Combined Joint Task Force-Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (CJTF-OIR). Here, Iran supports the Assad regime with the aim of maintaining the "Axis of Resistance" alliance against Israel, a sworn enemy of Tehran's revolutionary government. Notwithstanding their common support for the Assad regime, Iran competes with Russia for economic opportunities and long-term influence in Syria. Ultimately, Iran desires a permanent presence in Syria, pursuing economic opportunities to recoup significant wartime investment, increased local militia influence to maintain security, and increased soft power to gain influence over the population. To this end, Iran seeks to expand its already well-established position along the Middle Euphrates River Valley by converting local Sunnis to Shi'ism, recruiting Sunni tribal members into IAMGs, and colonizing the area with Iranian irregular forces and their families.

Iran will continue to use Syrian (and likely Iraqi) territory as a critical hub and resupply route for maintaining its campaign against Israel. CENTCOM supports Israel's right to defend itself from threats posed by Iran and Iranian proxies. Iran will also remain focused on supporting Lebanese Hezbollah, whose illegal weapons stockpiles exceed those of most legitimate partner militaries in the

region. Hizballah has consistently undermined the legitimate Lebanese Armed Forces, a steadfast partner of the United States that acts in the interests of the Lebanese people, works to maintain Lebanese stability, and remains the most trusted government institution in Lebanon.

Iran likely has decreasing tolerance for continued U.S. presence in Syria, especially as pro Assad regime forces gain more control over the country. Accordingly, Iran and its proxies and affiliates are increasing their capabilities and planning to target U.S. and partner interests, as evidenced by multiple indirect fire attacks against U.S.-associated bases with increasingly capable systems that have evolved from typical, commercial off-the-shelf UAS models to more advanced platforms resembling improvised cruise missiles with increased speed, range, accuracy, electronic warfare-hardening, and explosive payload capacity. More troubling, increased proliferation of this advanced technology has enabled mass production of components that can be easily transported, assembled, and launched from remote locations with little to no support infrastructure. Such capabilities make it easier for non-state actors and proxy forces to acquire and employ this technology on a much larger scale at great stand-off ranges.

### **Iranian Activities in Yemen**

The least restrained and most destabilizing of all of Iran's affiliates in the region are the Houthis of Yemen. Aside from being active combatants in that country's seven-year-old civil war, they are also engaged in a near-daily long-range fires conflict with Saudi Arabia. Wielding the most advanced UASs and ballistic and cruise missiles Iran can design, build, and smuggle into Yemen, the Houthis have targeted Saudi Arabia's largest cities and its critical oil infrastructure. Recently, the Houthis have raised the stakes further by using the same high-end Iranian weapons to target the United Arab Emirates, including the air base at Al Dhafra that U.S. forces share with our Emirati partners. Additional concerning indicators of Houthi contempt for international norms include the November 2021 breaching of the former U.S. embassy compound in Sana'a, the detention of local Yemeni staff of the U.S. embassy, and the escalating frequency of abductions, armed robberies, and carjackings in the parts of Yemen controlled by the Houthis.

Over the past year, Iran has continued to provide Houthi forces with advanced conventional weapons (UASs, theater ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and unmanned surface vehicles) and related technology. The proliferation of small and medium-sized UASs and sophisticated ballistic and cruise missiles to the Houthis presents the most complex and consequential threat to U.S., partner, and allied forces. In 2021, the Houthis conducted over 325 cross-border attacks with UASs and missiles. Since the start of 2022, the Houthis have conducted at least 45 cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE with attacks that simultaneously threaten U.S. personnel based in the region and international maritime interests in the Red Sea and Gulf of Oman. Over the past year, the Houthis made incremental advances toward the petroleum-rich city of Marib and reclaimed the areas surrounding the Port of Hudaydah following the withdrawal of Republic of Yemen Government aligned forces. Likely emboldened by territorial gains in western and central Yemen, as well as perceived declining U.S. support to the Saudi-led Coalition, the Houthis accompanied their campaign to capture Marib with near-daily cross-border attacks against Saudi Arabia using UASs, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles.

In response to recent gains by the Emirati-sponsored Giants Brigades south of Marib, the Houthis expanded their missile and UAS attacks to targets in the United Arab Emirates—including civilian targets, as well as military targets at Al Dhafra Air Base, home to a substantial contingent of U.S. forces. Air defense fires by both Emirati and American batteries—including the first successful combat Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) engagements in history—defeated this complex Houthi attack. It nevertheless demonstrated that the Houthis are prepared to further escalate this conflict using whatever means the Iranians put at their disposal, even at the risk of inflicting mass civilian casualties and threatening American forces.

The recent attacks on the UAE fit the broader pattern of Iran-enabled Houthi missile and UAS attacks on the Arabian Peninsula, targeting both military and civilian targets, endangering civilian life,

and risking global economic disruption should the Houthis successfully strike major oil infrastructure or economic hubs. Although the United States provides information and defensive assistance to Saudi and Emirati armed forces, it does not provide offensive military support. CENTCOM continues to support diplomatic efforts to end the conflict in Yemen.

### **Countering the Iranian Threat**

Deterring Iran and its threat network depends on capabilities that provide a credible threat of a robust and timely response to Iranian aggression paired with flexible deterrent and response options that impose high costs on Iran, thereby altering its decision calculus. Accordingly, current CENTCOM planning is based on clear and unambiguous signaling to Iran and its threat network. It also makes a virtue out of the necessity to disperse forces threatened by Iranian missiles and UASs. Distributing forces more broadly outside of the most significant Iranian threat ranges not only enhances survivability but also demonstrates an increased capability to rapidly mass combat effects using dynamic force employment (DFE), agile combat employment (ACE), and bomber task force (BTF) missions. A distributed approach lowers costs, improves defensive posture, and makes it more difficult for adversaries to mass effects against U.S. and coalition assets. In addition, this approach demonstrates the flexibility, global reach, and responsiveness of U.S. forces.

