

# **STATEMENT OF GENERAL MICHAEL "ERIK" KURILLA ON THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND - SASC Hearing Mar 7, 2024**

7 March 2024

## **TWO VISIONS FOR THE FUTURE OF THE CENTRAL REGION**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The Central Region faces its most volatile security situation in the past half century. Just a year ago, the region was on the verge of improbable and transformative progress. The strategic investments in our partners were transforming the security calculus in the region in ways unthinkable just ten years ago. The vision of an integrated and modernized region was on the precipice of actualization. The events of 7 October 2023 not only permanently changed Israel and Gaza, they also set off a series of reactions that have created the conditions for malign actors to sow instability throughout the region and beyond.

Today, a convergence of crisis and competition have enabled revisionist powers to fuel violence seeking a return to an unfortunately predictable pattern in the region's history. Iran and its expansive network of proxies and partners saw a once-in-a generation opportunity to reshape the region to its advantage. They have accelerated their efforts to expel Western presence and neutralize our influence in the region, enabling a long-term strategic goal to further their revolution and establish regional hegemony. Iran knows that its decades-long vision of dominating the region cannot be realized if the region's states continue to expand integration with each other and deepen partnership with the United States. ISIS and Al Qaeda, despite tremendous losses, remain committed to inflicting violence and suffering on anyone not aligned with their extremist ideology. ISIS retains the capability to threaten U.S. interests and is attempting to reconstitute in Syria. The People's Republic of China (PRC) and Russia demonstrate that they have little capability or will to reduce regional tensions and are quick to capitalize on instability. Collectively, Iran, Russia, and the PRC are strengthening their relationship, creating a chaotic landscape favorable for their exploitation and the spread of extremism.

However, the region is not predestined to this fate. The path of integration and partnership remains open to us if we remain committed to following it. The stable future envisioned by our National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS) and shared by our partners can support broader U.S. national interests and is one worth striving to achieve. Despite Iran's best efforts, the region is holding open its doors to security cooperation with the United States. It is modernizing at an incredible rate, seeking to shake free from the turmoil of its past, and looking towards a future of security, stability, and prosperity. Our partners in the Levant, Arabian Gulf, and Central and South Asia, remain committed to advancing the region – preferably with the United States. The degree of U.S. investment across the instruments of national power and the success of security integration in the Central Region will be decisive in determining whether its future supports U.S. national interests. Our years of continuous engagement throughout the region serve as the foundation for this investment.

U.S. Central Command's strategic approach of People, Partners, and Innovation, codified in our Theater Strategy, reinforces the vision of a modern and integrated Central Region and supports a Whole of Government effort to secure our regional and global interests. Our strategic advantage in the region remains strong military-to-military partnerships, while our adversaries and competitors rely on parasitic and transactional relationships. We seek to integrate our partners, while Iran seeks to leverage instability to its advantage. We enable our partners to defeat violent extremists by catalyzing unified responses, while Iran threatens national sovereignty and regional stability by supporting and enabling sectarian militias. In concert with our partners, we drive innovative approaches, concepts, and technologies to address the many threats we face, developing solutions for real time decision advantage and creating strategic depth in our force posture.

USCENTCOM is clear eyed about the task before us. The shockwaves of the past year will reverberate across the Central Region for some time. Iran intends to seize on its opportunity, and it will not be easily deterred. The fight against violent extremism is not complete. The PRC and Russia will exploit instability at every turn to undermine U.S. interests and advance their own strategic positions. Beyond the region, we acknowledge there are a myriad of global challenges that require deliberate risk and resourcing decisions by our national leaders. USCENTCOM remains committed to the vision of a prosperous and integrated Central Region in which U.S. national interests are advanced.

## **II. STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

The Central Region remains vital to our national interests. USCENTCOM protects the security of the American people and supports the expansion of American economic prosperity and opportunity. We benefit from deep diplomatic ties and military-to-military relationships throughout the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR), with many of the United States' most steadfast partners resident in the region or astride it. We also have critical economic interests to protect. The Arabian Gulf contains around 800 billion barrels of proven oil reserves and 2,800 trillion cubic feet of natural gas reserves – nearly half the world's oil and natural gas. Twelve percent of our imported oil comes from the region, and it supplies the world with 15 million barrels per day – much of which goes to our global partners and allies through the Strait of Hormuz. Many of the resources that do not originate in the region traverse it, along shipping routes between Asia and Europe, passing through strategic chokepoints in the Bab al Mandeb Strait and Suez Canal.

There are also significant security challenges in the region. From Iran's regional hegemonic ambitions to the world's biggest concentration of violent extremism, the security of America's homeland, its interests, and the security of our partners are under threat from an array of actors seeking to prevent the vision of a free and prosperous Central Region from coming to fruition. We must ensure malign actors do not proliferate regional violence around the globe and to our shores. We must also be cognizant that our partners are weighing their options as they interpret signals that suggest we will reduce our commitment. Meanwhile, the burgeoning military relationship between Russia and Iran threatens to amplify their activities across multiple theaters. USCENTCOM secures U.S. national interests and addresses these destabilizing influences through three lines of effort: Deterring Iran, Countering Violent Extremist Organizations, and Competing Strategically.

