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Opening

Chairman Rogers, Ranking Member Smith, distinguished members of the House Armed Service Committee, thank you for inviting me to testify on our defense posture and policy in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) areas of responsibility (AORs), alongside Commanders General Kurilla and General Langley.

The world has significantly changed since our posture testimony in 2023. The crises proliferating in both the USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM AORs have created a level of instability not seen in years. Although the Department of Defense (DoD) finds itself operating in a different environment, the 2022 National Defense Strategy (NDS) is still our guiding light for how the DoD will operate in the world. As articulated in the 2022 NDS, the DoD still believes, a strong, principled, adaptive U.S. military is a central pillar for U.S. leadership in the world. The U.S. military will strive to meet growing threats to vital national security interests, and a stable and open international system. The People's Republic of China (PRC) remains our most consequential competitor and the DoD will act urgently to sustain and strengthen deterrence, recognizing the PRC as our pacing challenge. As laid out by the NDS, we have collaborated with our NATO Allies and partners to reinforce robust deterrence in the face of Russian aggression while mitigating and protecting against threats from North Korea, Iran, violent extremist organizations (VEOs), and transboundary challenges such as climate change.

DoD is working to ensure we address the four NDS priorities in both USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM AORs, including: 1) strengthening deterrence; 2) defending the homeland, paced to the growing multi-domain threat posed by the PRC; 3) deterring strategic attacks and aggression against the United States, allies, and partners; and 4) building a resilient Joint Force and defense ecosystem.

In the USCENTCOM AOR, the Department is containing challenges emanating from Iran's malign influence, while surging support to our allies and partners – including Israel – all while maintaining current work furthering regional integration and partnerships. We are closely monitoring the PRC's efforts to project resources throughout the region, as well as Russia's destabilizing influence. We do all this while upholding the values at the core of our interests.

In the USAFRICOM AOR, our approach as defined in the NDS centers on disrupting VEOs threats against the U.S. homeland and vital national security interests, bolstering the capacity and capability of our African partners, and addressing strategic competition. As we refine our approach in Africa to ensure we achieve our NDS objectives, it is integral that we work closely with our African partners to address the security challenges.

As Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, my portfolio spans a vast network of U.S. allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Central Asia. It is my responsibility to ensure that the DoD has an effective approach to achieving our objectives and addressing the most pressing threats in the regions. As recent crises have shown us, this approach must be flexible enough to tackle the security challenges in the global environment that is rapidly changing and becoming more complex, but still one that is consistent with the NDS.

Our military instruments of power continue to support diplomacy, enhance our partners' capabilities and capacities to provide for their own defenses and address regional problems while advancing U.S. interests more efficiently and effectively. The United States' comparative advantage is building partnerships that strengthen deterrence, while using diplomacy wherever possible to deescalate tensions.

The DoD remains committed to using our tools – in support of broader instruments of our national power – to further U.S. interests in the USCENTCOM and USAFRICOM AORs and around the world. As we do, we will continue to stand with our partners and allies to win what we view as the competition of coalitions that is becoming increasingly critical to our common security.

Middle East

The Middle East is facing several crises. Hamas's abhorrent, brutal terrorist attack on October 7th included the murder of over 1,200 Israelis and the perpetration of sexual violence. Hamas continues to hold some 130 American and Israeli hostages. The United States has provided significant assistance to Israel as it seeks to ensure that the October 7th attacks can never be repeated. We mourn the thousands of Palestinians who have died in this conflict. We are alarmed at the significant loss of life throughout the conflict. Israel has an obligation to uphold international law, including international humanitarian law, and to protect civilians. Malign actors across the region – chief among them Iran – have sought to capitalize on events unfolding in Gaza, aiming to undermine stability and to advance their own interests. In the Red Sea, the Houthis have conducted at least 50 attacks against commercial shipping and naval vessels, affecting this vital channel for global trade. Iran-backed militia groups continue to attack U.S. forces in the region. Since October 17, U.S. bases and facilities in Iraq and Syria have been attacked over 175 times by Iran-aligned militia groups (IAMGs), killing three U.S. service members in an attack targeting the base called Tower 22, in northeast Jordan. On October 18, a U.S. contractor died of a heart attack while taking cover from a rocket attack in Iraq, and over 180 service members have sustained injuries during these unacceptable incidents. We mourn the lives lost and our prayers are with their families always.

Security and stability in the Middle East are necessary for protecting vital U.S. national security interests. A prosperous, peaceful, integrated region is central for the long-term security and prosperity of the United States and remains essential for mitigating threats to U.S. citizens that historically emanate from this region. Middle East partners are essential for maintaining security in the region and addressing global challenges beyond the region. Our decades-long security partnerships with the armed forces and defense ministries of our Middle East partners provide the foundation from which civilian-led efforts expand. DoD makes enhancing these partnerships, both bilaterally and multilaterally, a priority.

The 2022 National Security Strategy (NSS) articulates principles that guide defense engagement in the Middle East: partnership, deterrence, diplomacy, integration, and values. DoD applies these principles as it works to strengthen integrated deterrence, reduce conflict, and promote

stability. First and foremost, we support diplomacy as the U.S. preferred means to achieve our objectives. Second, the Department's vision for sustainable security relies on expanding regional security constructs, integrating our partners with each other and the United States, and extending deterrence through multi-domain, collective defense. Weaving air, maritime, land, cyber, and space capabilities together both enhances collective defensive capabilities and raises the potential cost to adversaries for aggression. Finally, respect for fundamental freedoms and human rights expands opportunities in our security partnerships. U.S. defense officials reinforce U.S. values in key leader engagements, through security assistance programming, across professional military education courses and training, and by demonstrating these values in exercises.

Amid the myriad complex challenges and heartbreaking devastation, the Department of Defense, in partnership with partners across the U.S. Government, is rising to the occasion to defend the nation's values and interests across the region.

The Administration continues to underscore with Israeli and regional counterparts, both publicly and privately, the importance of obligations related to civilian harm mitigation and the risks of conflict to civilians during Israel's operations against Hamas. The United States unequivocally stands for the protection of civilian lives during armed conflict consistent with the law of war.

