

STATEMENT OF  
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BEFORE THE HOUSE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE  
ON  
THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND  
GREAT POWER COMPETITION: THE CURRENT AND FUTURE  
CHALLENGES IN THE MIDDLE EAST  
7 MARCH 2019

## **Introduction**

As 2018 came to a close, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) was engaged in critical events and catalysts for change across its area of responsibility (AOR). In the final two weeks of December, CENTCOM supported the U.N. Special Envoy in the establishment of a fragile cease-fire in Yemen, and enabled the efforts of the U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation through military pressure on the Taliban. We began planning for the safe, professional withdrawal under pressure of U.S. forces from Syria, while maintaining our Defeat-Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (D-ISIS) efforts and accounting for the formation of a new governmental cabinet in Iraq. We monitored and mitigated the unprofessional acts of Iranian naval forces in international waters that threaten the global commons; which stood in stark contrast to the professional, mature actions of the U.S.-advised Lebanese Armed Forces as it de-escalated tensions along the border with Israel. While these events appear unconnected, they represent the swirling dynamics of the AOR – each event marking a pivotal point with the potential to impact the stability of the entire region.

Since 2001, in the aftermath of 9/11, CENTCOM has been charged with the responsibility of commanding multiple, often simultaneous combat missions in the Central Region. During that time, confronting terrorism and defeating violent extremist groups was the primary objective of U.S. national military power. Seventeen years later, CENTCOM is still the only geographic combatant command conducting multiple, active combat operations, but the strategic imperatives of a changing world have compelled us to rethink our priorities and assess our readiness for new challenges.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS) rightly recognized a return to competition between the great powers that now poses a greater long-term challenge to our nation than the violence of terrorism. We also noted that the National Security Strategy (NSS) directs that “The United States seeks a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power

hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market,” and that “We will retain the necessary American military presence in the region to protect the United States and our allies from terrorist attacks and preserve a favorable regional balance of power.” We at CENTCOM understand how global disorder has created a security environment more complex and volatile than we have faced in our nation’s history. This assessment demands a clear-eyed appraisal of the threats, an acknowledgement of the changing character of warfare, and an understanding that challenges to our national interests will largely be transregional versus regional.

We approach our evolving role at CENTCOM with both humility and agility, acknowledging the priorities outlined in the NSS and NDS, and the fact that we will not be the main effort of our nation’s scarce resources in perpetuity. We must, therefore, posture ourselves as both the supported and supporting effort toward securing our national interests – many of which are still heavily impacted by activities in the CENTCOM AOR. While CENTCOM has been the primary focus of military assets for nearly two decades, we recognize maintaining an agile posture in the Central Region doesn’t necessarily require large concentrations of military personnel and equipment. Our strategic strength has never rested solely on the volume of materiel we bring to the fight, but rather on the partnerships, alliances and whole-of-government efforts no other country in the world could recreate.

Looking forward, our challenge will be to secure our hard-fought gains, and those of our allies and partners, while posturing for continuing change in the Central Region. We must be ready to compete with China, Russia, and Iran as they challenge us for regional influence and threaten our vital national interests. We must continue disrupting violent extremist organizations and preventing the acquisition or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction so they cannot be used against the U.S. or our allies. Regardless of the challenge or level of resources, CENTCOM is committed to defending the national interests of the U.S., and those of its partners and allies.

## **Operating Environment**

Resolute Support (RS). Our current military efforts in Afghanistan in support of the South Asia Strategy are conditions-based and focused on two well-defined and complementary missions. First, through Operation Freedom's Sentinel, U.S. forces conduct counter-terror missions against al-Qaida, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria-Khorasan (ISIS-K), and associated groups to prevent their resurgence and ability to plan and execute external attacks. Second, in partnership with NATO allies and operational partner nations in the Resolute Support Mission, U.S. forces advise and assist the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) in their fight against the Taliban. The ANDSF have demonstrated exceptional resilience through a difficult and sustained fight.

The conditions-based South Asia Strategy is working. We continue to use military ways and means to achieve our end state of reconciliation, recognizing this conflict will not be resolved solely by military force. Our military and enabling missions in Afghanistan are designed to set conditions that will convince the Taliban to negotiate for a lasting peace, and allow Afghans to own the political and diplomatic solutions that will eventually bring an end to the conflict. Consistent, offensive military pressure helped bring about the first cease fires – local and national – between the Taliban and Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) in 17 years, illustrating the Afghan people's weariness of war, and representing our first real opportunity for peace and reconciliation since the war began. While the Taliban continue to demonstrate the capability to mount spectacular attacks and inflict significant casualties on the ANDSF, the 2018 fighting season confirmed that the Taliban cannot win militarily. We recognize it will take a combination of sustained military pressure and diplomacy to bring an end to the hostilities. Our military pressure serves as an enabler to a whole-of-government process, and supports diplomatic efforts led by U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation (SRAR), Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR). The unrelenting work of the 74-nation D-ISIS Coalition, determination and bravery of our Iraqi Security Force (ISF) and Syrian Democratic Force (SDF) partners, and support of multiple international governmental organizations has pushed the physical caliphate of ISIS to the verge of collapse. As a result, we are adjusting our military posture in Syria, planning and executing a deliberate, safe, and professional withdrawal of personnel and equipment while preserving sufficient power in the region to ensure that we can continue to destroy remnants of ISIS fighters and ensure it does not return. In Iraq, we work with the ISF to consolidate their gains, improve their security capability and help them evolve into the professional and representative force that the Iraqi people deserve.

We are grateful for the partnership of the SDF throughout our D-ISIS mission. A reliable partner since 2014, the SDF suffered tens of thousands of killed and wounded, and its leadership, sacrifice, and determination to drive ISIS from SDF homelands was instrumental in the liberation of the vast majority of ISIS' so-called physical caliphate. Of paramount importance now, the Coalition's hard-won battlefield gains must be secured by continued interagency efforts and mobilizing the international community to prevent a return of the conditions that allowed ISIS to arise.

Yemen. Conflict between the Iranian-backed Houthis and Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) forces, supported by the Saudi-led Coalition (SLC), led to deteriorating humanitarian conditions in Yemen. The U.N. noted in August 2018 that the Houthis – trained, funded and armed in part by Iran – exacerbated the crisis by restricting food and aid access to civilian populations by controlling or threatening transportation and logistical routes to the city of Ta'izz, and the Ports of Aden and Hudaydah. The impact of conflict on the country and its people is catastrophic, despite best efforts by our own U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and other U.N. agencies and international aid organizations to mitigate humanitarian suffering. U.N.-brokered consultations in

Sweden in December 2018, and the resulting agreement on a prisoner exchange, ceasefire and redeployment of forces in the city and port of Hudaydah, and humanitarian access to Taiz demonstrated promising steps and a willingness on both sides to seek a negotiated settlement. Toward this end, CENTCOM supports the international diplomatic efforts and the work of U.N. Special Envoy (UNSE) Martin Griffiths to facilitate an end to the conflict, providing knowledge, advice, and serving as an interlocutor through our trusted relationships in the region to help ensure transparency, cohesion, and positive momentum. We will continue to support our regional partners developing processes and procedures to counter ballistic missiles (CBM) and counter unmanned armed aerial systems (C-UAS) to help mitigate threats to civilian populations and critical infrastructure.

Iran exerts its malign influence throughout the region, through its increased – often unprofessional – activities in the Arabian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz, engaging in proxy warfare through its sponsorship of violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and proliferating advanced conventional weapons, including theater ballistic missiles and weaponized unmanned aerial and maritime systems. Operating in the gray zone of competition below open conflict, Iran conducts unfettered information and cyber campaigns against its adversaries and actively attempts to influence or obstruct the mechanisms of effective governance and domestic policies of several of its sovereign regional neighbors.

Prolonged conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Afghanistan have produced instability and large-scale humanitarian crises within and beyond the CENTCOM AOR, creating millions of displaced persons, stressing fragile economies, opening space for the spread of extremism among disenfranchised peoples, and providing opportunities for adversaries to cultivate influence. Countering instability requires an alliance-based and whole-of-government approach that CENTCOM is uniquely positioned to support. The Department of State, USAID and CENTCOM are partnering to counter the influence of competitors and malign actors by addressing the drivers of instability and creating the economic,

political, and security conditions required to reverse these trends. To alleviate suffering, CENTCOM, in partnership with USAID, provides targeted foreign humanitarian assistance to internally displaced persons using our Overseas Disaster, Humanitarian, and Civic Aid appropriated funds. Stabilization and humanitarian assistance activities provide a significant tool to reduce human suffering, promote stability, sustain fragile governmental institutions, and provide critical support countering our competitors' gray zone activities.