At the same time, the United States must demonstrate to our allies and partners that ours is a credible, dependable force in the region, and enable these allies and partners to contribute more effectively to their own defense. In this regard, the greatest threat to the region's security—Iran's missile force—is also a catalyst for increased cooperation in the form of Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD). While this requires a willingness on the part of regional partners to share intelligence more fully and quickly than they have to date, it does not require the introduction of foreign forces onto the soil of neighboring nations. Similarly, greater cooperation in the air domain promises greater integration and deterrent effect without provoking friction that has historically worked against collective defense in the region. This is especially true in the case of Israel, which joined the CENTCOM AOR in 2021 and has already participated in a number of multilateral exercises and fora that would have been inconceivable before the normalization agreements signed between Israel and Gulf countries in 2020.

Aside from their obvious value to readiness and interoperability, regional exercises incorporating DFE, ACE, and BTF demonstrate allies' and partners' will and readiness to respond to Iranian aggression, thereby enhancing deterrence. Additionally, exercises provide platforms to inject strategic communications and highlight Iranian malign activities, engendering unity and signaling resolve among allies and partners. For the return on investment, such exercises are invaluable. Unfortunately, COVID and reduced budgets for exercises impinged upon CENTCOM and its components' ability to even maintain (let alone expand) existing exercises, despite a regional appetite to do so.

CENTCOM is also hindered in its ability to achieve effective, economical collective security by delays in foreign military sales (FMS) to allies and partners, which—combined with reductions in American capabilities across the region—contributes to the perception of a wavering United States commitment to the security and stability of the CENTCOM AOR and the individual countries therein. This has provided a false narrative and an opening for America's strategic competitors in the region and undermines deterrence of Iran. Countering this impression requires credible assurance and demonstrations of America's commitment to regional security and our partnerships. This commitment includes a recognition of the importance of our security assistance enterprise and our defense industry being capable of efficiently supporting our partners' defensive needs. Moreover, CENTCOM's posture, in terms of forces, footprints, agreements, authorities, and resources must allow us the flexibility to compete with our adversaries below the level of armed conflict, leaving no doubt that U.S. combat power can rapidly flow into the region when required and that Iran will suffer grave costs for their aggressive actions.

### **Countering Violent Extremist Organizations**

While Iran remains the greatest threat to the security of the Central Region itself, ISIS, Al Qaeda (AQ), and other VEOs operating in the region will remain the most likely and proximate threat to the security of the United States and that of our citizens and interests at home and abroad.

ISIS and AQ are seeking to exploit a reduction of U.S. CT efforts in Afghanistan to reinvigorate their adherents and increase their ability to plot and direct external attacks. While CENTCOM and the Global Coalition to Defeat-ISIS have had extraordinary success against these VEOs, the underlying conditions that led to their growth—civil war, poor governance, a youth bulge, and scarce resources and opportunities—remain unchanged. If left unmonitored and unchecked, a resurgence of VEO capabilities could manifest with new attacks on the United States and the homelands of our allies. While VEOs have a presence in virtually every country in the AOR, CENTCOM's primary CT focus remains on those organizations with the ambition and varying capabilities to plot and conduct external operations against the United States and our allies. These VEOs principally reside in Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria.

### **Yemen**

U.S. unilateral and partner-supported CT operations have disrupted and degraded Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), rendering it ineffective and unable to conduct operations outside of Yemen. However, the group maintains aspirations to attack the U.S. homeland, with AQAP senior leadership threatening attacks against the United States as recently as October 2021. ISIS-Yemen remains an active threat group as well, although with fewer capabilities and adherents compared with AQAP. The United States retains a small, tailorable CT footprint in Yemen, supported by a regional CT headquarters that enables regional partner CT forces to monitor and disrupt these VEOs.

### **Afghanistan**

ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) poses a moderate to high threat to the Taliban and civilians in Afghanistan, and this threat has the potential to grow in the coming months and years. As the economic situation and humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan worsen, with food security continuing to deteriorate, vulnerable populations will potentially become increasingly susceptible to ISIS-K recruitment. ISIS-K continues targeting the Taliban, Shia populations, urban centers, and targets of opportunity and is attempting to expand from its historic eastern Afghanistan operating areas, as evidenced by its claims of high-profile attacks from Kunduz in the north to Kandahar in the south. ISIS-K likely will remain capable of conducting high-profile attacks throughout Afghanistan, seeking to increase recruitment, expand its operating area, and challenge the Taliban's control. Absent sustained CT pressure, ISIS-K may gain strength and be emboldened to expand its operations and target neighboring countries—as evidenced by recent attacks against Shia civilians in Pakistan. The Department of Defense assesses ISIS-K could establish an external attack capability against the United States and our allies in twelve to eighteen months, but possibly sooner if the group experiences unanticipated gains in Afghanistan.

In the near-term, AQ will most likely continue to maintain a low-profile under pressure from the Taliban, which seeks international legitimacy. Given its long-standing ties with the Taliban and Haqqani Network, CENTCOM assesses some AQ elements have limited freedom of movement in Afghanistan. AQ likely still aspires to recruit and train, and if successful, restore an external attack capability against the United States and our allies in twelve to twenty-four months. Following the August 2021 Taliban takeover of Kabul, on-the-ground CT efforts against Afghanistan-based VEOs fell largely to the Taliban. Since taking Kabul, the Taliban have prioritized internal security and begun taking steps to combat ISIS-K's ability to attack the regime in the near-term, and to reconstitute in the long-term. As 2022 unfolds, the Taliban's so called "Ministry of Interior" (MOI) and "General Directorate of Intelligence" (GDI) likely will synchronize efforts to combat ISIS-K's urban attack cells, while focusing on developing intelligence networks to weaken ISIS-K's historic support zones in eastern Afghanistan. The Taliban's restraints and actions against other regional VEOs have been markedly less aggressive.