The Department is also closely monitoring the situation to Israel's north, in Lebanon. We have been clear that Hizballah must not take advantage of the situation and attack Israel, which has a right to defend itself from terrorism, consistent with the law of armed conflict. Ultimately the only durable solution to the threats Israel faces from Hizballah and other actors operating in Lebanon is diplomatic and not military. The United States is committed to preventing escalation along the Blue Line, and working towards a diplomatic solution that will allow both Israelis and Lebanese to return to their homes.

Although Lebanese Hizballah may seek to take advantage of the situation and attack Israel; we support Israel's right to defend itself from terrorism, consistent with the law, and continue working to contain the conflict to Gaza, while deterring state and non-state actors seeking to escalate tensions.

DoD has demonstrated its ability to rapidly project additional power into theater, augmenting the more than 30,000 U.S. forces already in the Middle East. Since October 7, Secretary Austin ordered two Carrier Strike Groups into the region, including the USS Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, which has since redeployed, and the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, which is currently deployed in the Red Sea. Additionally, an Ohio-class nuclear-powered guided-missile submarine, transited the Suez Canal on November 5. DoD also bolstered air power and air defense and placed over 2,000 personnel and a range of units on a heightened state of readiness, some of which have subsequently been deployed to the region. These deployments demonstrate the United States' continuing and enduring commitment to Israel and our partners in the Middle East, and bolsters DoD's ability to respond quickly to the evolving regional security

environment. The Department continues to assess our force posture and remains in close contact with allies and partners.

The Department of Defense has also taken extraordinary steps to enhance our force protection posture and ensure that our people on the ground are adequately prepared to address a broad range of threats. These measures include: the rapid deployment of THAAD and Patriot ballistic missile defense systems; additional fighter squadrons to strengthen our deterrence posture; and two carrier strike groups to the region, one of which remains deployed, to strengthen our capabilities and ability to respond to a range of contingencies. We are constantly evaluating the threat to U.S. forces and adjusting our posture accordingly.

On February 2, following the Tower 22 attack, which claimed the lives of three U.S. service members, at President Biden's direction, U.S. military forces conducted strikes on seven facilities in Iraq and Syria and hit more than 85 targets. We will continue to hold Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and affiliated militias accountable for their attacks on U.S. and coalition forces. We do not seek conflict in the Middle East, but attacks on American forces will not be tolerated. We will continue to take all necessary actions to defend the United States. Our aim is to convince the Iranians to de-escalate threats against the United States, our interests, and our people.

Even as we take decisive and incisive action to address threats and challenges today, the Department remains focused on China, our pacing challenge, and persistent threats from Iran and violent extremist organizations, or VEOs. We are closely monitoring efforts by the PRC to project and sustain military power further afield. We remain postured and prepared to use all means necessary to prevent a nuclear-armed Iran, while working to counter Iran's other destabilizing activities. The U.S. military acts on a near daily basis to disrupt top-tier threats from VEOs that endanger the homeland and vital U.S. national interests.

The Department maintains readiness to unilaterally respond to any crisis or contingency, but our preference is to work alongside partners to deter any adversary seeking to take advantage of the situation. We seek to expand regional coalitions of capable, willing partners ready to share in the daily tasks designed to achieve these objectives. The United States' network of allies and partners provides us an asymmetric advantage our adversaries cannot match. Our efforts to address the crises of the day, testify to the premium the Department places on working alongside allies and partners, including the incredible work standing up the multinational security initiative to ensure freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden – Operation Prosperity Guardian. Even so, we have stayed the course. We are building upon existing work to strengthen existing partnerships. In Iraq, the U.S.-Iraq Higher Military Commission meets *despite* the threat environment to determine how the Coalition to Defeat ISIS' military mission will evolve, all while remaining in consultation with Coalition partners. We continue multilateral work to strengthen maritime security and Integrated Air and Missile Defense, furthering the NDS vision for integrated deterrence, enabling us to compete strategically in the

region and globally.

Iran

Iran remains a persistent threat to U.S. and partner interests through its continued support for violent, non-state actors; threats to the free flow of commerce; growing defense partnership with Russia; and nuclear advances. Iran continues to advance its missile and unmanned aerial systems (UAS) programs and expand its proliferation of these systems to terrorist and militant groups who have employed them in attacks on U.S. and partner interests across the region. This includes over 175 Iran-aligned militia group (IAMG) attacks against U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan since October 2023 and at least 50 Houthis attacks against commercial and naval vessels in and around the Red Sea since November 2023.

The DoD maintains unilateral options to address Iranian and Iran-backed threats. We have also pursued a range of partnered activities to bolster the defensive capabilities of our partners and conduct combined action with our partners. While we execute these activities and maintain readiness to respond to Iran-related contingencies, U.S. force protection is the highest priority. Since October 7, we have demonstrated to Iran that the United States can rapidly flow forces into theater to respond to any contingency through our deployment of two carrier strike groups, additional fighter aircraft, and missile defense and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

We have made clear that we will respond strongly to Iranian and Iran-backed attacks against U.S. personnel, international shipping, and innocent mariners, and we remain prepared to take additional necessary and appropriate action if needed. We demonstrated this through our seven successful strikes on IRGC and IAMG-affiliated infrastructure in Iraq and Syria since October 2023 and two successful strikes on IAMG individuals in Iraq who were directly involved in attacks on our force. In response, on February 2nd, we struck over 80 targets at seven IRGC-affiliated facilities in Iraq and Syria, some of which were serviced by B-1 bomber aircraft, a clear message of the firepower we are willing to deploy in response to Iran-backed attacks. We also carried out a strike against an axis militia leader involved in planning attacks against U.S. forces. Iranian leaders appear to have understood this message; we have not been attacked in Iraq, Syria, or Jordan since February 4.

In response to the persistent threat posed by Iranian-made UAS, we have bolstered our efforts to defeat these weapons prior to launch and fielded countermeasures to protect our service members at greatest risk. These systems have been critical to defending our forces in harm's way in Iraq and Syria and have saved countless lives. On January 28th, Iranian-backed militia UAVs killed three U.S. service members—Army Reserves soldiers from Georgia who were working for the enduring defeat of ISIS at Tower 22 in Jordan.