While we maintain a strong, cooperative presence with our regional partners in the traditional warfighting domains, there is room for improvement in cooperative ventures with our regional partners in the information and cyber domains. Our competitors do not play by the same rules as the U.S. They have developed and employed asymmetric strategies to use in the information and cyber environment to weaken the U.S. to achieve their strategic objectives. The unconstrained and unregulated nature of their capabilities puts the U.S. at a disadvantage, while great power competitors like China and Russia, as well as adversarial regimes like Iran, operationalize these strategies – including information theft, media manipulation, and cyber-attack – to strike vulnerable U.S. assets, disrupt our information systems and those of our allies, and undermine the image of the U.S. in the region and around the world.

Our CENTCOM Partner Network, a secure coalition computer network, improves our capability to exchange crucial cyberspace threat intelligence and operational data with coalition and regional partners. We will pursue more opportunities to enable real-time exchanges of classified information to meet critical coalition collaboration and mission needs. The ability to dynamically share information with mission partners at the speed of relevance provides us a greater advantage against our adversaries.

Across the interagency, CENTCOM pursues whole-of-government solutions to address transregional threats. CENTCOM places increased command emphasis on an organizational approach to ensure interagency integration is a high priority in all planning. For example, CENTCOM supports

National Security Council-convened threat finance fusion cells to counter ISIS and Iran. We also provide personnel to support interagency efforts in our Regional Narcotics Interagency Fusion Cell.

The Defense Threat Reduction Agency's (DTRA) Joint Improvised Threat Defeat Organization (JIDO) provides a best-in-class example of a successful, nimble, and responsive capability in support of the warfighter. CENTCOM relies heavily on the critical, life-saving training, technology, and expertise JIDO provides to safeguard U.S. and allied forces from many of the most dangerous, emerging threats on the battlefield, including improvised explosive devices; unmanned, armed aerial and maritime vehicles; and other improvised threats. JIDO's functions are not replicated in any of the Services, demonstrate enormous value, and are worthy of continued resourcing through DTRA.

### **Strategic Importance**

The CENTCOM AOR is one of the most complex, diverse regions in the world. Composed of nearly 600 million people dispersed among 20 countries, it is home to three of the world's five major religions, is the most energy-rich region in the world, and contains three strategic maritime choke points. The Suez Canal, the Bab al Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz are major transit points for energy and trade; the ability of commerce to transit these global commons freely being vital for the global economy.

Much like the rest of the world, almost 90 percent of businesses in the Central Region are small-to-medium-size enterprises. They are the key drivers of job creation, employ nearly 66 percent of the labor force, and help diversify their respective country's economies. Contrary to popular belief, not every country in the CENTCOM AOR is rich with oil and natural gas resources, and for those that are, their economies are highly susceptible to changes in the energy market. Strong economies, vibrant commerce, low unemployment rates, and decent standards of living are "must-haves" to promote and maintain stability. Military force cannot create strong economies. It can only help provide safe, secure conditions for them to develop.

There are multiple drivers of instability in the region, ranging from the toxic narrative of sectarianism, to brittle political and economic systems, to disenfranchised and disillusioned peoples. While drivers of instability can be addressed and mitigated through the application of elements of national power, many have roots spanning several generations. In our strategic approach, it is important to acknowledge with a degree of humility that there are some things that are beyond our power to change. Despite those challenges, we recognize the strategic importance of the Central Region to our national interests, and four key reasons why we must remain engaged here to preserve them.

First, we must not allow another attack on our homeland. The CENTCOM AOR is the world's epicenter for terrorism and VEOs. The 9/11 attacks were based from al-Qaeda's safe haven in Afghanistan and served as a wake-up call that terrorism could be exported from anywhere in the world.

Second, we cannot allow VEOs or rogue nations to acquire weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). Our active presence in this region prevents VEOs from coming together toward that purpose and helps prevent the proliferation of WMD materials.

Third, instability is contagious. It does not respect national borders and grows and spreads if left unchecked. A stable Middle East underpins a stable world. In an already volatile region, our steady commitment to our allies and partners provides a force for stability. As the President's National Security Strategy states, we must also "work with partners to neutralize Iran's malign activities in the region."

The fourth is the reemergence of great power competition, the main challenge highlighted in the NDS. China and Russia seek to dominate and influence not just their own geographic regions, but the Central Region as well. Just as great power competitors looked to influence energy and trade in the Middle East following the first World War, China and Russia are working very hard today to reshuffle the balance of power in the CENTCOM AOR, trying to displace the U.S from its position of influence.

The President’s National Security Strategy directs that the United States seeks a Middle East that is “not dominated by any power hostile to the United States.”

This is the reality of our world, and of the regional and transregional challenges we have to address in CENTCOM. We recognize the U.S. is rightly shifting its resources toward Europe and East Asia to balance great power competition, but remain mindful that the CENTCOM AOR represents a geopolitical crossroads and a principal zone for that competition as well. Of the five major threats identified in the NDS, four – competition with China; competition with Russia; Iran’s rogue, malign activities; and combatting VEOs – reside or are contested on a significant scale in the CENTCOM AOR every day.

Many observers, and many of our partners and allies as well, hold misperceptions of the focus on great power competition in the NDS. They view the prioritization and alignment of efforts for long-term competition with China and Russia as a wholesale shift in emphasis away from the Middle East and Central Asia regions. However, that view fails to account for the global context of the NDS and how great power competition is not isolated to Europe or Asia, but often takes place in other strategically important regions like the CENTCOM AOR.

Currently, CENTCOM is conducting or supporting military operations with Coalition partners in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and limited counter-terror operations in Yemen. We represent a U.S. presence with military basing and support in seven countries, have bilateral or multilateral military engagements with nearly a dozen countries, and security cooperation agreements with 16 countries. Across much of the AOR, however, where there is a U.S. presence, there is almost always an existing or developing presence by China, Russia, or both.

China uses its “One Belt – One Road” initiative as an economic lever to provide access and influence across the Central Region. China invested in Suez Canal development, the port of Haifa in Israel, and Jordan to provide access, relationships and leverage on the other side of the continent. In the

United Arab Emirates, it invested in the Free Trade Zone area and the Khalifa Port to create a regional hub in the Arabian Gulf. China built a naval support base in the country of Djibouti to expand its presence and access to the Red Sea, Suez Canal, and Bab al Mandeb. In Pakistan, China financed and gained access to the Gwadar Port enabling access to the Arabian Sea. In Oman, China is conducting port negotiations to obtain access to trade routes and energy transit corridors. For China, economic power is the primary tool, and while many “One Belt – One Road” projects do not pose direct threats to U.S. national interests, burgeoning Chinese economic power could support and mask longer-term military and political objectives.

Russia is focusing increasing attention to the Middle East, in part due to its geographical proximity, but also to reestablish its image as an influential global power. Russia invests in the Suez Canal development and is a co-member with China in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia has increased its engagement with and investment in Egypt, including construction of a 48 megawatt nuclear power plant in El Dabba, as well as development of a major trade and investment zone in east Port Said. Russia conducts bilateral and multilateral military exercises and provides economic and security support in more than half a dozen countries in the Central and South Asia (CASA) region, most of whom were part of the former Soviet Union and who remain reliant on Russia for their economic and security needs. Russia seeks to increase its own influence while limiting the influence of others, monopolize energy transit and pipeline routes, and provide a buffer zone against NATO enlargement. In Syria, Russia is establishing a permanent military and economic presence, with the goal of dominating infrastructure and energy commerce there in the coming years.

We also note the important role that nuclear deterrence plays within U.S. strategy, as the number one priority mission of the Department of Defense. It backstops all U.S. military operations and

diplomacy across the globe. A robust and modern U.S. nuclear deterrent helps ensure competition with Russia and China, regardless of where it originates, does not escalate to large-scale war.