For the United States, conducting CT operations in Afghanistan from “over the horizon” remains difficult, but not impossible. The loss of collection following the withdrawal of U.S. forces has exacerbated gaps in our intelligence. This limits the intelligence community’s ability to provide indications and warning of VEO threats from Afghanistan. Also limited is the United States’ ability to fix and finish those threats we are able to find. The resultant reductions in consistent CT pressure potentially could enable VEO groups to pose increased threats to the United States and our allies, assuming the Taliban is unwilling or unable to do so itself. Presently, CENTCOM relies on the Operation ENDURING SENTINEL Over-the-Horizon Counter Terrorism (OTH-CT) Task Force and a finite number of UAS sorties to develop and potentially strike terrorist targets in Afghanistan.

Additional opportunities for enhanced cooperation present themselves among the Central Asian States and Pakistan. Due to pressure from Russia (and, to a lesser extent, China), membership in its Collective Security Treaty Organization, and varied willingness to engage with the new Taliban government, the Central Asian States are measured in their support for counterterrorism cooperation in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, they remain concerned about the risk of extremist spillover from Afghanistan and will likely seek out a limited and measured expansion in U.S. security cooperation engagements while continuing to strike a balance in regional dynamics with all partners. Already, partners in Central Asia value several U.S. security cooperation activities, including support for border security activities, basic peacekeeping skills development, and Foreign Military Sales/Foreign Military Financing. Moreover, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan, which all border Afghanistan, hold military exercises and receive training from U.S. advisors. Working across the whole-of-government with our interagency partners, as well as international partners and allies, to mitigate the growing humanitarian and economic crises will also be a critical component of effectively countering the growth of VEOs in Afghanistan.

### **Iraq and Syria**

The threat posed by ISIS has been severely degraded in Iraq and Syria. Nevertheless, its enduring defeat has not been completely achieved. Through the combined efforts of Coalition forces under the command of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) and our partners in the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), including the Kurdish Peshmerga, and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), ISIS has lost territorial control and operates mostly in under-governed areas or disputed areas such as the Syrian desert or along the Kurdish Coordination Line (KCL) in Iraq. Deliberate targeting of leaders and facilitation networks has reduced ISIS’s capability to conduct large-scale attacks and compelled them to rely foremost on uncoordinated, small-scale hit and-run engagements. Meanwhile, they seek to reconstitute forces and plan for more complex mass casualty-producing attacks, the most recent example being the January 2022 attack at the detention facility in Hasakah, Syria.

#### *Iraq*

Despite significant progress in the Defeat-ISIS campaign, ISIS-Iraq remains a credible threat to the stability of the Iraqi government, as well as to U.S. and Coalition forces and interests in the country. ISIS-Iraq maintains the limited ability to target bases housing U.S. and Coalition forces both in the Kurdistan region and Baghdad. ISIS-Iraq is also capable of targeting supply lines, as well as U.S. and Coalition forces while in transit during training and enabling operations across the country. Improved Iraqi security in Baghdad has diminished ISIS-Iraq’s opportunities for high-profile attacks there, but it has demonstrated the intent to conduct small suicide and improvised explosive device (IED) operations against soft targets. Moreover, ISIS-Iraq continues its efforts to destabilize the ethno-sectarian environment, potentially embroiling our Iraqi partners and Coalition forces in a rapidly deteriorating security environment with little warning.

Consistent CT pressure likely resulted in key leader losses, reduced access to resources and materiel, and an inability to infiltrate urban areas. These challenges almost certainly contributed to an overall decline in attacks from 119 per month in 2020 to 97 per month in 2021. Nevertheless, ISIS Iraq remains a credible threat. ISIS-Iraq uses complex attacks and subverts authority to grow its influence and expand its insurgency and ISIS-Iraq remains operationally active in Diyala, Kirkuk,

and Salah ad Din—specifically along the KCL. ISIS-Iraq relies on rural safe havens to mitigate CT pressure, and as a staging point for operations against civilian and military targets. In late 2021, ISIS Iraq initiated a series of seemingly coordinated attacks against Kurdish interests causing dozens of casualties in Irbil, Kirkuk, and Diyala provinces as ISIS-Iraq continues efforts to stoke sectarian and ethnic conflict.

In early December 2021, CJTF-OIR, in cooperation with the Government of Iraq, completed the transition to an advise, assist, and enable mission. Preceding this transition was the restructuring of the force to an irreducible minimum of requisite personnel and equipment, all residing on consolidated joint bases with Iraqi forces. Coalition Force advisors in the Military Advisory Group Iraq (MAG-I) and Military Advisory Group-North (MAG-N) are working closely with their ISF and Kurdish Security Forces (KSF) counterparts in operational-level planning and battle tracking of unilateral Iraqi operations against ISIS. Special Operations Joint Task Force-Levant (SOJTF-L) contributes to this effort at the tactical, operational, and institutional levels by partnering with Iraq's Counter-Terrorism Services (CTS). Critical to this effort are the intelligence collection and fusion, logistics, and joint strike support that we provide to Iraqi-planned, led, and executed operations to defeat ISIS. Coalition Forces provide in-extremis assistance with ISR, and joint strike capabilities when required, at the request of the Government of Iraq. Finally, CJTF-OIR's Directorate of Military Assistance manages the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF), which divests materiel and financial support to the ISF and KSF. These efforts provide support to ISF and KSF counter-ISIS operations and serve as the basis for a future military-to-military relationship between the United States and Iraq. The ISF and KSF have conducted larger joint operations, demonstrating tangible progress, as well as a fundamental understanding of intelligence collection and joint fires to support more complex operations spanning multiple provinces.