To reassure our allies and partners and to deter and be prepared to respond decisively to attacks by Iranian aligned groups, we strengthened our joint force posture, including through the deployment of the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group to the Central Command area of responsibility.

At sea, Iran continues to pose a threat to vital shipping lanes in both the Strait of Hormuz and, through its support to the Houthis, in the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, Red Sea, and Gulf of Aden. We have seen a demonstrated pattern of Iranian and Iran-backed Houthi attacks on merchant vessels, which pose a challenge to freedom of navigation, has implications for insurance rates, and threatens global rules and norms. The United States, our partners, and our allies will continue to address Iran's maritime assaults and protect freedom of navigation, including through our participation in the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) and our leadership of Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN. We have also conducted four combined strikes alongside the United Kingdom and with support from a growing list of partners that now includes Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and New Zealand that are designed to degrade and destroy the capabilities that the Houthis use in maritime attacks. Simultaneously, we have worked to disrupt and publicly expose Iran's ongoing support to the Houthis.

Deepening Russian-Iranian military cooperation poses a serious threat to regional stability. Since Russia's brutal full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Iran has continued to transfer lethal aid for Russian use in Ukraine, offer support for Russian sanctions evasion, and receive Russian support for Iran's space program. In addition to the DoD's "prior-to-launch" activities, the Defense Intelligence Agency declassified additional information in August 2023 to demonstrate that Iran is actively supporting Russia's war in Ukraine and hosted media outlets, foreign delegations, and think tank representatives to a hands-on display of Iranian-produced UAS recovered from Ukraine.

Iraq and Syria

In Iraq and Syria, the Department remains committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS. We have launched the U.S.-Iraq Higher Military Commission, consisting of defense and military professionals, to make assessments that will support negotiations to define the future of a strong U.S.-Iraq bilateral security relationship. We pursue these efforts with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS), which brings together 80 nations and five international organizations to provide an array of military capabilities, funding, and political support to the campaign against ISIS.

Nearly ten years ago, the United States began working with allies and partners to confront the urgent threat of ISIS. At that time, ISIS controlled vast swathes of territory, oppressing more than 11 million people, all while plotting and staging attacks across the region and the globe and committing numerous atrocities and abuses. In the face of this grave threat, the United States, with its allies and partners, formed Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, CJTF-OIR, and over the past decade, CJTF-OIR has removed ISIS from the territory it once controlled.

Today, the United States remains committed to the enduring defeat of ISIS alongside its partners in the D-ISIS coalition and on the ground. The United States' relationship with Iraq is buttressed by our shared objective to defeat ISIS. The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have led during the last several years of the campaign and CJTF-OIR has supported our partner force through advise, assist, and enable efforts. The ISF have made tremendous progress through cooperation with CJTF-OIR.

While we maintain pressure on ISIS, we face challenges from our adversaries, including Iran. IAMGs have attacked U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, Syria, and Jordan over 175 times. USCENTCOM has taken decisive measures to increase force protection and, as mentioned earlier, President Biden directed strikes targeting responsible parties. These attacks have increasingly burdened U.S., Coalition, and local partner forces as they conduct force protection. Vetted Syrian Groups and Individuals partnered with U.S. forces face increasing difficulty in executing their counter-ISIS mission while under pressure from IAMG attacks. In Iraq, we have coordinated extensively with the Government of Iraq and urged Prime Minister Sudani to take action to hold those responsible for attacks to account. We must keep our eye on the ball and maintain pressure on ISIS.

To this effect, DoD is authorized to provide assistance to vetted partners in Iraq and Syria under section 1236 and 1209, respectively, of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, as amended, and through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) appropriation. CTEF remains an essential tool for enabling the ISF (including the Kurdish Peshmerga forces), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and other vetted partners to achieve the enduring defeat of ISIS. Current CTEF support to vetted partner forces includes basic life support services, stipends, detention facility renovation and construction support, equipment, and sustainment.

In Iraq, CJTF-OIR transitioned its primary mission to an advise, assist, enable role in support of Iraq's fight against ISIS in December 2021. This transition fulfilled commitments made by U.S. and Iraqi leadership during the July 2021 U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue and was made possible due to increased counterterrorism capabilities of the ISF including the Peshmerga, and U.S.-trained Counter Terrorism Service (CTS). Today, the ISF are in the lead for ensuring ISIS's enduring defeat in Iraq, yet still require support from U.S. forces. U.S. forces will continue to support the Iraqis in this fight at the Government of Iraq's invitation, and DoD remains committed to supporting the Iraqi-led fight against ISIS.

As part of this effort, DoD and the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government are partnered to help the Peshmerga execute vital reforms which support their self-sufficiency and capabilities fighting ISIS. These include reforms to the organization and finances of the Peshmerga forces, supported by reforms to the CTEF-funded stipends program supporting the Peshmerga. Recently, my team led the inaugural Peshmerga Executive Steering Committee, co-chaired by the CJTF-OIR Commander and the Kurdistan Regional Presidency. In this steering committee, the DoD and KRG affirmed commitment to implementing the financial and organizational reforms to the Peshmerga outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding, renewed in September 2022.

U.S. and Iraqi leaders agree that Coalition support remains essential for achieving the enduring defeat of ISIS. DoD is focused on increasing the capabilities of the ISF, including the Kurdish Peshmerga, and setting the conditions for a long-term bilateral defense partnership. DoD will also continue to provide logistical support, within means, to NATO Mission – Iraq, which conducts ministerial-level advising, a complementary mission to the operational advising conducted by CJTF-OIR. This continuity in the D-ISIS mission is an essential pillar of the broader U.S. government approach to build a strong, stable, and sovereign Iraq.

The inaugural August 2023 U.S.-Iraq Joint Security Cooperation Dialogue (JSCD) reaffirmed DoD's commitment to a continued bilateral defense partnership with the Government of Iraq. During the August JSCD, the DoD and Iraqi Ministry of Defense committed to launch the Higher Military Commission (HMC), which will determine how the Coalition's military mission will evolve according to mutually agreed upon factors, which include: the threat from ISIS; operational and environmental requirements; and ISF capability levels. U.S. and Iraqi delegations began HMC working groups earlier this year in Baghdad. DoD remains committed to a responsible, orderly transition through dialogue with our Iraqi partners and consultation with Coalition members.