The U.S. is able to exercise a great deal of control over its own economy because we exercise a great deal of political, military, and economic power around the world. Where we lose that power and influence, our competitors gain – and we will be more vulnerable at home because of it. Less than 100 years ago the Middle East puzzle came together with the U.S. influencing key pieces. Today, the puzzle is being remade and China and Russia are seeking new strategic pieces. We must recognize our old pieces may no longer fit, and stay engaged and agile enough to maintain our position as the dominant influence once this new puzzle comes together. In the CASA region, for example, our partner nations lie in close proximity to or share borders with Russia or China. We must realistically acknowledge this tyranny of distance, but continue to engage and compete in innovative ways that help build partnerships, grow our influence, and serve as a balance to the other great powers. The bottom line is simple: If left unchecked, the expanding global reach of China's economic and military initiatives, as well as Russia's objective to weaken or subvert Western security structures in the CENTCOM AOR will pose a significant challenge to U.S. prosperity, security, and regional stability.

As long as terrorism is exportable, as long as the Central Region remains a global supplier of energy, as long as we have allies and partners to whom we are committed, the U.S. cannot afford to cede our role as the dominant regional power. Without a continued strong presence and consistent engagement in the region, we risk our ability to secure the global commons, weaken our network of allies and partners necessary to eliminate potential safe havens for jihadist terrorists, and diminish our ability to maintain a stable global energy market.

## **Strategic Approach**

CENTCOM's mission is to direct and enable military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests. Our strategic approach is founded in three principles: Prepare, Pursue, and Prevail. This approach drives our thinking, gives direction and intent to every level in the command, provides capabilities to our commanders, and creates decision space for military and civilian leadership. Each aspect of our approach enables the next, and collectively contributes to the successful achievement of our goals and objectives. CENTCOM uses these aspects as the cornerstone to advance our operational approach of "by, with, and through."

We prepare by forming enduring coalitions, cultivating relationships with partners and allies, and maintaining security, basing, and overflight agreements, or paving the way for those agreements to be established. It means we deepen our interoperability and expand our regional consultative mechanisms and collaborative planning with our partners, so we can increase their capabilities and our collective capabilities to operate more effectively in a joint and combined environment. We communicate the winning narrative of a free and open international order, national sovereignty, individual freedom and dignity, and the rule of law. We foster meaningful, sustainable, two-way relationships with people who share common interests and common values instead of engaging in the transactional relationships and predatory economic practices of our great power competitors. The alliances and partnerships we forge, rooted in mutual respect, reduce the price we pay for our position of leadership, and provide significant asymmetrical advantages over our geopolitical rivals. These aspects of preparation are crucial, and perhaps even more important than maintaining a large military footprint in the region. While personnel and equipment can be surged in a time of crisis, one cannot surge partnerships, trust, understanding, agreements, and commitment.

Pursuing opportunities means we are proactive, always alert for chances to seize the initiative and dictate events on favorable terms. Regardless of whether we are investigating a new partnership or considering a different operational approach, pursuing those openings requires empowerment at the lowest levels, transparency, flat communications, understanding and trust. Surrounding circumstances and shortened decision cycles for action may induce greater risk, which we must underwrite and manage through strong feedback loops between all levels of leadership, including our interagency partners and allies. Not every opportunity pans out, but an opportunity not explored is a potential advantage lost.

Prevailing takes on a meaning different than raising a banner or marching in a victory parade. It entails consolidating our gains, securing and stabilizing what we and our partners have fought for. We recognize there are no easy victories to be had in the CENTCOM AOR as ours is a region of historical, protracted struggle. In CENTCOM, prevailing means retaining flexibility and decision space for our leaders, preserving our national interests and those of our allies and partners, and maintaining a favorable balance of power for the U.S.

We operationalize this principle using a “by, with, and through” approach. We conduct operations primarily by indigenous partner forces, with enabling support from the U.S. and our coalition partners, working through U.S. and international authorities and partner agreements. While not yet a doctrine, a strategy, or a formal military program, it is a proven, successful, operational approach that pursues culturally acceptable and durable solutions. It is a way of conducting military activities and operations with reduced direct combat employment of U.S. forces, while developing and supporting partner capacity and participation. While indigenous forces may not conduct operations according to U.S. pace and doctrine, they take ownership of the fight. Their wins are not only theirs, but ours as well; and fighting for those wins builds legitimacy and resiliency. Currently, CENTCOM successfully applies the “by, with and through” operational approach in Operation Inherent Resolve, assisting our partners to

defeat ISIS; in Yemen, using a multilayered Arab/U.S. approach to counter VEOs; and with Operation Freedom's Sentinel and the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission to defeat VEOs and pressure the Taliban in Afghanistan. This approach is not limited to combat operations, however, as CENTCOM fulfills many peacetime objectives working "by, with, and through" other partner nations.

Employing a "by, with, and through" operational strategy supports the objectives and intent of the NSS and NDS – promoting regional stability and security, defeating terrorist threats to the U.S., and ensuring that common domains remain free and open – while addressing these challenges through a resource-sustainable approach, including strengthening the indigenous capacities of, and improving interoperability with, our regional partners and allies.

While this approach provides CENTCOM the ability to do "more with less," our ability to act decisively in the region becomes more contingent upon the full commitment of regional partners. We must therefore ensure transparent and contextual communication across our own government, and among our allies and partners. If we mistakenly or inadvertently signal we are "pulling back" or "refocusing" priorities to address great power competition elsewhere in the world, we risk undermining our trust and credibility with long-standing partners here.

### **Regional Overview – Central and South Asia**

**Afghanistan** remains home to numerous terrorist organizations that threaten our interests. ISIS-K, in particular, maintains both the intent and the capability to inspire, direct, and conduct external operations, and if left unchecked, will continue to grow as a threat to our homeland. In support of the South Asia Strategy, Afghanistan became CENTCOM's main effort. U.S. support for the mission in Afghanistan evolved into a "by, with and through" operational approach as recognition of the need for domestic legitimacy and ownership increased. This ultimately strengthens the GIRoA's negotiating position toward reconciliation and reintegration.

Key Challenges: Years of conflict in Afghanistan have caused large-scale humanitarian crises exacerbated by porous national borders, and provided Iran, Russia, and China opportunities to expand their influence in the region. Russia has attempted to challenge U.S. influence in Afghanistan under the false pretense of supporting the Taliban's fight against ISIS-K, while Iran continues to use the Taliban to secure its own interests and to counter the ANDSF's attempts to improve security conditions across the country. Militants operating out of Pakistan and Afghanistan continue to threaten Afghan stability as well as stoke tensions between Pakistan and India. We look to regional actors such as Pakistan to cease behavior undermining regional stability and play constructive roles in achieving peace in Afghanistan as well as the whole of South Asia. Kabul's uncertain political situation remains the greatest risk to stability as the GIROA prepares for the 2019 presidential elections, and continues to suffer from weak institutions and a political environment marked by a lack of unity on core issues.

Key Opportunities: The potential for a political settlement in Afghanistan is promising. In June, following GIROA's call for a national ceasefire over Eid al Fitr, the Taliban responded with their own ceasefire, giving Afghans a glimpse of a future without conflict. October's parliamentary elections were the first run entirely by Afghans, with only limited logistical and security support from the Coalition. Despite Taliban and ISIS-K threats against voters and polling centers, the ANDSF oversaw a significant reduction in violence compared to previous election periods, with over 4 million Afghans participating in the parliamentary elections. Applying lessons learned will be critical to enabling successful presidential elections in 2019.

The Afghan Security Forces Fund appropriation has enabled us to increase the combat capabilities in the Afghan Air Force (AAF). Our security cooperation funds are used for procuring aircraft, training aircrews and maintainers as the AAF transitions from dated Russian platforms to modern U.S. aircraft. We are assisting the ANDSF in doubling the size of the Afghan Army's Special Operations Force,

currently the most effective combat element against the Taliban and terrorist organizations. In an effort to promote responsible development, we closely monitor ANDSF capability growth to ensure it is necessary, affordable, and sustainable. We continue to pursue opportunities to develop bilateral relationships with CASA nations to promote regional stability and encourage them, and our NATO allies, to contribute financial and advisory support to the GIRoA.

