



Statement

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Mar. 23, 2023
Release Number 20230323-01
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CENTCOM Commander's Opening Remarks During his House Armed Services Committee Testimony

TAMPA, Fla. – The following remarks are attributed to Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla:

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, ladies and gentlemen of the committee –

I am joined by Fleet Master Chief Derrick Walters, the Command Senior Enlisted Leader of U.S. Central Command.

On behalf of the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Guardians who serve this command, the central region, and this nation every day – thank you for allowing me to testify regarding the posture of U.S. Central Command.

This year is the 40th in our history.

In January of 1983, the United States Congress authorized the establishment of CENTCOM to serve as the security guarantor in the Middle East, the Levant, and the Central Asian states. Today, we rely heavily on the partnerships this command has developed and CENTCOM serves as the security integrator for the world's central region.

The story of this command between 1983 and today is one that parallels the threats and opportunities of the region it supports over the past four decades.

CENTCOM was formed to counter the influence of a revolutionary regime that had seized power in Tehran and to compete strategically with the Soviet Union. The organization's original charter was to direct and enable military operations and activities with partners to increase regional stability in support of American interests. That mission remains essentially unchanged to this day.

Iran remains the focus. We now battle violent extremist groups who threaten the United States, our interests, and the region. The Soviet Union has been replaced with China and Russia as strategic competitors.

The region remains vitally important to the Nation and the world. Ours is an area of responsibility that encompasses 21 nations and almost 600 million people and serves as the strategic nexus of the world's most important corridors of trade.

Today, CENTCOM's priorities are to deter Iran, counter violent extremist organizations, and compete strategically with China and Russia. That is what we do.

Four decades after CENTCOM's formation, Iran remains the primary destabilizing element in the region. We've seen rapid advances in Iranian military capability over time. The Iran of 2023 is not the Iran of 1983. In fact, Iran today is exponentially more militarily capable than it was even five years ago.

Today, Iran possesses the largest and most diverse missile arsenal in the Middle East, with thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles.

Iran also maintains the region's largest and most capable UAV force.

Iran's vast and deeply resourced proxy forces spread instability throughout the region and threaten our regional partners.

Iran continues to enrich and stockpile uranium far above what is needed for commercial use. Iran can enrich uranium far faster than it could even two years ago.

An Iran with a nuclear weapon would change the Middle East overnight and forever. As Iran continues to destabilize the region, we continue the fight against violent extremist organizations.

Four years ago today, March 23, 2019, was a historic day in CENTCOM's 40-year lifespan. In Baghouz, Syria, a global coalition eliminated the last of the so-called ISIS territorial caliphate.

This historic achievement did not come without loss. During the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, tens of thousands of our partner forces were wounded or killed. Our partners were fully in the lead. Twenty American servicemembers were killed and dozens were wounded. They will always be remembered throughout CENTCOM, and by their countrymen, for sacrifice in defense of the stability of the region.

Today, we continue the fight against ISIS in Syria alongside our Syrian Democratic Forces partners to ensure the group's enduring defeat of ISIS.

And we remain in Iraq to advise, assist, and enable the Iraqi security forces in the fight against ISIS.

In Afghanistan, ISIS-Khorasan seeks to expand its ranks and develop the capability to inspire, enable, or direct attacks in the region and beyond. The group's ultimate goal is a strike on the U.S. homeland.

Amidst these challenges, strategic competition is deeply manifest in this region. The People's Republic of China aggressively expands its informational, military, and economic instruments of national power across the region. And now Beijing seeks to establish its diplomatic influence.

China, dependent on the region for half its imported crude oil and more than a third of all its natural gas, is also moving beyond energy-based investments to encompass physical and telecommunications infrastructure that advances its Belt and Road Initiative.

Nineteen of 21 CENTCOM countries have signed a Belt and Road Initiative agreement with China. We are in a race to integrate with our partners before China can fully penetrate the region. Russia, on the other hand, seeks to expand its influence in Syria, seeking a permanent basing there and undermining our efforts toward stability and security.

Putin seeks a foothold of influence in the Central Asian states, leveraging historical relations and a perceived decline in U.S. engagement to challenge our influence in that critical part of the world. With these challenges, the CENTCOM region holds the greatest risk of derailing the National Defense Strategy with a flashpoint international incident that may demand a response using unplanned resources and attention. That is why we require a sufficient and sustainable force posture to accomplish these missions without relying on additional forces.

To accomplish these three strategic priorities, CENTCOM focuses on a strategic approach centered on people, partners, and innovation.

People are our greatest asset and most critical resource. Our servicemembers and civilians in the United States and across the region are our nation's best. I know this body keeps top of mind that we have, right now in the CENTCOM region, thousands of troops in harm's way.

Our partners are our nation's comparative advantage against competitors like China and Russia. Across CENTCOM, we cultivate deep, abiding partnerships that can serve as a hedge against threats in the region, while deterring Iran from its most destructive behavior. China views our partners as merely customers and clients.

Innovation of thought, innovation of process, innovation of concept, and technology extends the value of our partnerships. Innovation allows us to move faster, operate more efficiently, and increase progress across all operational efforts.

So, deter Iran, counter violent extremist organizations, and compete strategically are what we do. people – partners – innovation is how we do them.

In closing, let me thank you again for your support to our servicemembers, civilians, and families.

For forty years – much of that time in sustained combat in the CENTCOM area of responsibility – the United States and the region relied on the American servicemember for the security and stability of the region and to advance American interests. Those men and women have fulfilled the original promise of this command in some of the toughest of circumstances and we owe them a debt of gratitude.

I thank the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen and Guardians – and their families - who serve and sacrifice in CENTCOM today and continue to fulfill that promise. It is the greatest honor of my life to serve as their commander.