In Syria, DoD is committed to achieving the enduring defeat of ISIS by working by, with, and through vetted, capable partner forces, including the SDF. DoD conducts both unilateral and partnered counterterrorism operations that have yielded significant success in degrading ISIS networks in Syria; in 2023, the Coalition conducted over 137 operations resulting in over 21 ISIS operatives killed and over 344 detained. The SDF continue to demonstrate increased capabilities to plan and conduct counterterrorism operations, though Coalition presence and support remains critical to their success.

DoD is prioritizing the secure and humane detention of the more than 9,000 ISIS fighters by providing support to the SDF to maintain custody of this population. We are working to avert risks of detainees breaking out or conducting terrorist activities from detention facilities. Repurposed facilities currently housing many detainees require assessment and improvement for long-term detention. To address these concerns, DoD is leveraging the CTEF authority to work with the SDF to improve detention facilities and professionalize and expand the guard force securing detained ISIS fighters.

DoD coordinates with the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to address the simultaneous security and humanitarian crises at the al-Hol and al-Roj displaced persons camps in northeast Syria. DoD provides support to the SDF to disrupt ISIS activity and networks that threaten al-Hol's residents as well as the broader populations of northeast Syria. This support includes efforts to reinforce the camp's physical security, increase the number of security forces operating in the camp, and ensure those forces are appropriately trained to provide security in the unique environment of a displaced persons camp.

Repatriation remains the only durable solution for the humanitarian and security crises presented by the detention facilities and displaced persons camps in northeast Syria, including the approximately 45,000 displaced persons living in the al-Hol camp. It is imperative for countries of origin to repatriate, rehabilitate, and prosecute, where appropriate, their nationals who are detained in northeast Syria. DoD is committed to working with countries of origin to facilitate repatriations, including the Government of Iraq whose nationals make up most of both detained fighters and displaced persons. We are pleased that – despite increasing pressure from IAMG attacks – repatriations of displaced persons and detained fighters have continued. DoD will continue to prioritize supporting State Department activities to facilitate repatriation.

Military activities to support the enduring defeat of ISIS are just one piece of a broader whole-of-government strategy to address the underlying social, economic, and political conditions that

gave rise to ISIS and that ISIS continues to both exacerbate and exploit. DoD continues to work with interagency partners to support our local partners in Iraq and Syria and encourage international action to address the remaining challenges to ISIS's enduring defeat.

As today's challenges evolve in the Middle East, the Department is ready to act. However, our ability to surge to meet those challenge is not sustainable without the continued support of Congress. I urge you to pass the President's bipartisan National Security Supplemental to ensure we can fully defend our interests and champion our values in the region.

Partnerships: Israel, Egypt, the Levant, and the Gulf

Israel

The October 7, 2023, attacks against Israel fundamentally changed Israel's security environment and served as a pivotal moment where the United States demonstrated its commitment to Israel. We support Israel's right to defend itself consistent with the Law of Armed Conflict. The way Israel conducts its operations matters. Israel has a moral, legal, and strategic responsibility to protect civilians and uphold international humanitarian law. Our priority is the long-term security and dignity of Israelis and Palestinians. We are alarmed at the significant loss of life throughout the conflict, including many thousands of Palestinian civilians who are not Hamas who have been killed. We are working to alleviate the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. At the President's direction, the Department of Defense is establishing the infrastructure for a maritime corridor so that USAID, international partners, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can lead in increasing the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza. To achieve these objectives, we made our commitment to Israel crystal clear by expediting the transfer of critical air defense systems, precision-guided munitions, artillery, and medical supplies. In support of hostage recovery efforts, the DoD is conducting unarmed UAS flights over Gaza, as well as providing advice and assistance to support our Israeli partner to recover hostages. In response to the attacks, we took steps to strengthen our posture in the region and bolster deterrence. The Secretary directed the USS Gerald R. Ford and USS Dwight D Eisenhower Carrier Strike Groups into the region and augmented fighter aircraft squadrons in the region.

DoD works closely with the State Department to ensure Israel's Qualitative Military Edge through a robust and far-reaching bilateral relationship with the Israeli Ministry of Defense and Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Our bilateral cooperation extends across all elements of our defense enterprises, ranging from senior-level policy dialogues to bilateral operational collaboration and training, combined military exercises, missile defense cooperation, cooperative scientific research and development, technological innovation, and even collaboration on care for wounded veterans and addressing traumatic brain injury.

U.S.-Israel military exercises demonstrate our ongoing efforts to improve our interoperability and increase military cooperation across the region. The JUNIPER OAK 23 combined military exercise last year deployed roughly 6,400 U.S. troops alongside more than 1,500 Israeli troops, highlighting the ability of our two militaries to be interoperable and conduct combined operations. As Israel's alignment to USCENTCOM's AOR continues to mature, we will look for additional opportunities to train and exercise multilaterally with other partners throughout the region.

Egypt and the Levant

Our 40-year strategic partnership with Egypt continues to be essential for maintaining regional stability. Egypt supports U.S. overflight requests and Suez Canal transit remain critical to U.S. military ability to conduct operations around the world. Following the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel, Egypt has played a critical role, facilitating negotiations with Hamas on ceasefires and the release of hostages; assisted U.S. citizens, legal permanent residents, and their families depart Gaza; and provided a corridor for international humanitarian aid into Gaza. In the face of the conflict in Sudan, Egypt cooperated with the United States as we evacuated our Embassy personnel from Khartoum and accepted an influx of Sudanese refugees.

DoD supports Egypt's military modernization as Egypt procures U.S. military equipment through significant Foreign Military Sales, increasing interoperability on border and maritime security. The Egyptian Armed Forces are key to advancing integrated deterrence and stability in the region, as evidenced by their command of Combined Task Force 153, as part of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) efforts to secure vital sea lanes in the Red Sea. Egypt also continued to host the combined, joint exercise BRIGHT STAR, which in its 18th iteration in 2023 included participation from 1500 U.S. military service members as well as participants from over 30 other nations. DoD support for Egypt's counterterrorism capabilities, while mitigating risk to civilian harm, has degraded the threat from globally connected terrorist groups in the Sinai Peninsula and improved Egyptian contributions to PKO missions. DoD also continues to maintain U.S. contributions to the Multinational Force and Observers which monitors the implementation of the Egypt-Israel peace treaty in the Sinai Peninsula.