CJTF-OIR is committed to its advise, assist, and enable mission, helping Iraqi forces develop operational structures and processes of sustainment, maintenance, and command/control mechanisms at echelon that are necessary for maintaining force structure and operational tempo. Essential to CJTF-OIR's advisory mission is the relationship with NATO Mission Iraq (NMI)—an important initiative both for the contributions it is poised to make and for the signal it sends about our global allies' commitment to the long-term stability of Iraq. NMI provides advisory support to the ISF at the ministerial level, focusing on institutional advice in areas such as doctrine development, budgeting, sustainment processes, and personnel management. NMI's efforts are key to maintaining the operational capability of the ISF in the mid- to long-term. The NMI and OIR missions are separate but complementary, and there must continue to be a symbiotic relationship between the two as they progress. Work is ongoing to understand where gaps and crossovers exist between NMI and OIR so they can be addressed as these missions both continue to evolve.

### *Syria*

ISIS remains a significant threat in Syria, despite the drop in the group's total claimed attacks since July 2021. The group continues to target the Assad Regime, the SDF, and local populations primarily in Homs and Dayr az Zawr provinces. These attacks are typically small-scale and rudimentary, employing small arms fire, IEDs, assassinations, and hit-and-run ambushes on security forces. A notable exception is ISIS's recent concerted effort to liberate detainees from the largest detention center in Hasakah. ISIS's ability to project power further has been degraded by persistent pressure from the SDF and CJTF-OIR, and was further reduced with the February 2022 death of the so-called "amir" of ISIS, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. Nevertheless, increased conflict between the SDF and the Assad regime or Turkey—which views the SDF as inextricably linked to the YPG, a group Ankara considers a terrorist organization—would likely provide ISIS the respite it needs to recover from recent losses and expand its influence, and recent events at Hasakah demonstrate that its will is unbroken.

The SDF have continued to demonstrate the resolve and capability to maintain continuous pressure on ISIS in northern Syria. They have remained the only reliable and effective partner in Syria and continue to improve in their capability to prevent the resurgence of ISIS in the Eastern Syrian



Security Area (ESSA). The nature of the operations executed in northeastern Syria are different than those conducted in Iraq. The SDF control an area of Syria in which they are opposed not only by ISIS but also by the Assad regime, the regime's Russian and Iranian backers, and Turkey or its proxies. Thus, despite the SDF's ability to conduct operations without direct oversight from Coalition Forces, they remain susceptible to external pressures and dependent upon SOJTF-Levant for ISR, fires, and intelligence support for complex missions.

#### *Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund*

Throughout 2022, our partner forces in Iraq and Syria will continue to benefit from a range of financial and materiel support provided through the CTEF, which provided \$726.9 million of critical assistance in 2021. CTEF continues to play a vital role in Counter-ISIS operations within Iraq and Syria, resulting in tremendous operational success while minimizing U.S. presence in the AOR. CTEF is a critical tool by which the Coalition enables the ISF, KSF, and SDF to meet operational requirements necessary to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS and set conditions for continued stabilization of the region. Drawing on the lessons from the last twenty one years, CJTF-OIR has, over the last six months, tailored ISF divestments to address ISF sustainment, maintenance, and communications requirements. In Syria, CTEF expenditures for partner forces remain focused on maintaining the necessary level of capability to target ISIS cells, keep ISIS fighters securely and humanely detained until they receive due process or are repatriated to their countries of origin, and sustain vetted partners in Syria at the level required to counter the ISIS threat and help maintain security and stability in the region.

For these reasons, any rapid reduction of CTEF appropriations risks a reversal of gains made in the security sector, the reemergence of ISIS and other VEOs, and the future stability of the region. Given the unique circumstances of Iraq and Syria, where our most reliable partners depend upon us for essential support in various capacities, CTEF provides a flexible, responsive mechanism for addressing emergent requirements and capitalizing on opportunities. As such, CTEF is essential to continued progress in the D-ISIS fight.

#### **Detainees**

The limited repatriation of ISIS detainees and displaced persons in northeast Syria remains the biggest impediment to ensuring the enduring defeat of ISIS. While there has been modest progress on repatriating and resettling some of these displaced persons and some detained ISIS fighters, more needs to be done. Military force cannot resolve this festering problem, which, if not addressed by the international community, will eventually form the core of the next round of violent Islamic extremism in the region and beyond.

Presently, more than ten thousand ISIS fighters are detained in repurposed detention facilities throughout northeast Syria. These facilities are guarded by a force of makeshift SDF guards, mustered from the local population with limited training. The SDF guard force remains capable of responding to external threats against the facilities, but there remains a constant threat from internal riots and coordinated action with ISIS cells at large, as evidenced by recent events at the detention center in Hasakah. Working with the SDF and Joint Operations Center-Iraq, CJTF-OIR has facilitated the transfer of hundreds of Iraqi nationals from SDF-controlled detention facilities to Iraq—but there is still more work to be done, as several thousand Iraqi ISIS fighters remain in makeshift detention facilities in Syria. CJTF-OIR has also leveraged CTEF funding to upgrade facilities and has worked to train and pay SDF guards to mitigate the threat posed by the detained ISIS fighters. Yet these measures serve only as a temporary solution until a more viable long-term one can be found.