## **Deterring Iran**

For several decades, Tehran has pursued a three-pronged strategy for regional dominance: achieve a threshold nuclear weapons capability, advance and proliferate its standoff weapons arsenal, and leverage a vast proxy network to sow instability throughout the region. It is that proxy network, known as the Iranian Threat Network (ITN), that provides Iran operational reach throughout the region and enables its 5 offensive actions against our regional partners and global interests.

Iran continues to use its nuclear program for international blackmail. Last year, Iran continued to produce and stockpile highly enriched uranium well beyond what is needed for civilian purposes in hopes of gaining economic concessions from the international community. On 10 February 2024, the International Atomic Energy Agency announced Iran had amassed a 121.5-kilogram stockpile of 60% enriched uranium, and 5,525.5 kilograms of enriched uranium overall. Should Iran decide, it could enrich enough uranium for three nuclear devices within weeks. A nuclear-armed Iran would transform the region overnight and forever, likely igniting a regional race for nuclear weapons and creating a security umbrella for its hegemonic ambitions.

Iran also projects power through its ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial systems (UAS), and other advanced conventional weapons. Over the last 12 months, Iran continued to expand its arsenal of precision guided weapon systems including ballistic and cruise missiles with ranges up to 2000km and one-way attack UAS with ranges up to 3000km. These capabilities enable Iran to strike every country in the Central Region and to range key U.S. allies as far away as Europe. Iran distributes many of these weapons to proxies in the region, presenting a high-end, multi-axis threat to U.S. forces and those of our allies and partners. Iran's advanced weapons have been used by its proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen continuously in the past five months, and they continue their illicit shipments – in violation of UN sanctions – on a daily basis. Finally, HAMAS's barbaric attack on Israel would not have been possible without years of Iranian material and training support.

Not only does Iran actively undermine the sovereignty of neighboring states in the region by providing sophisticated lethal aid to its various militias, it also supplies countries like Russia, Venezuela, and Sudan with attack and surveillance UAS, with more customers lining up globally. Regardless of who pulls the trigger, Iran is unconcerned with ensuring its weapons are employed in accordance with the Law of Armed Conflict. Iran displays its growing UAS capabilities by attacking commercial shipping, striking merchant vessels more than 1,000 nautical miles into the Indian Ocean. In fact, since 2021, Iran attacked or seized 19 merchant ships in international waters, and still illegally holds five vessels and their crews against their will in Iranian ports.

Tehran has long driven instability in the region with its proxies, but 2023 saw an unprecedented activation of virtually every facet of the ITN across the entire region. After HAMAS attacked Israel, the Houthis in Yemen targeted the global economy, Iranian Aligned Militia Groups (IAMG) waged a campaign of violence to force the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS out of Iraq and Syria, and Lebanese Hezbollah's increasingly escalatory attacks held Israel's northern border at risk. Iran saw an opportunity to demonstrate the capabilities of its so-called "Axis of Resistance," and manifested decades of conditioning, provisioning, and preparation. Since 7 October 2023, IAMGs like Kata'ib Hezbollah and Harakat al Nujaba, enabled by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Qods Force, have attacked Coalition Forces 71 times in Iraq, 102 times in Syria, and twice in Jordan, killing three U.S. servicemembers on 28 January 2024. The Houthis have attacked international shipping and Coalition warships over 50 times, sparking supply chain issues reminiscent of those during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributing to food aid delays in hunger-stricken Yemen.

Through the ITN, the proliferation of its ballistic missile and UAS capabilities, and the potential of nuclear breakout, Iran is executing a strategic encirclement of the region. They are emplacing forces, ideology, and weapon systems that can threaten US interests, allies, and partners from multiple vectors and at critical chokepoints with little-to-no warning. Now, more than ever, Tehran has the capability to advance its regional goals and threaten global interests. Houthi attacks threaten the free flow of 15% of the world's commerce, while Iran itself repeatedly attacks and seizes international merchant vessels. IAMG attacks and Iranian political pressure jeopardize the hard-earned gains of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Iran's proliferation of advanced conventional weapons fuels conflict on three continents. All of this is underscored by Iran's status as a threshold nuclear state. With conditions now set, we assess Tehran perceives an opportunity to force the U.S. out of the Central Region, divide its neighbors, and take substantive steps to eradicate the state of Israel.

## **Opportunities for Deterring Iran**

In line with the NSS and NDS, USCENTCOM leverages the United States' unparalleled ability to integrate partners in pursuit of mutual interests. USCENTCOM's role is gradually shifting from security guarantor to security integrator, and many of our regional partners are increasingly willing to coordinate with their neighbors to enhance the defense of their borders. Behind this trend is a growing recognition that Iran is their greatest threat. In response, we develop competitive overmatch among our partners by enhancing our collective capabilities and leveraging our network of regional security constructs. Middle East Air Defense (MEAD) is an example, as the regional integration of our partners' air defense capabilities has helped detect and intercept the 8 unprecedented wave of missile and UAS attacks coming from the ITN.

Multinational coordination mechanisms aligned against individual domains, such as the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) help to address specific Iranian threats, like illegal ship seizures and arms smuggling. Even groups designed to counter other threats, such as the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and the 41-nation Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) bring the world together in common cause to defend the rules-based international order, which Iran is actively working to undermine.