Egypt remains a key partner to the United States that is essential for maintaining regional stability. Egypt's positive responses to U.S. overflight requests to transit the Suez Canal remain critical to U.S. military global readiness.

Jordan remains a steadfast partner and a leader for stability throughout the region. DoD continues to work with Jordan to bolster its ability to secure its borders against the continued threat posed by ISIS and address new and emerging threats such as drug smuggling, UAS, air and missile threats, and other challenges posed primarily by Iran. Last September, Jordan and the United States signed the most significant Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between our two countries to date. The MOU deepens our military and economic cooperation and strengthens Jordan's role as a leader in regional security. The arrangement covers the longest period and provides more assistance than any prior arrangement, including an unprecedented level of request for Foreign Military Financing, which will support the modernization of Jordan's military. DoD is committed to strengthening the capabilities, professionalism, and interoperability of the Jordanian Armed Forces through robust security assistance, bilateral and multilateral exercises, joint training, and defense institution building efforts.

In Lebanon, the DoD works closely with the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) to help them counter VEOs, counter weapons of mass destruction, secure their border with Syria, and maintain internal stability, and preserve internal security. Since October 7, 2023, Lebanon's security environment has further degraded due to increased violence between Israel and

Lebanese Hizballah along the Israel-Lebanon border. Simultaneously, as Lebanon faces destabilizing economic, political, and social crises, the LAF continue to perform admirably in continuing to fulfill their duties, which has preserved the LAF's reputation as a capable, nonsectarian, and responsible institution. Most importantly, our support for the LAF helps to undermine Lebanese Hizballah's false narrative that its weapons are necessary to defend Lebanon. Further, following violent protests near the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in October 2023 resulting from Israel's war in Gaza, the LAF was instrumental in protecting our embassy. In response, the U.S. Government provided the LAF with non-lethal crowd and riot control munitions through Presidential Drawdown Authority. This Administration remains committed to strengthening Lebanon's security and stability through a combination of diplomatic engagement and sustained support for the LAF.

Since October 7, 2023, Lebanon's security environment has further degraded due to increased violence between Israel and Lebanese Hizballah along the Israel-Lebanon border. Simultaneously, as Lebanon faces destabilizing economic, political, and social crises, the LAF continue to perform admirably in securing Lebanon's borders, conducting effective counterterrorism and counternarcotics operations, and in maintaining internal stability. The LAF's reputation as a capable, nonsectarian, and responsible institution also undermines Lebanese Hizballah's false narrative that its weapons are necessary to defend Lebanon. The LAF is a responsible partner who understands their own requirements and pursues exactly what they need and not expensive, exquisite capabilities. Following protests near the U.S. Embassy in Beirut in October 2023 resulting from Israel's war in Gaza, in which LAF personnel were injured protecting our Embassy when the protests turned violent, the U.S. Government provided the LAF with non-lethal crowd and riot control munitions through Presidential Drawdown Authority. This Administration remains committed to strengthening Lebanon's security and stability through a combination of diplomatic engagement and sustained support for the LAF.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Countries

U.S. strategic partnerships in the Gulf remain critical to our priorities in the region. We rely on these partners for essential access, basing, and overflight to conduct operations in the region and around the world. We also work with these partners to host U.S. forces, coordinate diplomatic and security approaches to regional challenges, share intelligence and early warning, and to expand interoperability and defensive capabilities to collectively address threats. Our Gulf partners prioritize U.S. military equipment and are significant Foreign Military Sales customers. This cooperation expands our opportunities for interoperability and integration. Finally, sustaining strong partnerships across the Gulf are vital if we are to achieve the National Defense Strategy vision for integrated deterrence and strategically compete in the region and globally.

DoD aims to convene the U.S.-GCC Defense Working Groups on Maritime Security and Integrated Air and Missile Defense in Riyadh in May. DoD previously held these working groups in February 2023 and March 2022. The Defense Working Groups are one of many initiatives to promote integration as a foundation for a more secure and prosperous region. These efforts complement regular security initiatives and joint exercises under the auspices of USCENTCOM.

Decades of investment in security cooperation, exercises, and foreign military sales to Gulf partners like the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) are enabling these governments to effectively defend their territory, their citizens, and the tens of thousands of U.S. citizens living in the Gulf. The United States remains committed to supporting the defense of our GCC partners' territories and will continue to provide intelligence, early warning, training, and security cooperation activities.

The strategic partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia spans nearly eight decades. The Kingdom is a regional leader and a critical stakeholder for preventing the further spread of the conflict in Gaza, and achieving an enduring end to the crisis that provides lasting peace and security for Israelis and Palestinians alike. We coordinate with the Kingdom to reduce regional tensions, including a cessation of Houthi attacks undermining both freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and to gain progress on the Yemen peace process. Saudi Arabia is a foundational partner for integrating regional security architecture and advancing a stable, integrated, and prosperous Middle East region. DoD remains committed to supporting Kingdom's security and territorial defense and facilitating its ability to obtain necessary capabilities to defend its people and territory against external threats.

The UAE is a strategic partner that has participated in coalitions alongside U.S. forces in Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen and has been integral in enhancing regional security. DoD is committed to our bilateral defense partnership with UAE, which focuses on building capacity, capability, and interoperability of our militaries. UAE has sought to navigate the ongoing crises in the region by maintaining a "no enemies" approach. It has maintained diplomatic ties with Israel throughout the conflict in Gaza, while also providing substantial humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people.

We also have a close and robust partnership with Qatar, which acts as a host and provides critical support to U.S. forces and facilities. Qatar has played a critical role in the international response to the ongoing crisis in Gaza by facilitating negotiations with Israel and Hamas representatives on ceasefires and the release of hostages. Qatar is also taking steps to increase its interoperability with U.S. and NATO forces and continues to rely on the United States as one of its top suppliers of defense sector purchases.