#### **Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees**

Another challenge in the AOR is that of large-scale displacement as a result of protracted conflicts in the region. Of Syria's pre-war population of approximately 20 million, over 6 million are IDPs and more than 13 million throughout the country need humanitarian assistance. Another 6 million sought refuge in other countries. Russia and the Syrian regime have consistently limited efforts by the UN and other organizations to provide sufficient humanitarian aid to vulnerable populations in Syria,

causing unnecessary suffering. The UN has identified Syria as a hotspot for acute food insecurity, with millions depending on humanitarian organizations to deliver essential aid to areas outside of regime control.

Especially challenging is the displaced persons camp at Al Hol in northeast Syria. Al Hol, which began as an Iraqi refugee camp in the early 1990s and originally hosted about ten thousand people, swelled to a population of over seventy thousand after the fall of Baghuz when ISIS lost its last remaining territory. The camp, which currently holds approximately fifty-seven thousand people, predominantly women and children, comprises a complex mix of Iraqis Syrians, and third-country nationals; both the victims of ISIS and families of ISIS live in relatively close proximity to one another. The camp remains a challenge to security forces and humanitarian providers alike due to recurring violence against camp residents, NGO workers, camp administrators, and suspected coalition collaborators. In March 2021, the SDF conducted a security operation in response to the uptick in assassinations within the camp. Assassinations decreased following this sweep but continued throughout 2021, underscoring ISIS's resilient influence and the ongoing challenge of properly managing security.

Some women living in Al Hol camp are perpetrators of violence, while many residents, including the tens of thousands of children, remain victims and extremely vulnerable. ISIS-affiliated women often act as Hisba, or religious police, keeping a keen eye on activities in the camp, while preying upon vulnerable camp residents through violence and intimidation. They often focus on radicalizing other residents, primarily children, through propaganda and fear to ensure the second generation of the organization. Some of these children are being radicalized in the camp and are later smuggled out to be trained as future fighters and suicide bombers in ISIS camps in ungoverned locations in Syria.

In addition to providing humanitarian assistance inside camps like Al Hol, USAID and State Department-sponsored humanitarian aid and stabilization programs in Syrian communities have attempted to fulfill the need for basic services, maintain stability, and facilitate the peaceful return of displaced Syrians to their areas of origin. In the interim, extremist elements will continue efforts to exploit the lack of a viable, internationally-supported solution to the Syrian conflict to build popular support and contribute to the reconstitution of ISIS and affiliates. The only viable solution to Al Hol is a political one, whereby nations repatriate and reintegrate their citizens and relieve the burden on the SDF.

Other displaced persons in the AOR pose logistical and economic challenges. Following the largest airborne non-combatant evacuation operation (NEO) in history, which delivered over 124,000 Americans, third-country nationals, and at-risk Afghans to safety, many Afghans have already begun new, promising lives in the United States. Others remain at transit facilities in Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, awaiting onward resettlement. To aid in this effort, CENTCOM facilitated the establishment and support of several temporary safe havens and transportation "lily pad" sites utilizing \$140 million of the emergency Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) funds provided by Congress in July 2021. Meanwhile, the United States continues to relocate Afghan allies, which will require at least two of these locations to be fully operational for the remainder of the fiscal year. Planning continues for expanded efforts at the Camp As Saliyah transit site in Qatar, and initial indications are that this effort could continue well past originally estimated end dates. Coordination with interagency partners for the hand-off of resourcing and contracting for this effort is challenged by gaps in various departments' and agencies' operational authorities and funding. For other countries that have hosted the region's refugees—among them Jordan, Lebanon, and Pakistan—the economic strain imposed on the host country systems can further exacerbate fiscal challenges and undermine stability.

A final crisis of displaced persons within the AOR is, unfortunately, largely beyond CENTCOM's ability to influence or alleviate. Over the past year, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen has remained severe, with over 16 million Yemenis subject to food insecurity and 4 million internally displaced by conflict. The World Health Organization reports only 50 percent of Yemen's medical facilities remain

functional, and those that are open lack sufficient medical staff, equipment, or basic medicines, leaving Yemenis vulnerable to COVID-19, cholera, diphtheria, malaria, and other diseases. Yemen will remain dependent on external aid to address these critical needs. The ongoing conflict raises additional difficulties for aid workers attempting to transit to and within the country, while the Houthis also tax and abscond with humanitarian aid supplies to support their war effort. The humanitarian crisis will remain a challenge in Yemen for years to come, even after any settlement of the internal conflict, and Yemen will remain reliant on external aid to address issues such as food insecurity and healthcare shortfalls. Additionally, a structural failure of the FSO Safer, a permanently-moored oil tanker off the coast of Ras Isa, could quickly compound many issues in Yemen, almost certainly disrupting maritime traffic transiting the Red Sea and potentially causing an environmental disaster.

### **Safeguarding Civilian Life**

While CENTCOM strives daily to alleviate the suffering of those displaced or harmed by conflict in the region, we also recognize that combat operations can also inflict harm on civilian life and infrastructure. CENTCOM is absolutely committed to safeguarding civilian life throughout its area of operations, and across the range of military operations. Further, CENTCOM and each of its subordinate headquarters takes very seriously our legal, moral, and ethical obligations to abide by the law of armed conflict, and we recognize that respect for the sanctity and dignity of human life is inherent in our mission to ensure the security and stability of the region. Moreover, we recognize that the United States' legitimacy as the leader and guarantor of a liberal, rules-based international order depends on our demonstrated commitment to protecting innocent life.