We must continue to strengthen our longstanding bilateral military-to-military relationships. Just as our partners count on our support, we depend on our partners. A more effective foreign military sales (FMS) program will underwrite the trust among our partners and help bolster their capabilities

relative to Iran as well as protect their own sovereignty. Beyond materiel contributions to any fighting force, our close partnerships enable access, basing, and overflight that will be critical to mission success. For example, our close relationship with Egypt allowed us unique access to expedite humanitarian aid at the outset of the Sudanese Civil War, in addition to our daily operations. Going forward, we must continue to develop the partner-enabled Western Access Network, which provides alternate routes to transport equipment and personnel throughout the USCENTCOM AOR. You cannot surge trust in crisis, and our partners must know we are there for them before we need something in return.

## **Risks to Deterring Iran**

Iran believes it has the momentum to force a premature withdrawal of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, allowing them opportunity to expand its land bridge to the 9 Mediterranean Sea and revive the narrative of abandonment in the region. Further, the PRC and Russia would undoubtedly capitalize in the information environment by characterizing our withdrawal as a demonstration of American unreliability, hoping to drive a wedge in our global partnerships and assault a core premise of the NDS and NSS. Iran's potential pursuit of a nuclear weapon could significantly alter our risk assessment. Preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon remains a top priority with global implications. While we have not seen indications that Iran's Supreme Leader has changed his calculus to pursue a nuclear weapon, we will continue to develop military options for the Secretary of Defense and President, should they be necessary.

## **Countering Violent Extremist Organizations (VEO)**

Five years after the fall of the territorial defeat of ISIS, the group's extremist ideology endures. It endures in more than 5,000 fighters and operatives still at large throughout the Central Region and beyond. It endures in detention facilities, guarded by our Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partners, which hold approximately 9,000 detainees. Finally, it endures in pockets of camps for displaced persons like Syria's Al Hol, which currently holds approximately 43,000 men, women, and children. ISIS remains resolute in its quest to plunge the region into sectarian violence, impose its ideology, and eventually spread its influence globally.

Without the Global Coalition's continued focus, ISIS resurgence remains a threat. In 2023, Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) conducted 475 total ground operations and 45 total airstrikes, resulting in 164 ISIS fighters killed 10 and 619 detained. We assess our high volume of partnered operations has kept ISIS at bay; however, IAMG attacks on U.S. and Coalition forces degrade the D-ISIS campaign. Eliminating ISIS's ability to conduct terrorist attacks requires sustained investment in Iraqi security forces, partners on the ground in Syria and a robust counterterrorism apparatus consisting of intelligence community and interagency elements.

The barrage of Iranian-sponsored attacks after 17 October 2023 forced CJTF-OIR to come off plan as we prioritized protecting our forces in Iraq and Syria. The ensuing spike in ISIS attacks demonstrates the gravity of disruptions to the international effort to permanently defeat the group. In the first two weeks of 2024, ISIS conducted 275 attacks in Iraq and Syria, the highest rate of attacks in the last two years. The Government of Iraq is rightly concerned that ISIS is taking advantage of the Global Coalition temporarily letting up due to IAMG attacks. Furthermore, Tehran is exerting incredible political pressure on Baghdad to expel the Coalition, which would all but guarantee ISIS'

return if it occurred before Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were ready to stand on their own. We would also be challenged to support our Syrian partners without a military presence in Iraq. In Syria, we saw ISIS increase intensity of activity across multiple provinces, as it enjoyed more freedom of movement due to SDF conflicts with local tribes and Turkish airstrikes that restricted SDF operations. A spate of ISIS attacks in late 2023 drove up the annual average casualties per attack to twice the rate of the previous year.

Disruptions in Syria also forced temporary delays in training security forces for detention facilities and displaced persons camps. We must ensure the SDF can sustainably hold ISIS detainees while the international community repatriates foreign 11 fighters. In addition to training guards, we assist with the maintenance and refurbishment of the detention facilities to eliminate vulnerabilities ISIS may exploit in attempts to free detainees.

We also train our partner forces in Syria, many of whom are women, to provide security at the displaced persons camps. The training is key to keeping the residents safe, enabling access for aid organizations, and preventing the spread of extremism. Nonetheless, the longer that displaced persons remain in camps like Al Hol and Al Ro, the more susceptible they are to ISIS ideology, making their reintegration into society more difficult. Alongside our partners, we continue to identify and detain ISIS facilitators operating in the camps. To prevent the next generation of ISIS, the international community must sustain the recent momentum in repatriating and reintegrating displaced persons in their home countries.

Our Central and South Asian partners repeatedly share their concern over ISIS' pursuit of opportunity and capability to conduct external operations. The Taliban targeted some key ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) leaders in 2023, but it has shown neither the capability nor the intent to sustain adequate counterterrorism pressure. In fact, this lack of sustained pressure allowed ISIS-K to regenerate and harden their networks, creating multiple redundant nodes that direct, enable, and inspire attacks. Additionally, the Taliban has shown little interest to apply counter-terrorism pressure against the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP), presenting a significant threat to stability in Pakistan's border regions. We do not expect that dynamic to change. These groups have leveraged poor economic conditions, lax governance in 12 Afghanistan, and a sophisticated network to recruit, train, and sustain an expanding cadre of fighters.