Kuwait is a Major Non-NATO Ally who provides critical access, basing, and overflight support for U.S. troops and equipment, acting as a force-flow and logistic hub. Kuwait continues to host the fourth largest presence of U.S. forces outside the United States.

Bahrain is a Major Non-NATO Ally, strong U.S. partner and critical host of regional coalitions. It hosts U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (also known as the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet), which protects the freedom of navigation through the waterways around the Strait of Hormuz and Arabian Gulf; the International Maritime Security Construct, an eight-member consortium that helps to maintain the free flow of trade for legitimate mariners in the region; and the Combined Maritime Forces, which works to interdict Iran's illicit shipments of weapons, underscoring the enduring U.S. commitment to maritime security.

Oman serves as a critical waypoint for DoD operations in the USCENTCOM AOR and is a consistent voice for diplomacy and moderation in regional affairs. Oman provides critical access, basing, and overflight to U.S. forces. With its strategic location near key naval chokepoints, Oman is valuable to DoD operations and planning.

Yemen and the Red Sea

In Yemen, U.S. policy objectives remain focused on restoring safe and free navigation for all legitimate maritime traffic and creating the conditions to implement a durable resolution under UN auspices that will end the conflict to alleviate humanitarian suffering and stymie threats from al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS-Yemen. DoD supports the Department of State's efforts to secure a peaceful settlement to the war which must pave the way for an inclusive, Yemeni-Yemeni political process, which must also include the voices of civil society, including women and members of marginalized groups, and their calls for justice, accountability, and redress for human rights abuses and violations. Although an agreement to extend the April 2022 UN-mediated truce for a third time could not be reached before it expired in October 2022, both sides have largely upheld their commitments under the UN-brokered truce agreement and have continued to refrain from cross-border strikes.

Yet, as we have all seen since October, the Houthis are throwing this progress away to serve their own self-interested political agenda, aligning with Iran, at the expense of the Yemeni people and international security. Since November 19, the Houthis have conducted at least 50 attacks against commercial shipping and naval vessels in and around the Red Sea through which 15% of all global trade flows using anti-ship ballistic missiles (ASBMs), anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), UAS, uncrewed surface vessels, and—in one instance—a helicopter-borne ship seizure.

Our guiding principles are to internationalize the response to the Houthis' attacks in coordination with our allies and partners and to nest military, diplomatic, and economic actions within a whole-of-government approach to impose costs on Houthi leadership and deter Houthi attacks on commercial shipping.

The United States has coordinated multiple multilateral statements condemning Houthi attacks, imposed new sanctions on the group and designated it a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group, drafted a successful UN Security Council resolution affirming the right of States to defend their vessels from Houthi attacks, established a defensive coalition of more than 20 countries to patrol the Red Sea and safeguard commercial shipping, and conducted four rounds of combined strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen.

Our main defensive effort in the Red Sea is called Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN. Since Secretary Austin announced this coalition in December, more than 20 countries have joined to increase maritime patrols in the Red Sea and safeguard commercial shipping. This coalition is led by Task Force 153, which is charged with providing leadership and command and control of international maritime security activities in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Gulf of Aden. Operation PROSPERITY GUARDIAN is designed to reassure the maritime shipping industry, deter illegal activity, and promote safe navigation while protecting the free flow of international commerce.

Meanwhile, the Department has been engaged in efforts to destroy and degrade the capabilities that the Houthis use to conduct maritime attacks, such as ASBMs, ASCMs, UAS, and facilities known to house such weapons. On January 11, January 22, February 3, and February 24 at the President's direction, we executed deliberate, multinational strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen alongside the United Kingdom and with support from a growing number of partners that now includes Australia, Bahrain, Canada, Denmark, the Netherlands, and New Zealand. Beyond coalition strikes, U.S. forces have also struck Houthi targets, including missiles and UAS on launchers, nearly three dozen times, in self-defense over the last few weeks.

DoD is also bolstering efforts to interdict Iranian weapons transfers to the Houthis and expose Iran's involvement in such transfers so that Iran can no longer hide behind the veneer of plausible deniability. In the past few months, there have been at least two significant interdictions of Iranian illicit cargo that was en-route to Yemen, which have prevented the transfer of components for unmanned underwater and surface vessels as well as propulsion, guidance, and warheads for Houthi medium range ballistic missile and anti-ship cruise missiles. The Houthis have employed these same weapons to threaten and attack not just U.S. Navy vessels, but also commercial mariners on international merchant ships transiting the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb Strait, and Gulf of Aden.

The People's Republic of China (PRC)

The Middle East is important to the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the PRC has maintained efforts to supplant the United States through economic means, including through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – the Chinese program to finance infrastructure projects that often come with hidden costs to debtor nations. The PRC is the Department of Defense's pacing challenge and our approach to this challenge inside the Middle East is a critical element of our broader, global efforts. The PRC is uniquely capable of leveraging economic, diplomatic, military, and technological capabilities to fundamentally reshape the rules-based international order. We support all efforts aimed at promoting regional stability and peace and would welcome the PRC playing a constructive role, particularly in the Red Sea.

Nonetheless, we have not seen the PRC leverage its considerable influence in working alongside the governments in the region to address strategic threats or improve collective defensive capabilities. In some significant instances, the PRC is actively undermining the region's security. The PRC has yet to leverage its considerable influence with Iran to call for an end to the dangerous attacks by the Houthis targeting civilian ships. The PRC has upgraded its strategic relations with Iran, deploying coercive economic tactics to secure contracts for Chinese Communist Party (CCP) companies, and expanded exercises to increase its own power projection operations. The PRC is not a member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and contributed negligibly to international humanitarian efforts in Gaza, Yemen, and Syria, or political processes to wind down these conflicts. While the PRC demurs on stepping up to uphold regional stability among competing crises, it remains dependent on energy imports from the Middle East and Africa, many of which transit through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

As the 2023 China Military Power Report states, PRC leaders and officials have increasingly sought to bolster the PRC's relations with developing countries in the Middle East and PRC investments there have experienced strong growth. The PRC's arms sales have continued to grow throughout the region, with sales to U.S. partner nations in the Central Command area of operations including combat aircraft sales to Iraq and fixed wing UAV strike-capable UAV aircraft sales to Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kazakhstan, and the UAE.