2019 Prognosis: The South Asia Strategy is working. While the Taliban continue to demonstrate resilience and the capability to inflict significant casualties on the ANDSF, the Coalition's sustained military, diplomatic, and social pressure will be instrumental in convincing the Taliban that reconciliation is the only path forward.

**Pakistan** presents the U.S. with challenges and opportunities in the execution of our South Asia Strategy. As a state possessing nuclear weapons that sits at the nexus of Russian, Chinese, Indian, Iranian, and U.S. geopolitical interests, Pakistan will always be a country of importance to the U.S. However, Pakistan's actions are often a source of frustration to U.S. regional efforts in Afghanistan. Our posture with Pakistan involves supporting our colleagues at the Department of State as they pursue a diplomatic solution with Islamabad to end the conflict in Afghanistan while ensuring that Pakistan's equities are acknowledged and addressed in any future agreement.

Key Challenges: Pakistan has not taken concrete actions against the safe havens of VEOs inside its borders. Similarly, VEOs located in Afghanistan conduct attacks inside Pakistan. This cross-border instability and violence generates tension along both sides of the border. The suspension of U.S. security assistance funds to Pakistan remains in place. Meanwhile, some U.S. Pakistan military cooperation activities have continued, demonstrating the importance of military cooperation, despite challenges in the bilateral relationship.

Key Opportunities: Pakistan has taken positive steps to assist SRAR Ambassador Khalilzad in support of Afghanistan reconciliation by facilitating talks with the Taliban but has avoided taking any concrete or irreversible steps such as arresting or expelling Taliban leaders who do not cooperate with reconciliation efforts. With our strategic focus on reconciliation and regional security, Pakistan has a unique opportunity to make good on its promises of support to U.S. efforts focused on finding a negotiated settlement to the Afghanistan conflict. If Pakistan plays a positive role in achieving a settlement to the conflict in Afghanistan, the U.S. will have opportunity and motive to help Pakistan fulfill that role, as peace in the region is the most important mutual priority for the U.S. and Pakistan.

2019 Prognosis: A peaceful resolution in Afghanistan and improved cross-border security between Afghanistan and Pakistan would strengthen the opportunity for mutual trade and increased economic flows not only between them, but also potentially with India and the Central Asian states. China is already partnering with Pakistan for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor as a central piece of China's "One Belt – One Road" initiative. Central and South Asia cooperation between the U.S. and China offers opportunities for peaceful dialogue and a chance for the U.S. to balance China's economic rise and reinforce its commitment to global norms for the benefit all.

**Uzbekistan** and U.S. partnerships continue to improve, and we are increasingly optimistic that the government of Uzbekistan is promoting a constructive foreign policy, improving relations with its neighbors and becoming more involved in multilateral exchanges and exercises. Uzbekistan is fully supportive of our South Asia Strategy and a constructive partner in the Afghanistan peace process. Given its large population, strong security forces, central location, and a shared border with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan's willingness to partner with us and its neighbors can help promote stability in the region.

Key Challenges: Russia remains the dominant power in Central Asia, and Uzbekistan must balance cooperation with the U.S. carefully to avoid actions Moscow deems provocative. As we strengthen our partnership with Uzbekistan we must respect this balance, mindful of Uzbekistan's absorptive capacity.

Key Opportunities: Uzbekistan is hosting the Central and South Asian armed forces Chief of Staff conference in February, demonstrating its growing role as a regional leader. Our mil-to-mil efforts are focused on improving border security capacity, enhancing counter-narcotic and counter-terrorism capabilities, and assisting the Uzbeks with the potential return of domestic terrorist fighters returning from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. The Uzbeks expressed interest in diversifying their military equipment and provided lists of U.S. systems and equipment they are interested in purchasing. This interest represents a unique opportunity to off-ramp Uzbekistan from Russian equipment and deepen our relationship as we negotiate increased air and land access through the Northern Access corridor.

2019 Prognosis: Uzbekistan will continue efforts to increase its capacity, using U.S. security assistance to maintain a balance between Russian and Chinese influences and to boost its professionalism in the areas of border security, counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism and defense institution building. U.S. security assistance will help maintain and potentially enhance access in support of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan.

**Tajikistan** remains a target of both Russian and Chinese overtures. We continue to build our military relationship with Tajikistan, even as Moscow deepens its influence and increases its military posture at its base outside the capital. China's increased security cooperation, focused on border security, is coupled with an aggressive economic lending program. China seeks to minimize instability along their shared border, in its eastern provinces, and protect its economic investment in Tajikistan.

Key Challenges: The Government of Tajikistan is concerned with stability in northern Afghanistan and security along the mountainous, 800-mile Afghan border. The inability to secure their border

encourages smuggling and has a destabilizing effect on both Tajikistan and Afghanistan. These border concerns provide a strong nexus of mutual interests and we support development of Tajik counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and border security capabilities. We are also assisting Tajikistan to counter trans-national threats that impact both Tajikistan and the broader Central Asia region.

Key Opportunities: Tajikistan is eager for U.S. assistance and its modest funding for security services presents an opportunity for CENTCOM to help Tajikistan develop its capabilities and relationships to balance Russian influence. Exercise REGIONAL COOPERATION, a multilateral exercise Tajikistan expressed interest hosting in August 2019, will address border security and counter terror issues. Moving forward, CENTCOM will assist Tajikistan's efforts to counter violent extremism and emphasize the need for building stronger defense institutions.

2019 Prognosis: Economic investment and border security will continue to characterize China's relationship with Tajikistan. It is likely that both Russia and China will continue to exaggerate the terrorist threat to further entrench and justify their respective security relationships with Tajikistan. Russia will seek to continue to safeguard what it considers its "sphere of influence" in the region and China will continue to take actions it deems necessary to secure its border. U.S. security assistance for Tajikistan can provide a counter to this great power competition by enabling the Tajiks to maintain their border integrity with Afghanistan while supporting regional stability.

**Kazakhstan** and U.S. relations continue to be the most mature and forward-thinking in Central Asia, although Russia's proximity influences Kazakhstan's posture. Kazakhstan remains the most significant Central Asian contributor to Afghan stability, engaging in trade, providing electrical power, donating money to the ANDSF fund, providing educational opportunities, supporting programs for Afghan women, and offering technical support and services to the Afghans.

Key Challenges: Kazakhstan, like most CASA nations, must carefully balance cooperation with the U.S. to avoid actions Russia interprets as threatening. As we strengthen our partnership with Kazakhstan, we must respect this balance. The U.S. should continue assisting the Kazakhstan Ministry of Defense as it focuses on the necessary institutional reforms of its non-commissioned officer corps, training management, human resources administration, and its professional military education system. As we look to off-ramp Central Asian countries from Russian defense equipment, the higher price of U.S. systems will remain a challenge for nations like Kazakhstan.

Key Opportunities: Kazakhstan has expressed interest in working with the U.S. to improve its logistical, medical, and engineering branches. We will also continue our engagement with the Kazakhstani Peace Keeping Operations (PKO) training center to improve Kazakhstani PKO capabilities and foster regional integration by opening the center to Kazakhstan's neighbors. Exercise STEPPE EAGLE, an annual trilateral peacekeeping exercise sponsored by the U.S., United Kingdom and Kazakhstan, has expanded to include Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In November 2018, with U.S. assistance, Kazakhstan deployed a company-level unit to Lebanon on a U.N. peacekeeping operations mission – a first for any CASA nation.

2019 Prognosis: Kazakhstan will continue to use U.S. security assistance to balance Russian and Chinese influences. U.S. security assistance enables access for sustainment of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Maintaining mil-to-mil programs, with a focus on defense institution building and professional military education, will position us to maintain our comparative advantage with a country situated on the doorsteps of Russia and China.

**The Kyrgyz Republic** and U.S.'s strained bilateral relations impede security cooperation that would otherwise further military our objectives in Central Asia.

Key Challenges: The lack of a status of forces agreement with the Kyrgyz Republic severely limits CENTCOM's level of engagement. Until steps are taken to extend diplomatic protections for U.S. military operating in the Kyrgyz Republic, mil-mil exchanges and training are suspended.

Key Opportunities: The Office of Military Cooperation in Bishkek and the Montana National Guard through the National Guard State Partnership Program remain postured to renew programs aimed at developing military capabilities specifically in the areas of Field Medicine and Disaster Response, and Humanitarian Assistance as soon as political conditions permit.