As the Secretary of Defense has recently acknowledged, we can and must do better in minimizing and responding to harm to civilian populations resulting from our operations. We remain committed to reviewing and improving our tactics, techniques, and procedures and fully support the Secretary of Defense-directed development of an overarching Civilian Harm Mitigation and Response Action Plan (CHMRAP). CENTCOM has already implemented preliminary changes to its method of tracking and reporting allegations of civilian casualties. Process improvements include the establishment of a civilian casualty working group, increased interagency coordination to improve deconfliction processes, and the resumption of publication of monthly CIVCAS reports by CJTF-OIR. This working group will provide additional oversight of the reporting and investigation chain that was previously conducted predominantly outside of the combatant command headquarters. CENTCOM appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the CHMRAP and will swiftly implement and fully support the Secretary's direction.

Although CENTCOM is fully committed to the principles of the Law of Armed Conflict and U.S. policies that in many cases far exceed what international law requires, we cannot offer guarantees against the unintended loss of civilian life in the future. Our adversaries in the AOR do not merely lack our regard for innocent life—they deliberately abuse and jeopardize it with a goal of protecting themselves and using civilian casualties to conduct information operations against the United States. Moreover, U.S. forces, which often operate in complex, hostile environments, always retain the inherent right of self-defense. In the fog and friction of combat, individuals and their commanders must sometimes make difficult decisions—literally with life or-death consequences—under intense pressure and with sometimes imperfect information. Hesitation can cost lives, as can well-intended action.

When an allegation of civilian casualties occurs, CENTCOM and its subordinate headquarters will report it to Defense Department leadership, acknowledge it, investigate it, and take whatever action is appropriate to ensure accountability and improve CIVCAS prevention and mitigation measures. CENTCOM did so in the wake of the MQ9 strike in Kabul on 29 August 2021. Our commitment to minimizing the risk to civilian life was further demonstrated in the recent raid that resulted in the death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. Rather than target him with an airstrike, we accepted increased risk to U.S. forces by launching a raid, expressly planned to separate noncombatants in the objective area from the ISIS leader and his subordinates. Notwithstanding the regrettable loss of noncombatant lives when the terrorist or one of his wives detonated an explosive

on the third floor of his residence, U.S. forces took extraordinary measures to clear the objective area of civilians, and in so doing protected no fewer than ten of them from harm. This is a standard of care for civilian life that is virtually unprecedented in the history of armed conflict, and it is one that CENTCOM will continue to uphold into the future.

### **Strategic Competition**

As the historical and enduring crossroads for overland and maritime trade between Europe, Asia, and Africa and home to half of the world's proven oil reserves, the CENTCOM AOR constitutes geo-strategic "key terrain" and a potentially decisive theater for strategic competition with the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia. Within the AOR, an expansionist PRC and a resurgent Russia seek to shift alliances and gain influence, seeking leverage through tools such as state-sponsored investment, to achieve assured access and key resources to support their national objectives. The PRC and Russia have tailored their regional approaches to suit their specific goals and have expanded military cooperation with many regional countries through both arms sales and exercises. The PRC has expanded its presence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), COVID-19 diplomacy, debt-trap infrastructure investments, and the proliferation of 5G technology that will provide opportunities for political coercion and military exploitation. Similarly, Russia has reinforced its enduring military and economic presence in Syria, expanded its economic presence in and defense relationship with Egypt, and seeks to increase influence over regional energy resources and transit routes. In Central Asia, proximity to the PRC and Russia and a relatively minor U.S. presence mean every interaction between the U.S. and Central Asian states holds significance for our regional CT and strategic competition policy priorities. Ultimately, the PRC and Russia seek to expand their influence and subvert the international rules based order at the expense of U.S. interests and those of our allies and partners.

The PRC and Russia also engage Iran to further their own interests while working against those of the United States. Both the PRC and Russia hope to position themselves as key economic partners for Iran, anticipating sanctions relief and priority access to development contracts and markets. In October 2021, Iran announced it would sign a strategic partnership with Russia similar to the agreement Tehran signed with Beijing in March 2021. For the PRC, the agreement ensured a reliable energy supply, hedging against any U.S. attempts to block other sources of oil. Moscow, meanwhile, advocated for a reinstatement of the JCPOA while helping Iran develop military capabilities that enable its destabilizing regional activities. Ultimately, neither the PRC nor Russia will align itself so closely with Iran that it jeopardizes its ability to court other economic and military partners in the region, but both will continue to use Iran as a useful foil against the West, reaping economic benefits as they do so.

Yet the geography and political contours of the region do not overwhelmingly favor the PRC or Russia. To the contrary, the bisection of the Eurasian landmass by the Central Region provides key terrain and a dominant position for the United States to strategically compete with the PRC and Russia through a range of security cooperation ventures, including border security, counter-narcotics, CT, and defense institution building. Because of these relationships, the United States remains the "partner of choice" for most countries in the region in comparison to Russia or the PRC. While we must compete to retain this favorable position, it remains ours to lose. In Central Asia, where proximity does afford Russia and the PRC certain advantages, many nations are interested in closer relations with the West and share CT concerns with the United States, presenting opportunities to find and cultivate common ground.

### **The People's Republic of China**

The PRC, which is the world's largest importer of oil, currently imports roughly 46 percent of its crude oil and 36 percent of its natural gas from the CENTCOM AOR. It continues to cultivate trade relationships, infrastructure development projects (on which it depends to absorb its excess industrial capacity), economic investment, and comprehensive partnerships among the region's states. The PRC continues to expand influence in the Arabian Gulf and Northern Arabian Sea is

supported through port development and investment programs such as those in Gwadar, Pakistan, and with the United Arab Emirates, which are central to the PRC's regional strategy.

Throughout the past year, the PRC has engaged with nearly every country in the AOR, using trade, the BRI, COVID-19 diplomacy, and other humanitarian assistance to support its strategic objectives and expand its influence. The PRC particularly enhanced its cooperation and influence with Iran by securing a twenty-five-year economic agreement, dampening the effects of international sanctions and providing the Iranian regime an economic lifeline. The PRC also initiated the accession process for Iran's full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), while adding Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners. Additionally, the PRC advanced its status as an arms supplier to the region, providing military equipment to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, and the UAE, at discount prices and without preconditions, attempting to supplant the U.S. as a "partner of choice."