Tragically, even as Iran undermines the Global Coalition in Iraq and Syria, ISIS-K killed 91 Iranians and injured 284 others in Kerman on 3 January 2024. This was the deadliest terror attack in Iran since 1979 and it is part of ISIS' efforts to exploit the war in Gaza to rejuvenate its global attacks. In retaliation, Iran further destabilized the region by carrying out strikes in Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria, drawing harsh condemnation from both Pakistani and Iraqi governments and reportedly causing civilian casualties in two of these incidents.

Al Qaeda, while weakened, still enjoys safe havens in Afghanistan and Yemen. Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) operates training camps, safehouses, and religious schools in Afghanistan. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) launched a counter-offensive against Republic of Yemen Government forces in September 2023, likely to regain access to historically supportive areas in the southern governorates. Both AQIS and AQAP continue to call for lone wolf attacks on U.S. and Western interests via their global digital reach.

## Opportunities to Counter VEOs

The enduring defeat of ISIS depends not only on the repatriation and reintegration of displaced persons from camps like Al Hol and Al Roj, but the repatriation and prosecution of ISIS detainees as well, and our efforts to encourage this process gained traction in 2023. The international community repatriated 6,396 displaced persons from Syria, helping to reduce the population of Al Hol, the largest of the camps, by 18%. Iraq and 13 Syria led the way on repatriating their citizens, while nations like the Kyrgyz Republic also set the example, conducting 333 repatriations in 2023. The Government of Iraq stepped up its efforts to shorten the average stay in its rehabilitation centers, like Jeddah 1, which hold returning citizens until they can be reintegrated into society. This is also a moral imperative. In my six visits to Al Hol, I have met adolescent children who arrived in the camp as infants.

Our partners in Iraq and Syria, including Iraq's Counterterrorism Service and the Syrian Democratic Forces, continue to demonstrate improving capability, capacity, competency, and will. In 2023, the ISF conducted five independent D-ISIS operations without Coalition assistance. Funding mechanisms like the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) are key to sustaining this progress and fully transitioning Iraq's security to Iraqi hands.

In August 2023, the D-ISIS mission in Iraq took a major step forward when the U.S. and Iraqi governments agreed at the Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue to form a Higher Military Commission (HMC), a consultative mechanism for the Coalition's transition. The HMC will enable the transition to an enduring bilateral security partnership between Iraq and the United States, on a timeline that factors in the threat from ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and the capability of the ISF. CJTF-OIR, in lockstep with NATO Mission Iraq, will continue to train and develop the ISF until it is fully capable of independent operations.

In Central and South Asia, we can partner with countries like Pakistan, Tajikistan, and others to help them address the growing threat from the deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. Our partners in the region consistently cite counterterrorism as one of their highest priorities for cooperation and combined training.

## Risks to Countering VEOs

Despite gains in the Counter-VEO fight, various groups in the Central Region retain the capability and will to target U.S. interests abroad in under six months with little to no warning. We assess an attack on American soil would likely take longer. The reprioritization of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, targeting expertise, and linguists contributes to gaps and seams in our ability to detect and disrupt plots, increasing freedom of movement for VEOs. This could be partially mitigated by additional assets and cooperation with our Central and South Asian partners.

Taliban pressure against ISIS-K temporarily disrupted the group's ability to plan and conduct attacks against the Homeland and Western targets, but that pressure has been intermittent. ISIS-K and its allies retain a safe haven in Afghanistan, and they continue to develop their networks in and out of the country. Their goals do not stop there. They have called for attacks globally on anyone not aligned with their extremist ideology, and Taliban efforts to suppress the group have proven insufficient. The recent ISIS attack in Kerman, Iran demonstrates the group's resiliency and indicates that they retain the capability and will to conduct spectacular external operations.

Safe havens like Afghanistan also increase the risk of VEOs inciting regional conflict. VEOs killed at least 2,300 Pakistanis in 2023, with TTP attacking Pakistan 881 times, the highest rate in over five years. In addition to hundreds of attacks by TTP, ISIS-K conducted at least three high profile bombings in Pakistan in 2023 and plotted to conduct 15 more attacks throughout Central Asia. The Taliban's inability, or unwillingness, to rein in VEOs could destabilize Central and South Asia.

We must also prevent a premature Coalition departure from Iraq and Syria. If Iran and Russia were to succeed in their goal of pushing us out before our partner forces can operate independently, it is my assessment that ISIS would reconstitute the ability to seize territory within two years. The Global Coalition's sustained presence not only helps our partners in their fight against ISIS, it also prevents the reemergence of territorial control and ensures the group does not have a safe haven in Iraq or Syria to plan global attacks. The eventual transition to a traditional security cooperation framework must be predicated on Partner Force Development and Security Sector Reform in Iraq, and continued repatriations, secure detention facilities, and a political pathway for the SDF in Syria.

## **Competing Strategically**

Strategic competition is a contest of visions. The United States and our partners promote a vision in which the rules-based international order respects the sovereignty of nations and shared interests are advanced through the strength of partnership. The PRC, Russia, and Iran have deepened their partnership and collaboration as Iran seeks to strengthen its regional position, Russia leverages Iranian military support in Ukraine, and the PRC aims to exploit tensions in the region to afford them a position of advantage and diminishes US interests. According to public reporting, Supreme Leader Khamenei said in November 2023 that "death to America" is not just a slogan, it is a policy. The PRC and Russia increasingly contribute to Iran's goals through direct assistance or 16 refusing to apply their own instruments of national power to discourage Iran's malign behaviors.