2019 Prognosis: Any U.S. security assistance for the Kyrgyz Republic will help the Kyrgyz to maintain their national sovereignty in the face of Russian and Chinese jockeying for influence.

**Turkmenistan** has a U.N.-recognized policy of “positive neutrality” by which the government balances the demands of the regional powers by not taking sides in international conflict and not entering into alliances or economic organizations, necessitating a subtle and agile approach to Security Cooperation to be successful.

Key Challenges: A struggling economy, a rigid political system, and the Turkmen policy of positive neutrality largely limits international cooperation and Turkmenistan's security services.

Key Opportunities: We have focused our efforts on English language training, medical engagements and the development of Special Forces with Turkmenistan Ministry of Defense (MOD). We are encouraged by MOD's increased participation in our exchanges and conferences. Turkmenistan has expressed interest in enhancing its disaster response capability and border security, providing additional opportunities for CENTCOM.

2019 Prognosis: Turkmenistan remains concerned with the instability in Afghanistan and the potential for the flow of foreign terrorist fighters, therefore assistance will focus on enhancing border

security. Maintaining a small, consistent security cooperation portfolio in Turkmenistan has outsized impact and will help counter Russian and Chinese influence.

### **Regional Overview – Greater Levant**

**Iraq's** mil-to-mil relationship with the U.S. is as strong as it has ever been, and Iraq has both the potential and desire to become a formidable ally in combatting terrorism. The Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) is conducting programs to enhance professionalization of the ISF, coupled with prudent implementation and oversight of FMF and Foreign Military Sales (FMS). Transforming OSC-I into a permanent Title 22 Security Cooperation Office is key. Our authority for OSC-I to conduct training activities with ISF is more important than ever in the evolution of an ISF that is effective, inclusive, sustainable, affordable, and cements our long-term bilateral partnership.

Key Challenges: Reform of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to achieve the goal of “One ISF” remains a challenge. Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) are officially part of the ISF, however, the forces are comprised of disparate groups, some of which are not totally responsive to the direction of the Government of Iraq (GoI), the worst of which are affiliated with Shia militia groups directed by Iran. Iraq's Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs (MoPA) is largely treated as a less-than-equal organization by the government. While some tensions between the Kurdish Regional Government and Baghdad have eased, challenges with revenue sharing, disputed territory and control of oil resources remain problematic. It is critical the ISF consolidate its gains against ISIS and evolve from a war footing to a steady state, which must be effective, affordable, and protect Iraqi people and their infrastructure from terrorism.

As ISIS continues to build a clandestine insurgency, the GoI must form an effective cabinet and government entities to manage the country and improve economic resilience and quality of life for its people. This includes meeting the needs of Iraq's youthful population who demand better economic opportunities, access to essential services, and an end to endemic corruption in the GoI. Failure by the

newly formed government to address the basic needs of Iraqi citizens may facilitate the reemergence of ISIS or other VEOs, which capitalize on public dissatisfaction to increase their support. Iran's meddling in the selection of Iraqi cabinet members, notably the Minister of Defense and the Minister of Interior, has prevented the GoI from addressing pressing national security issues

Key Opportunities: CENTCOM, through OSC-I, is working with our Iraqi partners to re-integrate the GoI with its Arab neighbors. These efforts have paid dividends in reinitiating cooperation between Iraq and countries such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey, and Qatar; illustrated by the reopening of shared borders. OSC-I can leverage its authorities to support the ISF's evolution into an effective, sustainable, and affordable force through mil-to-mil relations, security sector reform, security cooperation, while coordinating broad-based reform with regional partners. Key objectives include the further professionalization of the ISF, rebalancing the ISF's force structure to meet future threats, and reforming the ISF's human resources and professional military education systems with increased emphasis on force design, force management, and policy development.

2019 Prognosis: Iraq's May 2018 elections resulted in the formation of a new, generally representative government. Newly elected Prime Minister Abd al-Mahdi vowed to improve public services and prioritize reconstruction of areas devastated by the conflict with ISIS. It is likely that Iraq will retool its budget to focus on Government goals however, Iraq must also rebuild its security forces, which are exhausted by four years of operations against ISIS.

**Syria's** President Bashar al Assad remains in power with the military support of Russia, Iran, and Lebanese Hezbollah (LH). Despite significant advances, the Syrian regime has insufficient forces to adequately secure recaptured territory. The U.S. withdrawal from Syria represents the most dynamic shift in the environment since ISIS lost its ability to govern major population centers and fight as a conventional force and could trigger a renewed race for influence, control, and for some, survival.

Turkey's strong national security concerns in Syria and standing as a NATO ally further complicates the battlespace. Israel's legitimate concerns about Iran's increasingly provocative actions in Syria, particularly the transshipment of advanced weapons systems into and through Syria, are driving increasingly forward leaning Israeli military actions. If the major actors and their proxies become embroiled in a competition for influence in Syria, this may create space for ISIS remnants or other terrorist groups to reform or reconstitute. Because the regime was incapable or unwilling to fight ISIS, the responsibility for D-ISIS fighting has been borne by the Coalition and our partnered force, the SDF, whose bravery and determination have been crucial to rolling back ISIS. The intervention of the Coalition in the Syrian conflict blocked Assad's ability to recapture all of northern Syria. As the U.S. executes a safe, professional withdrawal, we seek to help negotiate a secure future for the people of northeast Syria liberated from ISIS and our partners in the D-ISIS fight.

The international humanitarian community has achieved some success, but the Syrian regime's resistance to allow aid deliveries is largely driven by Assad's use of starvation as a weapon of war. As a result, there are more than 13 million Syrians who require humanitarian assistance, including 5.7 million internally displaced persons and 5.7 million refugees in neighboring countries. While U.S. humanitarian assistance reaches four million people throughout Syria monthly, security concerns and access constraints limit the reach of aid in some locations. Vulnerable populations in Syria will continue to require humanitarian aid until parties to the conflict reach a political solution.

Key Challenges: The civil war, combined with ISIS occupation and the subsequent fight to displace and destroy ISIS has led to vast destruction of infrastructure, degradation of government, lack of basic services, and other humanitarian challenges. Assad's reluctance to negotiate directly with the Syrian opposition, and Moscow's reluctance to force him to do so, indicates significant challenges ahead in forging a political resolution to the conflict and ending this humanitarian crisis. A political resolution is

key to the lasting defeat of ISIS, because unless fundamental drivers of domestic instability are addressed, conditions will remain for a resurgence of ISIS, or ISIS-like VEOs.

While CENTCOM's "by, with, and through" partnership with the SDF has been critical to the defeat of ISIS, it has created friction with Turkey, which views the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) elements within the SDF as a terrorist group. Our assistance to the SDF focuses on defeating ISIS, as we have simultaneously sought to include measures to reassure our Turkish allies. In October 2018 the U.S. and Turkey began conducting combined joint patrols in key locations. CENTCOM will continue to assist the Turkish military in countering VEOs that threaten their border, maintaining our emphasis on the D-ISIS campaign.

The repatriation of ISIS foreign fighters to their home countries to face justice remains a challenge. Both SDF and Iraqi forces are holding hundreds of foreign fighters in prisons or temporary detention facilities, with no single process for prosecution or repatriation. This requires a concerted international effort involving law enforcement, intelligence sharing, and diplomacy.

Key Opportunities: The conflict in Syria has led to an increased demand from our regional allies and partners for improved border security as well as improved domestic counter-terrorism capabilities. CENTCOM is able to manage the development of these capabilities which supports our objectives of promoting stability and countering VEOs in the region. The U.S. withdrawal provides an opportunity to reset our relationship with our Turkish allies as well as an opportunity for us to focus on reinforcing Iraq's consolidation of its gains against ISIS. A strong, enduring partnership with Iraq will serve as stabilizing factor, helping mitigate concerns about long-term U.S. intentions in the region.

**Jordan** is one of our most committed partners in the Middle East and one of the most critical voices of moderate Islam in the region. We must be careful to not take their partnership for granted. Jordan's civilian and military leadership exemplifies professionalism and modernization within a region in crisis.