Aside from foreign military sales that can displace our U.S. security assistance relationships, the PRC conducts multilateral military exercises in the region and is postured for further collaboration. The People's Liberation Army Navy maintains a constant presence and is active in the region, conducting a wide range of peacetime operations to protect the PRC's maritime trade, assets, and personnel. This presence includes the Naval Escort Task Force, which operates in the Gulf of Aden and uses Djibouti as a sustainment hub. From there, the PRC can quickly project naval power into the Red Sea, the Bab al Mandeb strait, and the Gulf of Aden.

### **Russia**

Over the past year, Russia has sought to portray itself as a regional powerbroker and reliable partner on the global stage while also attempting to undermine U.S. positions and relations in the CENTCOM AOR. Russia maintains a largely opportunistic approach to its engagement with countries in the Middle East while viewing its influence in the Central Asia region as vital to its national security interests. Moscow responded to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan by pressuring Central Asian states to refuse support from the U.S. and reinforcing its own position as the area's primary security partner through military exercises and advocating for the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Additionally, Russia has solidified its military presence in Syria, where it asserts its position in international fora to increase its influence in the region and pressure the United States to withdraw. Russia has demonstrated the ability to project forces, test weapon systems, and routinely interfere with Coalition D-ISIS operations. To date this has included the exploitation of the space environment, electronic warfare, GPS jamming, and the use of private military companies. Since 2015, Russian armed forces have conducted kinetic actions in Syria at the behest of the Assad regime.

Russia has further developed forces and footprints capable of sustaining extra-territorial military operations. One example is the Russian naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus, for which Russia recently signed a forty-nine-year lease and announced plans to invest \$500 million in port development. This base allows up to eleven nuclear-powered Russian Black Sea warships to repair and replenish in the Mediterranean Sea without having to return to home port through the Turkish Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, and it has facilitated increased naval activity in the Red Sea. Russia also developed an airfield to accommodate Russian bombers and expand its operational capacity in the region. From its Syrian footprints, the Russians are ideally placed to disrupt NATO operations in the Middle East and present a potential hedge against NATO's southern flank.

To improve its economic situation, Russia leveraged its relationship with the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC+) to gain favorable market conditions for oil and gas sales over the last year. Russia's interests in Iraq are primarily in the fuel and energy sector, including exploration and infrastructure development. Russia has several energy companies operating in Iraq, including Lukoil, Gazprom, Neft, and Bashneft, for investments worth over \$10 billion. Russia also continues marketing its advanced weapons systems for export to CENTCOM AOR countries. This

marketing occurs in an environment in which many of our partners are looking for systems that support their national security requirements, including the threat posed by Iran. As with the PRC, the speed of Russian arms sales is appealing to partners—and does not come with American accountability demands for end-use monitoring and human rights assurances, such as Leahy vetting.

While it is too early to grasp the full consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine for the CENTCOM AOR, our partners there are already feeling the initial adverse effects. Challenging humanitarian conditions across the CENTCOM AOR have already led to sustained displacement, undermined trust between governance structures and communities, and created space for our adversaries to exploit the human suffering of vulnerable populations. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has the potential to exacerbate these dynamics due to disruptions in wheat exports to the Middle East, strain on financial institutions, and rising fuel prices with global implications. Russia is the world's largest exporter of wheat, and Ukraine is the world's fifth largest, together accounting for 28.9 percent of global wheat exports. Countries across the AOR depend on Russian and Ukrainian wheat to varying degrees, and reporting out of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon indicates price hikes of staple food items ranging between 30 and 50 percent since the Russian invasion began. Governments are attempting to ease the negative impacts on their citizens by increasing domestic production or pursuing imports from alternative markets, but these efforts will not fully address growing food insecurity, especially in import-dependent and cash-strapped countries such as Lebanon and Yemen.

### **Competing Strategically**

The PRC and Russia have shown that they are willing to work together toward common regional objectives: mutually supporting Iran, vetoing United Nations Security Council resolutions against Syria, and offering limited humanitarian assistance where it furthers their interests. Due to the geostrategic importance of the Central Region, allies, partners, and competitors will attempt to increase their influence in the CENTCOM AOR, especially if they perceive a wavering U.S. commitment to the region. The global economic environment induces regional partners to seriously consider Chinese and Russian offers of capital, investment, technology, infrastructure, and equipment to realize their national long-term economic and defense goals. At the tactical level, security cooperation and building partner capacity will remain central tenets of our military instrument of national power. The PRC and Russia currently lack the capability and capacity to conduct robust security cooperation activities, despite their desire to do so—but we should not assume this will continue to be true over the longer term. When given a choice, our Middle Eastern partners have traditionally preferred alternatives presented by the United States and our allies. These alternatives must be viable, substantive, and timely if they are to ward off our strategic competitors.

Meanwhile, the United States and our allies can capitalize on our unique ability to build and lead international coalitions of like-minded nations. Multilateral security organizations such as the Combined Maritime Forces, the International Maritime Security Construct, and the forthcoming Red Sea Maritime Security Initiative serve as bulwarks against Chinese and Russian grey-zone operations and a deterrent to aggression in the region. By demonstrating international resolve and solidarity, we at once instill confidence in the international rules-based order and reduce the burden of doing so with like-minded partners.