For nearly eighty years, since President Roosevelt met with King Ibn Saud aboard USS QUINCY, the United States has formed a network of hard-earned security partnerships with the Central Region. These partnerships are more than just objects to be guarded from competitors like the PRC and Russia, they must be nurtured and reinforced. Our partnerships are strategic high ground and represent a core strength of the United States. This is evidenced by our rapid response to recent trade disruptions caused by Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. The U.S. Fifth Fleet leveraged its decadeslong relationships under CMF to bring together more than 20 nations under Operation Prosperity Guardian, which protects shipping through the critical Bab al Mandeb Strait in response to the Houthis' indiscriminate attacks. No other nation on Earth could generate an international response so quickly, and it would not have been possible without the trust and interoperability we have fostered among our allies and partners.

Our partnerships in the Central Region will become even more valuable as the transformation toward modernization and prosperity continues. Our partners want the United States to be part of this transformation, and our competitors know this. In 2023, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) continued to diversify its economy, exemplified by Western tourists strolling through massive shopping centers in Riyadh and ambitious megaprojects, while remaining dedicated to seeking peaceful coexistence with its neighbors. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) catapulted itself to global prominence in space, sending an astronaut to the International Space Station for six months and providing the world with a new map of Mars from its Hope Spacecraft, the second probe 17 ever to

successfully enter Mars orbit on its first try. Just a few months earlier, in November 2022, Qatar hosted the world's largest sporting event, the FIFA World Cup, for the first time ever in the Central Region. American engagement has contributed to this transformation, and the Central Region of the future will remain open to those who continue to help it.

## **Strategic Competition with the People's Republic of China**

With telecommunications and physical infrastructure, diplomacy, and security cooperation, the PRC is rapidly penetrating the Central Region and feeds misperceptions of American disengagement to try to supplant the United States as the security partner of choice. In late October 2023, the PRC's outgoing Naval Escort Task Force (NETF), which ostensibly counters piracy in the Gulf of Aden on rotational deployments since 2008, visited Kuwait, Qatar, UAE, and Pakistan before departing the theater. This unprecedented series of port calls was a milestone in the PRC's nascent campaign to gain security influence and access.

The term "security partner" means something very different to the PRC than it does to the United States. The PRC offers discounted sales and rapid delivery of military equipment, and the region is learning the hidden cost associated with these quick sales. When Chinese equipment performs poorly, there is no maintenance, logistics, or training architecture in place. Furthermore, the PRC shows no desire to support the region's security or stability with military forces. For example, the PRC's NETF in the Gulf of Aden has done nothing in the defense of international shipping under Houthi attack, nor has it responded to the recent series of piracy events in the Somali Basin, instead solely focusing on the protection of Chinese assets and interests.

Meanwhile, the PRC has also done little to rein in Iran's destabilizing behavior since the much-touted rapprochement it brokered between Tehran and Riyadh in March 2023. Unfortunately, perhaps as evidence of the lack of depth of the arrangement and tepid commitment towards actual stability, Iran has continued its illicit activities, including continued arming of the Houthis. It is noteworthy that the PRC buys 90% of exported Iranian oil, which they could use to influence Iranian lethal aid to the Houthis if they chose to. Instead, Beijing only helps Tehran evade sanctions and accelerate its destabilization of the region. The PRC's unwillingness, or inability, to leverage its influence has contributed to Iran's disruption of the free flow of international commerce.

The Central Region is vital to the PRC achieving its goal of refashioning the international system to suit its interests and authoritarian preferences and become the world's leading power. Increased cooperation between the PRC and the Central Region advances its Belt and Road projects, strengthens bilateral relations, and helps regional countries diversify their economies. Trade between the PRC and the Central Region surpassed \$436 billion in 2022, and its investments in the region under the Belt and Road continued apace in 2023, with projects in telecommunications, construction, transportation, and more.

A key element of the Belt and Road seeks to create overland shipping routes between the PRC and Europe through Central and South Asia, which could bolster regional economies but also carries risk. For example, Pakistan is the world's third largest recipient of Chinese loans (behind Russia and Venezuela), receiving over \$67.19 billion to fund the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Now, amid its ongoing economic crisis, Pakistan is vulnerable to PRC influence. We have also seen an incremental increase in Beijing's political investment in the region. In the past two years, Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, KSA, Qatar, and UAE became dialogue partners in the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization, while Iran joined as a full member last year. This year, Egypt, UAE, and Iran formally joined BRICS.

We now routinely see People's Liberation Army (PLA) general officers serving as Senior Defense Officials (SDO) or Defense Attachés, whereas just a few years ago, these would have been mid-grade officers. The PRC relies on the region for its energy, importing 56% of its crude oil and 43% of natural gas from USCENTCOM AOR countries. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) announced last year by President Biden, along with six other countries and the European Union, offers a promising counterbalance to the PRC's Belt and Road. USCENTCOM's military-to-military relationships can provide critical and timely insight on projects that could be incorporated into IMEC. Time and time again, our partners tell us they would prefer to contract with U.S. or Western companies if a viable option were available. We are at risk of deterioration in our strategic relationships and losing influence to Beijing in the Central Region if we cannot effectively assist our partners with their security needs. Our partners recognize the superior quality of our military equipment but, as the advent of drone warfare has demonstrated, even a third-rate product employed rapidly and in large quantities can be effective.