Jordan is the only country in the Levant to provide a platform for operations, in addition to unhindered access and overflight essential to U.S. interests. The Jordan Armed Forces (JAF) are a key contributor to the D-ISIS Coalition and OIR and is a major contributor to efforts to stabilize the region. Continued support to the Government of Jordan (GOJ) and the JAF is critical to ongoing D-ISIS efforts, and preventing the spread of instability in the region.

Key Challenges: Jordan currently hosts over 750,000 registered refugees from Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, straining government resources, services, and infrastructure. The GOJ and the JAF have effectively balanced legitimate security concerns with the humanitarian imperative to care for these refugees, despite the strain on Jordan's resources. Simultaneously, regional turmoil, falling remittances, and declining tourism have led to rising unemployment and high national debt creating a volatile environment that threatens political stability.

Key Opportunities: CENTCOM, in conjunction with interagency partners, uses Section 333 and other Title 10 funds provided by Congress to build partner capacity and capability in Jordan. These funds and activities are in addition to the total assistance budget of \$1.275 billion annually from the State Department, as agreed upon with the Government of Jordan, that includes at least \$750 million dollars in Economic Support Funds and \$350 million dollars in FMF. In August 2019, Jordan will host nearly two dozen countries, including regional and NATO partners, for exercise EAGER LION, focusing on counter-terror, border security and humanitarian assistance missions.

2019 Prognosis: Jordan will face domestic pressure to move towards normalized relations and trade with Syria, but also seeks to avoid the risk of triggering the extensive U.S. sanctions on Syria. Russia will likely seek to capitalize on its role as a Syrian intermediary to increase its influence in Jordan and the region. Both domestic and external VEOs will remain a security threat, but continued funding from

Title 10 programs, in addition to FMF and economic support, will enable Jordan to develop critical capabilities and remain a key contributor to coalition efforts.

**Egypt** lies on the western edge of the CENTCOM area of responsibility, an anchor state for the region. The country is an important strategic partner whose location, size, enduring peace treaty with Israel, control of the Suez Canal, and moderate religious and cultural Pan-Arab influences are significant elements that support regional stability. Egypt is geographically positioned to counter the flow of foreign fighters, materiel, and financial support to extremists transiting from Libya through Egypt into the Central Region. The U.S.-Egypt security relationship is resilient and growing, exemplified by Egypt's formal request to participate in the National Guard State Partnership Program. Egypt supports our overflight requests, provides Suez Canal access affording short notice transits, and trains and deploys peacekeeping troops worldwide. In the spirit of our strong mil-to-mil partnership, in September 2018 we held a joint Defense Resourcing Conference to increase the orientation of U.S. security assistance to Egypt toward a counter-terrorism and sustainment focus.

Key Challenges: ISIS-Sinai continues to conduct attacks against the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF) to bolster its influence over the local populace through intimidation. The EAF has contained most of the violence in the northeastern Sinai Peninsula and has begun to address societal and economic reforms to defeat ISIS-Sinai and prevent its spread to the Nile Valley.

Key Opportunities: Through our collaborative approach with the EAF we continue to see improvement in the security of their maritime and land borders. The EAF have improved their efforts to stem the flow of fighters and illicit material transiting from Libya through Egypt into Israel and the Central Region. Mindful of the complex environment of the Sinai, we continue our support to the Multinational Force and Observers in order to ensure the safety of these forces, allowing this crucial mission in support of the 1979 peace treaty to continue. We see the beginnings of improved

interoperability between the EAF, U.S., and other partner nations, exemplified in more Egyptian participation in multi-lateral exercises and strategic forums including exercise BRIGHT STAR 2018, the second joint military exercise held since 2009. Egypt has expressed plans to broaden its participation in coalition operations and has signed the Communications Interoperability and Security Memorandum of Agreement, allowing Egypt improved access to interoperability enabling acquisitions. We look to strengthen our security cooperation partnership through continued engagement and FMS programs.

2019 Prognosis: Our military assistance ensures that the U.S. remains a military partner of choice and counters Russia's efforts to expand its influence in the region. U.S. government aid and support to Egypt is crucial to our strategic partnership. CENTCOM will continue to support the EAF's efforts in the Sinai, and assist them with implementing a whole of government strategy that addresses the underlying political, economic, and social conditions that give rise to extremist elements.

**Lebanon** is a multi-confessional democracy that occupies a pivotal geostrategic position in terms of U.S. national security interests. Wedged between a key ally in the region, Israel, and a corridor of Iranian influence running from Tehran through Iraq and Syria, Lebanon has managed to remain relatively stable. Nevertheless, Hezbollah's manipulation of the Lebanese political process thwarts needed reforms while exacerbating sectarian tensions inside Lebanon.

Key Challenges: Lebanon faces a confluence of problems. The stagnant economy is worsened by regional conflict and exacerbated by the fact that nearly a quarter of the total population are refugees. Additionally, both Russia and China are increasing their efforts to gain access and influence in the country because of its key location on the Mediterranean and proximity to Syria. Hezbollah holds political clout which gives it a de-facto veto on Lebanese policy decisions, fields an armed militia that does not act on the behest of an elected government and builds popular support by acting as a social service provider – all undermining the role of the legitimate Lebanese government and armed forces.

Hezbollah has also engaged in provocative actions with Israel, risking unpredictable escalatory actions that threaten Israeli security and could undermine Lebanon's stability. Through its Hezbollah proxy, Iran continues to meddle in Lebanon's internal affairs. While the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) were able to drive ISIS from all Lebanese territory in 2017, the threat from remnants of ISIS and other extremists crossing into Lebanon from Syria remains present.

Key Opportunities: Our efforts to strengthen the LAF are a critical aspect of our policy to promote Lebanese sovereignty and security. The U.S. is the LAF's top security assistance partner. Our modest, consistent, long-term commitment and investments has led to the LAF becoming a successfully modernized, legitimate fighting force. The LAF is innovative, professional, and have proven their capabilities to protect the Lebanese people from internal and external threats through successful counter-VEO operations. It established itself as the most trusted and respected institution in the country, undercutting Hezbollah's claim that its armed militia is necessary to protect Lebanon, while providing a mature, apolitical, stabilizing influence. The even-handed, professional response of the LAF, assisted by the professional mediation of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, was key in de-escalating the Israeli counter-tunnel operation in December 2018.

2019 Prognosis: Successful, consistent partnership with the LAF forms the backbone of U.S. influence in Lebanon, providing a bulwark against growing Russian and Chinese interest in the country, a reliable partner capable of fighting and defeating remnants of ISIS and other extremist groups attempting to regroup in Lebanon. The LAF has the potential to eventually form a deterrent to increased Iranian activity, and a vital counterbalance to Hezbollah influence. While Lebanese security and sovereignty is enhanced every day through our robust relationship with the LAF, Hezbollah continues to risk the stability and security of Lebanon by maintaining an armed militia and advanced weapons outside the authority of the State.

## **Regional Overview – Central Gulf**

**Iran's** unpredictable and reckless behavior remains a threat to our partners, global commerce, and U.S. vital interests in the Middle East. While supporting the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, Iran foments instability and chaos in the region through the proliferation of advanced weapon technology and a destabilizing ideology. To conceal its culpability, the Iranian regime masks its malign activities through proxies and surrogates enabled by the Iran Threat Network (ITN) in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon. Iran is also attempting to build ground lines of communication through Iraq and Syria into Lebanon to support its proxy Hezbollah. Iran has gained influence within Iraq's armed forces with the formalization of the Popular Mobilization Forces, and also exerted influence in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, oftentimes affecting established sovereign governance.

Key Challenges: Iran's military is composed of approximately 700,000 personnel, the largest in the region. Both of its military arms, the Islamic Republic of Iran Armed Forces, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), are improving their abilities to quickly mobilize and deploy in response to internal and external threats. Iran postures its forces and supports proxies to threaten – or be able to threaten - strategic locations like the Bab al Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz. With little warning, Iran could impede commercial traffic in these key maritime chokepoints. Iran seeks to gain hegemonic influence through the resulting chaos of its proxies and the threat of force. Iranian surface to air missiles pose a significant threat to U.S. intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets operating in international airspace. Iran also has the region's largest ballistic missile force, which continues to increase in capability, range, and lethality. In November 2018, Iran demonstrated its ballistic missile capability, striking ISIS targets in Syria and Kurdish militant targets in Iraq.