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As the PRC's overseas interests have grown, its leaders have increasingly pushed the People's Liberation Army (PLA) to rethink how the military will protect those interests. The PLA Navy (PLAN) is operating outside of its home waters to other regions including the Middle East. The Department of Defense is closely monitoring PRC efforts aimed at establishing a more robust overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power further afield. A global PLA military logistics network could interfere with U.S. and ally military operations and eventually support offensive operations as the PRC's global military objectives evolve. The PRC officially opened its first PLA base in Djibouti – close to the Middle East and in sight of vital shipping lanes transiting through the Suez Canal – in 2017. PLA personnel at the facility have violated international norms by blinding U.S. military personnel with lasers, and the PRC has sought to restrict Djiboutian sovereign airspace over the base. The PRC has also likely considered the United Arab Emirates as a location for PLA military logistics facilities. We encourage allies and partners to carefully consider the potential strategic and security risks prior to committing BRI cooperation and other economic initiatives.

The United States will not force nations to choose between the PRC and the U.S. We recognize that our partners seek healthy relations with the PRC, including commercial, trade, and defense ties. DoD and interagency leaders have shared with Middle East partners U.S. concerns of the threat posed by Chinese surveillance and influence. Middle East partners are calibrating, making individual decisions about how to pursue their economic interest with the PRC. However, specific categories of engagement put at risk U.S. defense partnerships, U.S. defense technology, and ultimately, U.S. force protection. Given the robust U.S. force presence and basing across the region, PRC military installations in the territory of our strategic partners is a major concern. We constantly engage our partners to ensure that secure communications networks, U.S.-origin defense equipment, and U.S. war fighters are protected. This is an area that requires constant vigilance and consistent engagement from across the DoD enterprise. Although we assess and monitor the risks posed by growing PRC influence, the U.S. remains the partner of choice throughout the region in defense partnerships.

Russia

The NDS describes Russia as an acute threat. Russia's unprovoked full-scale war against Ukraine has already produced significant consequences for the governments, forces, and people of the Middle East. Russia's influence and destabilizing activities in the Middle East include Russia's military activity in Syria and deepening military cooperation with Iran. Russia and Syria limit the United Nations and other organizations from providing sufficient humanitarian

aid to Syrian populations in need. Russian forces in Syria interfere with Coalition D-ISIS operations. Russia's procurement of hundreds of Iranian UAS, and the use of the UAS in its war of aggression against Ukraine, represent a growing risk to Middle East partners.

Increasing Russian-Iranian military cooperation has altered the perception for those in the region, as Russia deepens ties with Iran. Iran is gaining battlefield experience and forging a strategic relationship with Russia, which will have serious implications for the region. The United States is working with partners to issue new restrictions to prevent components found in Iranian UAS from making their way onto the battlefield in Ukraine. Additionally, the United States is at the forefront of a global coalition supporting Ukraine with capabilities to defend itself. More than 50 nations, including many Middle East partners, support the Ukraine Defense Contact Group. Middle East partners have an important role to play, from increased humanitarian support to air defense assets to protect population centers.

Many Middle Eastern countries have historically relied on Russian arms imports to supply their militaries. Russia's defense industry has already struggled with numerous challenges, such as inefficiency, low production capacity, and lack of a modern machinery base. These challenges have only been exacerbated as Russia's military takes substantial losses in Ukraine. Major supply shortages for Russia's forces in Ukraine, in part because of U.S. sanctions and export controls, complicates imports of Russian arms replenishment of spare parts, ammunition, and material. Furthermore, Russian battlefield losses undermine its own portrayal of Russian armed forces and military equipment as highly capable.

Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Central Asia

Afghanistan

Under Operation ENDURING SENTINEL, DoD is conducting counterterrorism operations using personnel and platforms stationed outside of Afghanistan to ensure terrorist groups do not use the country to launch attacks against the United States.

DoD retains the ability to conduct kinetic strikes to disrupt terrorist threats within Afghanistan.

Our service members and civilian employees remain hard at work to advance our interests in Afghanistan, which includes supporting the Department of State's efforts to facilitate the departure of American citizens and lawful permanent residents from Afghanistan and the resettlement of our Afghan allies.

Central Asia

DoD continues to collaborate with our Central Asian partners to help counter a wide range of threats to the region and to the U.S. homeland, strengthening our relationship through cooperation in areas of mutual interest.

Of note, Congress appropriated funding in the Consolidated Appropriations Act for Fiscal Year 2023 to establish security cooperation programs in the region that will build our partners' ISR capabilities and enhance our efforts to work with them on countering threats posed by terrorism

and violent extremist organizations while also enhancing border security in support of regional stability. Security cooperation programs will translate to long-term improvements to our partners' ability to monitor and defend their borders and will foster enduring relationships.

Additional long-term security cooperation programs with our Central Asian partners support their sovereignty and territorial integrity, particularly considering increased Russian aggression toward the region and attempts by the PRC to expand its influence in Central Asia.

Pakistan

We also work with Pakistan across several issues that are important to our national interests. We continue to seek and build upon areas of mutual interest to improve regional security and our bilateral relationship.

Strategic stability in South Asia remains an enduring interest of both Pakistan and the United States. There are several ways we can continue to cooperate with Pakistan to pursue these interests.

For example, counterterrorism remains an area of mutual interest as several violent extremist organizations seek to target U.S. and Pakistani interests.

Pakistan also participates in counter-piracy efforts, meant to ensure a rules-based international order with free and open maritime transit.

Africa

To say Africa is important is an understatement. Africa is not merely important; it is essential. Africa is a cornerstone of technological innovation and economic, social, and political influence. African partnerships are critical for the Department of Defense to accomplish its geopolitical and strategic objectives. From the artificial intelligence that will unlock new possibilities, to the computer chips needed in our next generation defense systems and advanced medical technologies, the necessary components to maintain our technological edge and to power our future are found in Africa.

It is no surprise Africa has found itself at the center of world attention. The United States is not the only country that knows and understands Africa's importance. Many of our allies and partners across the world have consistently approached us to ask how they could work together with DoD to partner in Africa. Our competitors have also taken note of Africa's potential and have increased their political, economic, and defense engagements to accomplish their own self-interested, transactional geopolitical objectives.