We must improve our processes to 20 outperform competitors like the PRC, who has increased arms sales to the region in the last decade. We are also monitoring the potential expansion of PLA basing in the Central Region, beyond their current naval base in Djibouti and border outpost in Tajikistan. If the PRC were to secure additional PLA naval bases, it could give them the ability to hold our strategic lines of communication at risk. Even in ports where they have no intention of establishing a naval base, Chinese state-owned enterprises that own or operate terminals could give them considerable political influence to present us with logistical challenges in a future conflict.

## **Strategic Competition with Russia**

Russia's goals in the Central Region are different from those of the PRC, but they are no less intent on diminishing American influence in the region. Russia's primary security interests in the region are maintaining its access in Syria, preserving its legacy Soviet status in Central Asia, and developing its military cooperation with Iran. Russia's two largest foreign bases are in Tajikistan and Syria, both in the USCENTCOM AOR. Further demonstrating the region's importance to Russia, Vladimir Putin's only international visits since he launched the invasion of Ukraine – outside of the PRC, Iran, and Central Asia – were to KSA and UAE.

Over the past year the collaboration between Russia and Iran grew into a nascent military partnership. Iran has delivered at least 1,000 attack drones, and dozens of multipurpose UAS, to Russia for use in Ukraine. With Iran's help, Russia plans to build 6,000 UAS domestically by 2025. After UN sanctions on Iran's missile program expired 21 in October 2023, Russia now intends to purchase hundreds of Iranian ballistic missiles in the coming months, significantly increasing the risk of prolonging its war in Ukraine. In return, Russia agreed to supply Iran with its advanced Su-35 fighter jets, attack helicopters, and training aircraft.

Our partners in Central Asia observed Russia's unprovoked invasions of Ukraine and Georgia, and its military's subsequent performance, raising doubts about its reliability as a security partner. Furthermore, the lack of intervention by the Russian-led Collective Security Treaty Organization in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, despite multiple Armenian requests, underscored the ineffectiveness of the alliance among the Central Asian states, many of whom are members. As a

result, USCENTCOM has a generational opportunity to strengthen and expand our partnerships with Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

We also have the opportunity to support U.S. European Command by coordinating across theater boundaries. When Russia uses the Central Region to evade sanctions or transport illicit war materiel, we can work with willing partners to frustrate its logistics. In addition, when we seize lethal aid that Iran smuggles to its proxies throughout the region, and when authorized by applicable law, we will work with the Interagency to transfer it to our Ukrainian partners, just as we did with 1.1 million rounds of seized rifle ammunition in October 2023. The growing military relationship between Russia and Iran is expanding to new domains. Apart from Iran's proliferation of advanced weaponry with no export controls or end use monitoring, they are also cooperating in cyber and space. In March 2023, 22 Russia sent Iran digital surveillance software, and Tehran is seeking more assistance. As of December 2023, the two countries are reportedly on the verge of signing a new long-term comprehensive cooperation agreement covering defense, energy, and space sectors.

Russia welcomed Syria's reinstatement into the Arab League in 2023, which boosted the status of one of its key regional partners while simultaneously ramping up pressure for the D-ISIS Coalition's withdrawal. Syria's reinstatement was a lifeline for Assad, who has depended on a mixture of Russian and Iranian support and funding from drug smuggling to sustain his regime. Additionally, Russia's continued irresponsible and unprofessional behavior in Syrian airspace and on the electromagnetic spectrum needlessly raise the risk of miscalculation.

### **III. STRATEGIC APPROACH**

USCENTCOM seizes the opportunities and mitigates the risks that arise in the Central Region through our strategic approach: People, Partners, and Innovation. My first two years in command reinforced the value of these three pillars. We've outlined this approach in our Theater Strategy, new Campaign Plan, and our approach to current operations. Our approach aligns with the 2022 NDS, which is a call to action to incorporate our unparalleled network of allies and partners. USCENTCOM will continue this approach as a security integrator in the region.

#### **People**

Our People – our servicemembers, civilian workforce, contractors, and supportive families – serve as the bedrock of everything we do. They are our greatest asset and our 23 most critical resource. Our goal is to instill in them a sense of accomplishment, purpose, identity, and belonging. We recognize that the top talent in the workforce, both in and out of uniform, have many options. As an actively engaged Combatant Command, we require the best, but also develop and cultivate expertise, so that the best want to work here.

We seek to attract and retain premier talent to meet our evolving needs. For example, we hired a team of experts to critically analyze our operations to ensure we do everything possible to preserve innocent life, in line with the Department's guidance to mitigate civilian harm. We also maintain a cadre of Interagency liaisons to support a Whole of Government strategy in the region, such as our USAID team that enables us to support humanitarian aid and disaster relief missions.

Our partners see the professionalism of our Service Members as we engage with them on a daily basis and seek to emulate their example through investment in reforms across their military formations. Our Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Corps is the envy of all other militaries, and we are working with many of our partners across the Central Region to build world-class NCO development and education systems. In Central Asia particularly, our partners are increasingly seeking our help with NCO development, as we have done with Kazakhstan over the past 30 years. Our People are not just in our headquarters and in our subordinate commands, but across the enterprise that supports our operations, activities, and investments in the Central Region. Reductions over time, such as rank reductions in our defense attaché positions and reallocation of analytical support across the intelligence community, have a 24 cumulative effect. As necessary and logical resourcing decisions have been made to reprioritize assets against other emergent challenges, risk accumulates over time if cuts are made too quickly or deeply. Much like blocks being removed from a Jenga tower, the impact may not be obvious at first, but eventually the tower will fall.