Key Opportunities: Since the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and the subsequent re-imposition of pre-JCPOA nuclear-related sanctions, Iran has sought to

demonstrate its resolve and counter U.S. pressure while trying to mitigate the impact of sanctions. However, longstanding vulnerabilities in Tehran's fiscal policy are reducing its ability to alleviate the impact of U.S. sanctions and Iran's already fragile domestic economy will likely further decline. While Iran's strategy is to sow chaos through its malign activities, CENTCOM will continue to develop means of maintaining order to combat Iran's chaos. Our mil-to-mil relationships help build local credibility in many partner nations, while bi- and multilateral efforts – such as maritime exercises and developing integrated ballistic defense – with our regional partners helps create baffles to stifle Iranian ambitions.

2019 Prognosis: Iran will continue to seek to expand its political influence and military presence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, and to threaten international trade and regional stability throughout the Central Region. Leaders in the IRGC–Qods Force will continue to use surrogates, businesses, and logistics entities to execute direct action, intelligence, influence building, terrorism, and cyber operations against the U.S. and our partner nations. Iran intends to expand its regional influence, counter Saudi Arabia, threaten Israel, and maintain a capability to threaten strategic maritime transit routes. Iran will continue to acquire and develop increasingly lethal weapons to raise the cost of direct military conflict, and seek to pursue policies that threaten U.S. strategic interests and goals throughout the region.

**The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)** suffered challenges to its international reputation over the past year but remains a key strategic partner. The ambitious reform agenda set forth by Mohammed bin Salman is meant to modernize and diversify the Saudi economy and encourage foreign direct investment. To date, however, these reforms have met with mixed success.

Key Challenges: The conflicts in Yemen, Syria, Iraq and Libya have challenged Saudi Arabia's partners in the region, beset by malign influence driven by experienced and well-funded Iranian proxies. The Gulf Rift, pitting KSA, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain against Qatar, complicates unified deterrence to Iranian malign activity. The ballistic missile threat and armed UASs emanating from Yemeni territory

continue to pose a significant risk, as the Houthi's consider civil infrastructure as legitimate military targets. High-profile civilian casualty incidents on behalf of the Coalition in Yemen and international backlash resulting from the murder of Saudi dissident Jamal Kashoggi have damaged Saudi Arabia's international standing.

Key Opportunities: The Yemen conflict provided lessons learned on military operations and tactics, adding greater urgency to institutional defense transformation efforts. We continue to share our own experiences and processes in an effort to improve Saudi Arabia's operational performance and reduce civilian casualties. CENTCOM's security cooperation with Saudi Arabia remains a critical link in our efforts to strengthen partners in the region and meet current and future challenges. The work of U.S. advisors is essential to the success of our mission, and Saudi Arabia underwrites the lion's share of their presence. Helping build Saudi Arabia's security forces reflects our commitment to increase partner capacity, sustain effective defense institutions, increase professionalism, interoperability, and capability in order to deter aggression in the region and protect critical infrastructure.

2019 Prognosis: Saudi Arabia plays an important role ensuring regional stability. Despite recent strains, the U.S. – Saudi Arabia security relationship is resilient and this strategic partnership with the Kingdom is a foundational point of CENTCOM's ability to execute our national defense strategy. Our ongoing relationship with the Kingdom regarding regional basing and access, interoperability, freedom of movement – exemplified by Saudi support for CENTCOM's expansion of the Trans-Arabian Network as a primary distribution route across the Arabian Peninsula - remains critical, and our defense institution-building endeavors represents the operationalization of our “by, with, and through” approach.

**Yemen** is beset by strife and riven with internal fractures. The civil war continues unabated and the humanitarian crisis worsened in the last year. Saudi Arabia and the UAE continue to lead the coalition supporting the Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG). While some elements of the ROYG are

reestablished in Aden, a portion of the ROYG, including President Hadi, remains in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The Houthis retain control over Yemen's capital, Sana'a, and other key territory, and the civil war has severely affected Yemen's population, with nearly three quarters percent requiring urgent humanitarian assistance. Similarly, Yemen's economy has been devastated by rising food and fuel prices, lack of a regular salary, the depreciation of the Yemeni Rial. Neither the Houthis nor the ROYG are able to effectively govern within the areas they control.

Key Challenges: Terrorist groups like AQAP and ISIS-Yemen continue to maintain a presence in Yemen and focus on attacks against ROYG, SLC, and Houthi targets. The conflict in Yemen opened opportunities for Iran, which continues to provide support to the Houthis aimed at building a proxy force designed to pressure the SLC and expand Iranian regional influence. This support enables Houthis to launch missiles at its neighbors and target ships in the Bab al Mandeb and Red Sea; threatening Americans and our partners and raising the risk of broader regional conflict. The prolonged conflict deepened the humanitarian crisis, and much of the population faces severe food shortages, a cholera epidemic and other outbreaks of disease.

Key Opportunities: Following years of fighting, security sector reconstitution will be a priority, and any peace agreement will require functioning, unified Yemeni security forces in which both the ROYG and Houthis work together to maintain Yemen's stability. Leveraging existing mil-to-mil ties with the ROYG and a supportive relationship with the UNSE, CENTCOM is positioning itself to provide the necessary assistance to conduct security cooperation in Yemen while continuing not to engage in hostilities between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis. The Yemeni Coast Guard resumed control of six ports from the SLC in late 2018, with training provided through the Department of State's Export Controls and Related Border Security program. Implementing the existing 505 agreement with Yemen will allow CENTCOM to significantly deepen and broaden assistance and training opportunities.

2019 Prognosis: The U.S. and ROYG will continue to maintain a nascent but increasingly productive mil-to-mil relationship with the goal of enabling Yemeni security forces to secure national borders, defeat VEOs, and respond to existing and emerging threats in order to provide an environment that facilitates the reconstruction of a stable economy and reconstitution of Yemen's government institutions and civil functions.

**Kuwait** is a key strategic partner for regional security, indispensable facilitator of the D-ISIS campaign, multinational partner on U.N. Security Council, and linchpin of the region in humanitarian, diplomatic, and economic stability. The Government of Kuwait provides tremendous support for U.S. and Coalition operations. Kuwait hosts the fourth largest presence of U.S. troops overseas – including CENTCOM's army component, U.S. Army Central. The U.S. military presence is viewed as essential to the defense of Kuwait, and Kuwait reimburses the U.S. for its presence.

Key Challenges: Given the large military U.S. presence in Kuwait, the implementation of the NDS, the evolution of missions in Syria and Afghanistan, and the unknown of potential missions to come, we must ensure we maintain flexibility and clear communications with our strategic Kuwaiti partner.

Key Opportunities: Vigilant to numerous regional threats, Kuwait sought resolution to the Gulf Rift dispute, while promoting a regional response to the crises emanating from Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Kuwait continues to play an important role for Iraq's future. Kuwait hosted the International Conference for the Reconstruction of Iraq last February, raising \$30 billion toward Iraq's reconstruction – including \$2 billion dollars in Kuwaiti loans and investments.

2019 Prognosis: Kuwait remains a key partner, combat support and logistical hub, and enabler for CENTCOM. Our strong mil-mil relationships with the Kuwaiti military underscores our commitment to the defense of Kuwait. This will also allow U.S. access to Kuwait ranges and training facilities and

enable the U.S. to realign to the NDS, while simultaneously providing flexibility to surge forces into Kuwait as needed to preserve regional stability and U.S. interests.

**Bahrain** is a strong security partner and a major non-NATO ally. The Government of Bahrain (GOB) has welcomed the broader effort to confront Iran's destabilization activities in the region. Bahrain is a strong partner in countering threat financing, especially helping curtail Iran's efforts to circumvent financial sanctions. Bahrain has also been part of the GCC-wide effort to rebuild ties with Iraq and provide a counterweight to Iran's influence. Bahrain's strong partnership with the U.S. is most evident by its hosting of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, the only operating U.S. naval base in the Central Region, and multiple U.S. command and control facilities located at the Naval Support Activity in Bahrain.

Key Challenges: Changes in oil prices have posed a formidable challenge to Bahrain's economy, as over 75 percent of government revenue comes from hydrocarbon sales. Despite the GOB's attempts to shore up its fiscal position by cutting public spending and increasing non-oil revenues, the country continues to confront significant annual fiscal deficits and will consequently continue to rely on its neighbors to provide financial lifelines.