Yet as we seek to limit the day-to-day deployments of U.S. assets to the region, we must retain the flexibility to rapidly deploy forces and other resources throughout the depth of the AOR. Increasing port, airfield, and basing access expands our regional influence and enhances our partnerships while also building resiliency and survivability in the case of regional or global conflict. It also allows us to support humanitarian assistance and disaster relief more quickly and effectively than our competitors, demonstrating the values, commitment, and capability that have made us the partner of choice in the region and beyond.

### **Taking Care of Our People**

### *Command Values*

Improving diversity and inclusion in our force is an operational imperative to meet the demands of strategic competition. We must take deliberate action to build a joint force of men and women of all ethnicities, races, backgrounds, and beliefs. CENTCOM established a Diversity and Inclusion office responsible for advising the command on all matters relating to discrimination and institutional biases, as well as barriers to diversity and inclusion across the CENTCOM portfolio. This office is currently working on our Human Capital and Talent Management strategy to meet the demands of strategic competition.

While diversity enhances and strengthens the command, sexual assault and extremism within the ranks erode the very bonds of trust that make CENTCOM and the broader Joint Force the most capable military organizations in the world. CENTCOM is fully committed to the prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment. Over the past several years, we have improved our command climate and prevention efforts in each of these areas. The feedback we have received from several command-wide surveys shows our efforts have increased trust, credibility, and awareness. Our command climate results show that both our military and civilian personnel feel comfortable not only coming forward and reporting any concerns, but also that they trust we will action it appropriately.

Extremist ideologies conflict directly with our obligations to our country and the American public. Every service member and DoD civilian took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States of America. Extremism desecrates that solemn obligation and erodes the trust and confidence the American people have in the military as an institution. CENTCOM conducted virtual training modules featuring subject matter experts and presentations by our most senior leaders and facilitated small-group discussions to build awareness and help prevent actions associated with extremist behaviors that go against the fundamental principles of our profession. This dialogue with our servicemembers and DoD civilians will continue, as will CENTCOM's commitment to respecting the rights and dignity of the American citizens who embody our force and constitute our greatest strength. Operating in a command free of discrimination, hate, and harassment while accomplishing our mission is paramount to our success.

### **COVID-19**

Across the AOR, CENTCOM rapidly responded to the COVID-19 threat, implementing both non-pharmaceutical and pharmaceutical interventions, obtaining and disseminating personal protective equipment, and adapting newly-developed treatment guidelines to an austere deployed environment. Despite the pandemic, military operations and medical support for combat and non-combat casualties remain fully mission capable. Extensive public health measures, host nation partnerships, and robust medical support across the AOR resulted in zero COVID-19-related service member deaths.

As of 17 February 2022, over 15,773 cases of COVID-19 were identified, resulting in 297 personnel medically evacuated from theater. Over the past three months there has been a decline in active cases with an average active case count of thirty-five. While many events were cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19, partners successfully executed larger, multinational exercises such as BRIGHT STAR, IMX, and EAGER LION. Anticipatory public health measures and effective implementation of the COVID-19 vaccination program detailed below led to dramatic reductions in daily active cases and theater medical evacuation.

CENTCOM continues working closely with the Joint Staff, Defense Health Agency, and Defense Logistics Agency to identify requirements for COVID-19 vaccines and newly developed medications. CENTCOM prioritized forward-deployed forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria for early vaccine delivery and voluntary inoculation efforts. In March 2021, CENTCOM significantly expanded vaccine distribution throughout the AOR with the intent to provide COVID-19 vaccines for all DOD personnel, dependents, and contractors willing to receive it to provide maximal force health protection. Following full licensure and OSD-directed mandatory vaccination, CENTCOM overcame ultra-cold

storage and shipping challenges to provide the Pfizer vaccine more broadly across the AOR, achieving full vaccination rate of 97 percent among U.S. military personnel and civilians.

Refinement of theater deployment physical standards for all personnel helped reduce the impact to U.S., Coalition, and partner-nation civilians. Continued entry of COVID-19 infected personnel, finite quantities of on-hand testing consumables, limited quarantine and hospital capacity in theater, and irregular resupply obstacles were effectively mitigated, leading to outbreak prevention and containment. Individuals must now be fully vaccinated as a theater entry requirement, which will minimize COVID-19 mission impact moving forward. Booster shots are readily available and encouraged for all deployed personnel.

At the CENTCOM headquarters, relaxing restrictions on travel and movement in both the AOR and the United States renewed face-to-face key leader engagements and regular personnel rotations throughout much of 2021. CENTCOM was able to remove previously implemented teleworking procedures, with on-site staffing returning to 100 percent in June 2021. Effective public health measures and implementation of mandatory vaccination has provided long-term solutions to enable safe operations in the headquarters (both in Tampa and forward) and continuous support to forward-deployed formations.

### **Conclusion**

CENTCOM will continue to play an important role in commanding and directing a multitude of operations, activities, and investments across the region that maintain freedom of navigation, bolster our allies and partners against coercion, share in the region's common defense, and strive for regional stability. Maintaining a sufficient and sustainable level of presence in the Central Region will enable us to deter Iranian aggression, while providing the capability to compete with the PRC and Russia and disrupt VEOs. It also will provide us the ability to influence and help secure three of the world's five most vital transit choke points, ensuring free flow of navigation, resources, and commerce.

Moving forward, how we establish our limited enduring presence will be closely watched by both our regional and global partners, with nations making their own decisions about our reliability in the long term. A tailored presence supported by an over-the-horizon capability will enable flexibility, responsiveness, and act as a strategic shock absorber and backstop to our allies and partners in times of crisis. It is vital to match aspirations with resources to ensure successful strategy execution in the Central Region. Ultimately, CENTCOM must operate forward, retain appropriate manning, and remain operationally ready in order to meet an uncertain, unstable future and support whatever policies our civilian leadership direct. The necessary oversight and deep support from Congress critically enable our continued success.