Finally, we are committed to bringing on individuals who can help accelerate innovation in USCENTCOM. In addition to our Chief Technology Officer, last year we hired our first Chief Data Officer and an AI & Robotics Advisor, both of whom will enable our digital modernization and shift toward data-centric operations. We then initiated our Technology Residency program in January of this year. The program will bring in exceptional talent from across the industrial base throughout the year to support us on a three to six-month timeline. The Residents will partner with elements of USCENTCOM staff and components to help tackle the friction points we encounter in our experimentation, aid in our data modernization efforts, and contribute key skillsets that are not organic to the Department of Defense.

## **Partners**

Both the NSS and NDS emphasize the importance of partnership. The trusted relationships we have built with our partners over decades give us an advantage over competitors like the PRC and Russia, and sustaining that advantage is key to our strategic approach in the Central Region. We help our partners achieve competitive overmatch versus Iran and suppress VEOs through security integration and dependable cooperation, such as timely FMS and Foreign Military Financing.

Our fight against ISIS depends on multilateral constructs like NATO Mission Iraq and 25 CJTF-OIR, and on our bilateral partnerships in Iraq and Syria. Our Coalition remains in Iraq at the invitation of the government. The Government of Iraq faces immense pressure from Iran to withdraw its invitation for Coalition presence, but they have resisted external manipulation thus far, even holding their first provincial elections in a decade in December 2023. Iraq is committed to cooperating with the United States, reforming its security sector, and realizing the full development of the ISF, which made strides in 2023. We are planning for an orderly transition to a normalized military-to-military relationship featuring traditional security cooperation. In Syria, the SDF remain committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS, in detention facilities, in displaced persons camps, and at large – despite facing an existential threat and pressure from the Assad regime.

Our relationships with the militaries of the Levant Region helped keep HAMAS' attack on Israel from spiraling into a wider regional conflict. We have stood side by side with Israel, ensuring it has what it needs to defend itself, deter Iran and its proxies like Lebanese Hezbollah from getting further

involved, and plan for a transition to postconflict. Close coordination with our counterparts in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon allowed us to expedite the flow of humanitarian aid and facilitate safe operations for organizations like the UN Interim Force in Lebanon. Our partners in the Levant also contribute valuable forces and expertise to regional security constructs like MEAD and CMF.

Integrating the security efforts of our Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners is the linchpin of our strategy to deter Iranian aggression. GCC members are moving toward operational coordination in the defense of their territorial airspace and waters, bilaterally and via multilateral constructs like MEAD, CMF, and IMSC. Specifically, KSA is enabling interoperability by transforming its Ministry of Defense to mirror the U.S. model more closely for national defense. Qatar's Air Force contributes aircraft to our daily operations throughout the region. The UAE just completed its second company-level rotation to our Joint Readiness Training Center, with the goal of fielding a brigade completely interoperable with U.S. Forces by 2028.

Together, the GCC countries can stand strong against Iran. Still, the strategic importance of the GCC goes beyond any singular adversary. GCC countries host the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, the headquarters for CJTF-OIR in Kuwait, and our theater air operations center and the largest U.S. military base in the region in Qatar. The Gulf is also home to the region's economic power centers in KSA and UAE, and the diplomatic efforts of partners like Qatar and Oman have helped resolve multiple crises and return American citizens home safely.

In September 2023, USCENTCOM held its Central and South Asian Chiefs of Defense Conference in Uzbekistan for the first time in two years, an indication of our steadily growing relationships. Our Central Asian partners are cautiously optimistic about the prospect of increased security cooperation, especially border defense, counterterrorism, institutional capacity building, and military medicine. We are also beginning more advanced training like cybersecurity and special operations with some partners. With the region's strategic location between Iran, Afghanistan, the PRC, and Russia, this momentum in our military-to-military relationships is invaluable to our national security but it also places constraints on our partners. We intend to continue cooperation, via programs like International Military Education and Training and the State Partnership Program, at a pace with which our Central Asian partners are individually comfortable. 27 In South Asia,

Pakistan has had a deep and multi-faceted strategic partnership with the PRC since the 1960s. Ties between the two countries deepened further in the early 2000's as the two countries developed shared concerns about the rise of India as a regional power. Since 2015, nearly 75% of Pakistani arms imports came from the PRC, which represents 40% of Chinese arms exports, making Pakistan Beijing's largest security customer. Nevertheless, Pakistan seeks U.S. security and economic assistance. Considering the weight that Pakistan carries throughout Asia, we must approach our relationship from the perspective of its own merits. Any security strategy in Afghanistan will require Pakistan's help. They have invaluable expertise, access, and geographic location for countering ISIS-K, and they are willing and capable counterterrorism partners as they face persistent threats from VEOs like TTP.

Finally, our global partners provide invaluable contributions to USCENTCOM operations in support of our mutual interests. Our "Five Eyes" partners (Australia, Canada, United Kingdom, and New Zealand) share intelligence and commit forces across all three of our lines of effort. In addition, France continues to be a ready and willing military partner in defeating ISIS, countering Russia, and deterring Iranian aggressive action at sea.