Key Opportunities: Bahrain's access, basing, and overflight support to U.S. and Coalition forces in the region are essential to our force posture. Its contribution to regional security, maritime patrols, intelligence sharing, counter-mine, and counter-piracy efforts are an integral part of the region's overall security. Bahrain continues to pursue military modernization initiatives that will result in a Bahrain Defense Force more able to contribute to and lead regional coalition military operations. Bahraini Land Force, SOF, and Air Force support to the SLC campaign in Yemen is providing Bahraini forces with experience in expeditionary operations, while ongoing efforts to improve the BDF's capabilities will enable Bahrain to play a more critical role in regional security.

2019 Prognosis: The mil-to-mil relationship between Bahrain and the U.S. remains strong.

**Qatar** is a critical partner in the Arabian Peninsula, providing CENTCOM with invaluable regional access, and hosting approximately 10,000 U.S. service members and aircraft, and is home to the Combined Air Operations Center, U.S. Special Operations Command Central Forward Headquarters, and the CENTCOM Forward Headquarters. The access, basing, and overflight that Qatar provides would be costly to replicate anywhere else in the region. The Gulf Rift has a detrimental effect on joint training and interoperability between the U.S. and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners. Qatar's recent withdrawal from OPEC and lower-level attendance at the December 2018 GCC Summit indicate Qatar is pursuing economic and political policies more independent of Saudi Arabia.

Key Challenges: While the Gulf Rift had little direct impact on CENTCOM operations, it has imposed significant restrictions on Qatar's freedom of movement through the closure of land borders and air space. It impacted Qatar's participation in GCC-hosted multilateral exercises, eroded coalition building efforts, and increased Qatari reliance on Iran to overcome the economic and commercial shipping constraints – specifically, Qatar relies heavily on Iranian land, sea, and airspace for transshipment of foodstuffs.

Key Opportunities: The Gulf Rift reaffirmed Qatar's commitment to make the U.S. its primary defense partner. While Qatar has one of the smallest militaries in the region, it is also, per capita, the richest country in the world. Despite its relatively small size, Qatar has been a major contributor to coalition operations throughout the region and against ISIS, and seeks to expand its participation in other regional coalitions. Qatar is the second largest FMS customer in the world with \$26 billion dollars in new cases and is on track to surpass \$40 billion dollars in the next five years with additional FMS purchases. This investment demonstrates a clear desire to partner exclusively with U.S. and NATO allies and become a reliable contributor to coalition operations.

2019 Prognosis: Qatar's efforts to expand their military both in size and capacity will result in increased bilateral military engagements between CENTCOM and the Qatari Armed Forces. This will give the U.S. an opportunity to make a positive impact on the military development of a key partner in a turbulent region. Qatar will continue to play a vital and necessary role in the region and has spent nearly \$9 billion dollars on U.S.-led Coalition basing infrastructure.

**United Arab Emirates (UAE)** is one of the U.S.' staunchest partners and non-NATO allies in the Central Region. The UAE's strategic location, vast natural resources, willingness to engage VEOs, proven expeditionary capabilities of its military, and drive to be at the forefront of military innovations makes them an ideal partner. The UAE has repeatedly supported U.S. objectives in both Syria and Afghanistan and has taken a leading role in the fight against terrorism – being among the first countries to join the D-ISIS coalition. It remains active in pursuing many of the coalition's lines of effort, including D-ISIS messaging, stabilization, and assisting in stemming the flow of foreign fighters.

Key Challenges: Yemen is the UAE's top near-term security concern. The UAE sees the Huthis as Iranian proxies, paving the way for a new and unwelcome Iranian role in southern Arabia and in the seas surrounding the peninsula. The UAE is a key partner in the SLC in Yemen, conducting offensive operations in cooperation with Yemeni forces around Hudaydah since May 2018.

Key Opportunities: The U.S. and UAE cooperate under a strong bilateral framework to prevent and respond to conflicts and crises, and the UAE has clearly indicated a desire to forge even stronger military relationships with the U.S. The UAE is active in an operational partnership to disrupt terrorist networks and reduce terrorist attacks and is the only member of the Saudi-led Coalition in Yemen to expand its military objectives to include counter-terrorism alongside the U.S. Robust training and exercise programs with the UAE increase the level and quality of cooperation between our nations. The

UAE also provides substantial access and is willing to burden-share the costs of basing and infrastructure.

2019 Prognosis: The UAE expressed a desire to strengthen our relationship through a nine-point Defense Cooperation Roadmap, which supports our NDS through increased burden sharing in its own defense. A continued robust exercise and engagement program will strengthen our military-to-military relationships, and UAE's purchase of U.S. produced weapon systems will help secure interoperability with U.S. units. We expect the UAE to continue their partnership to U.S. efforts in Syria, Yemen, and Afghanistan, in addition to supporting freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.

**Oman** is a bastion of stability in the Central Region. The long-standing relationship between the U.S. and Oman, based on shared security and stability interests, remains strong – each service chief of the Sultan of Oman's Armed Forces a graduate of U.S. military schools via our International Military Education and Training program. Oman serves as an interlocutor with other GCC members, factions in Yemen, and Iran. Oman faces some political and economic uncertainty due to the eventual leadership transition from Sultan Qaboos, and the continued budgetary dependence on limited hydrocarbon revenues to fuel Omani development and employment.

Key Challenges: Oman's economy continues to experience recurring fiscal deficits, growing unemployment, and stagnant growth. Economic diversification is increasingly seen as a national security priority for Oman, as reliance on the hydrocarbon sector and a growing population result in rising unemployment, growing debt, and a diminishing capacity to pay for the costly security apparatus that keeps Oman safe and secure. Progress toward achieving the goal of diversification has been slow. This economic insecurity combined with an untested succession plan to follow Sultan Qaboos' decades of stable rule represent significant challenges.

Key Opportunities: Oman's strategic location, outside of the maritime chokepoints of the Bab el Mandeb and Straits of Hormuz, provides CENTCOM with key logistical, operational, and contingency capabilities. The U.S. and Oman have shared interests in allowing increased United States access to Oman's military and commercial ports and bases as the country looks to modernize its infrastructure and diversify from an oil-based economy.

2019 Prognosis: A stronger economy in the Sultanate of Oman will ensure a politically stable country with adequate employment opportunities for its citizens. The U.S. and Oman will continue to maintain a strong mil-to-mil relationship and Oman will provide crucial access in the form of thousands of aircraft overflights, landings, and dozens of port-calls in Oman. Negotiations for enhanced access to Duqm port offer the prospect of deeper military cooperation. Oman will participate in numerous bi-lateral exercises and training events with U.S. Forces. Oman will continue to develop an FMS portfolio that already includes over \$2.7B in open FMS cases, though Omani budgetary constraints may significantly slow new acquisitions in coming years.

## **Conclusion**

Maintaining our competitive advantage in the Central Region relies on more than simply overmatching those who would challenge us with a higher volume of forces and equipment. CENTCOM's strategic approach has never relied on physical overmatch, but on our people, our strategic partnerships, and the ability to creatively leverage our combined capabilities to achieve our mission. As we operate more and more in the gray zone of competition short of combat, our people and partnerships – based on foundations of respect, trust, and shared values – will continue to be our source of strategic strength and key to maintaining our edge in the region.

The CENTCOM team – our component commands, our combined and joint task forces, our country teams, and all of our interagency partners – more than 90,000 uniformed military and civilian strong, is

the engine that drives everything we do toward securing our national interests. They represent America's greatest treasure. In an era of austerity and change when we consistently ask our people to do more with less, the service and sacrifice of these men and women and their families in support of their nation is both humbling and inspirational. For nearly 18 years of sustained conflict across the CENTCOM AOR, our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coast Guardsmen, and Civilians have answered the call with an unwavering commitment and devotion matched only by the families who support them. We could not accomplish what we do without all of them and they deserve the very best capabilities and support we can provide them, from weapons and communications systems, to healthcare and housing. As CENTCOM continues to fulfill its current missions and evolves to face new challenges, we appreciate the efforts of our civilian leadership at the Department of Defense, the interagency, and especially members of Congress and their staffs, who work tirelessly to provide our people everything they need to accomplish their vital missions and lead healthy, fulfilling lives in continued service to our nation.