## Innovation

In USCENTCOM, we are not just experimenting with new technologies - we are developing innovative processes, building innovative teams while encouraging individual contributions, and responding to emerging threats in innovative ways. Importantly, our personnel use the capabilities that we are developing in real world operations today. We are helping to create America's military of the future, not waiting for it.

USCENTCOM has implemented a wide range of mechanisms and processes to drive innovation. The Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2) software suite USCENTCOM employs today is drastically different from the C2 systems used in counterinsurgency operations of the past twenty years. The persistent and multidomain threat created by Iran's ongoing proliferation of advanced weaponry to its proxies necessitates decision-making tools that enable seamless command and control functions from the tactical to the strategic level in real time. The importance of speed and a holistic approach in seeing, understanding, and acting cannot be overstated. The CJADC2 software suite we have tested, and now use daily, enabled us to thwart numerous ITN attacks. This momentum must be continued and accelerated through the Combatant Commands under the Department's strategy. These efforts are complementary to ongoing work across the Department, and we have hosted senior officials from across the entire enterprise to share our lessons learned and help the Joint Force modernize.

Since January 2023, we have conducted a series of quarterly digital exercises, preceded by month-long software sprints, to develop the tools needed for CJADC2. CJADC2 is more than just a concept for us, it is a daily activity that we are improving with each exercise. By pairing operators with software developers, we are proving that we can use digital tools to improve our situational awareness, make our targeting more efficient and effective, improve our planning and sustainment processes, and embody true digital warfighting. Exercises like these demonstrate the value of hands-on training with live data and the centrality of robust networks in CJADC2. We nest our exercises and experimentation under DoD efforts such as the Global Information Dominance Experiment series.

In addition to quarterly CJADC2 exercises, we have driven other events to encourage innovative thinking and solutions. In 2023, we continued our Innovation Oasis, a "Shark Tank" style competition open to the entire USCENTCOM enterprise. The winning ideas are rapidly introduced to the force, such as an intuitive software tool for managing force flow into theater that won last year's competition and is already in use across the Command. This is indicative of how we look for innovative responses to our most pressing challenges.

For the counter-UAS problem, we developed a series of tailored "SANDS" exercises to address the problem's many unique aspects, and established an integrated experimentation center in KSA where we can test the newest technology alongside our partners. Another example is cybersecurity. In 2023, we held a "Best Cyber Warrior" competition in Oman. Exercises and training events with our partners in rapidly developing fields like counter-UAS and cybersecurity are key to establishing regional competitive overmatch versus Iran. We also organized our subordinate commands to encourage innovation, with each now operating an innovation task force tailored to their unique domain. On land, Task Force 39 is experimenting with additive manufacturing, counter-UAS technologies, and unmanned logistics vehicles.

At sea, Task Force 59 has not only revolutionized how the U.S. Navy incorporates robotic and AI systems, but now contributes daily to regional maritime security, and encourages partner investments in unmanned surface and subsurface vehicles. Last 30 year we launched Operation GATEKEEPER, the largest operational employment of multinational unmanned surface vessels in the world. GATEKEEPER allows us and our partners to not only increase maritime domain awareness across 18,000 square kilometers in the North Arabian Sea, but unlike an operation with manned assets, it enables continuous presence.

In the air, Task Force 99 is testing a wide range of new technologies to expand our air superiority, including long endurance ISR platforms that can fly for days and low-cost 3D-printed UAS, some built for as little as \$3,000 in eight hours. Task Force 99 is also experimenting with new tools for expeditionary aviation logistics and exploring new ways to detect and counter jamming. Our special operations innovation task force, TF 179, is developing digital and unmanned solutions for ISR, target information sharing, electronic warfare, and payload delivery. For example, TF 179 takes advantage of USSOCOM's rapid acquisition capabilities to field disposable, swarming unmanned systems that can be employed unilaterally or through a surrogate force for one-way attack, electronic warfare, or tactical ISR. IV.

## CONCLUSION

The United States cannot just articulate a vision of integration and partnership for a brighter future that aligns the interests of the United States and our partners; we must match that vision with the commitment necessary to give partners the confidence to continue on that path with us. There is a narrative that the Central Region is too fraught with turmoil to be considered worthy of American investment. Twenty-plus years of 31 American military engagement in both Iraq and Afghanistan play to this narrative. But the past, while it may serve as prologue, does not predetermine the future. The vision, the hopes, and the ambitions of our partners throughout the Central Region are palpable and they are real. Equally real are those recidivist forces attempting to undermine those who seek progress, pulling them back into a past checkered with violence and disorder.

We are and should remain engaged in every corner of the Central Region, from Egypt to Kazakhstan and from Lebanon to Pakistan, strengthening our partners and securing our vital national interests. Our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Guardians, and Coast Guardsmen are executing critical operations that contribute to the collective security of the US and our partners. They operate in harm's way each day: whether it is an F-15 pilot flying missions in support of our Iraqi partners; the USS CARNEY patrolling the Red Sea and defeating Houthi attacks; a Patriot Battery protecting our forces and those of our partners; a Marine Task Force ready to respond to crisis; a U.S. Space Force detachment combatting adversary attempts at jamming; or a U.S. Coast Guard boarding team interdicting a shipment of Iranian weapons. The women and men of U.S. Central Command remain committed to the vision of a stable Central Region in which U.S. national interests are secure and our partners prosper.