Despite its boundless potential, Africa faces many unpredictable threats that may derail its bright future. Political instability, democratic backsliding, the presence of violent extremist organizations (VEOs) and transnational threats, heavy debt burdens, and the effects of climate change and environmental degradation, all combine to create an environment that is not conducive for growth and opportunity for the continent's people. To put the United States and our African partners in the best position to tackle these challenges, the United States has decided

to lead with our values and has prioritized working closely with African partners. DoD has expanded the State Partnership Program to strengthen relationships with African partners, is expanding efforts on climate impacts on defense and security and growing our capabilities to support partners on civilian harm mitigation.

In this vein, DoD's approach to Africa centers on working with our State and USAID colleagues and is grounded in the Global Fragility Act (GFA) and the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability (SPCPS) which prioritizes collaboration among the "3Ds" - Defense, Diplomacy and Development. DoD's role in the 3Ds is further grounded in the National Defense Strategy's three priorities for Africa, 1) disrupting VEO threats to the homeland and vital U.S. interests, 2) building the capability and capacity of our many African partners to address these threats, and 3) addressing strategic competition concerns.

To accomplish our objectives, DoD employs a variety of tools, including key leader engagements, counter-terrorism training and operations, civil-military engagement, accountability training to minimize civilian harm, military-led exercises, foreign military sales, and partner intelligence sharing. DoD also conducts institutional capacity building, crisis response and humanitarian assistance through the National Guard's State Partnership Program (SPP), and the United States Coast Guard's ship rider program. DoD strives to ensure our security cooperation builds resilient defense and law enforcement institutions, promotes civilian oversight and professionalization of partner militaries, and respect for human rights at every level of training, programming, and curriculum delivery. DoD also works with African defense ministries and other security institutions to strengthen their armed forces in a manner consistent with the principles of good governance and the rule of law.

To support the implementation of President Biden's U.S.-Africa Leaders' Summit in 2022, Secretary Austin traveled to Africa, visiting Djibouti, Kenya, and Angola in September 2023. Each stop was meant to highlight key objectives in the 2022 National Defense Strategy. During the trip, Secretary Austin gave a speech that highlighted key U.S. priorities on the continent and how DoD works with State and USAID to accomplish these goals. The speech signaled that the U.S. is ready to work with African partners to address the complex challenges that hinder growth and development and was well-received by audiences all over the continent.

Northwest Africa

North Africa

In North Africa, the DoD is committed to building its strategic defense partnership with the Tunisian and Moroccan Ministries of Defense (MODs). Both countries are strategic partners that play important roles addressing security challenges on the continent and in the Mediterranean on NATO's Southern Flank. As the only two Major Non-NATO Allies in Africa, Morocco and Tunisia play important roles helping achieve DoD strategic objectives in Africa. They are vital partners in training other African countries, supporting peacekeeping, and in building interoperability.

DoD continues to strengthen ties with the Algerian Ministry of National Defense. Over the past year, we have met with our Algerian counterparts to advance a deeper security relationship with Algeria. DoD will continue to work with the Algerian Ministry of National Defense to foster regional security, building on the momentum of 2023 to solidify its ongoing partnership with Algeria.

Although Libya continues to struggle with political reconciliation between the Government of National Unity and the Libyan National western Army and eastern factions, military leaders on both sides, including the 5 + 5 Joint Military Commission, from both factions are discussing what a future unified Libyan military, under civilian control, might look like. DoD is exploring ways to expand engagement with western and eastern and western Libyan military leadership to improve security and ultimately lay the groundwork for military reunification, through focused engagement on the development of a military subordinate to an elected, unified government.

Sahel and West Africa

Significant political changes across the Sahel in the past year, including the July 2023 military coup d'état in Niger and the December 2023 withdrawal of MINUSMA forces in from Mali, have exacerbated an already tenuous security situation and complicated our ability to work with both African and international partners. In the Sahel, the DoD is working to strike a balance between offering the practical assistance our African partners need to face emerging threats, while reinforcing the professional values required to build strong, resilient institutions that will reinforce their democratic and physical security.

VEOs affiliated with al'Qaida affiliated Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) and ISIS-Sahel have taken advantage of weak governance capacity, waning state legitimacy, and porous borders to expand their operational reach, resulting in dramatic increases in civilian deaths and regional violence. the purpose of DoD's presence in Niger is to monitor for indications and warnings of VEO activity in the Sahel and potential threats emanating from the region against U.S. interests, persons, and our diplomatic missions in the region.

DoD is focused on improving the coordination of our programs in the Sahel to prevent the spillover of further expansion of violence and instability into Coastal West Africa where VEOs threaten the northern border regions of countries such as Benin, Cote Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Benin, Guinea, and Togo. DoD is playing a supporting – but important – role in Department of State and USAID efforts to support leaders across these countries in taking comprehensive action at local, national, and regional levels to build upon existing resiliencies, prevent conflict, and promote stability by addressing the root drivers of instability.

In Coastal West Africa, we are also working with strong partners such as Ghana and Senegal to build their capacity in the areas of maritime security, counter-illicit trafficking, border security, intelligence, logistics and maintenance, and Women, Peace, and Security programs. Our security cooperation with Gulf of Guinea countries in the areas of maritime and border security promote stability. We also work closely with these partners to bolster Maritime Domain Awareness to counter threats such as illicit trafficking and Illegal, Unregulated, and Unreported (IUU) Fishing.

Other VEO groups such as Boko Haram and ISIS West Africa in the Lake Chad Region, threaten countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger. We are working with our partners to help them counter these threats through our security cooperation activities. In our engagements, we stress compliance with the laws of armed conflict and civil harm mitigation. For example, the DoD has active foreign military sales cases and several security cooperation activities with Nigeria that include working with the Nigerian Air Force on an Air-to-Ground Integration program to improve targeting to mitigate civilian harm.

East, Central, South Africa

East Africa

In the Horn of Africa, VEOs, particularly al-Shabaab, continue to present both near-term and long-term threats to U.S. and regional security interests. DoD's persistent presence in Somalia has been instrumental in supporting Somali progress on degrading al-Shabaab. We have defined a narrowly scoped mission and are working with our partners such as the African Union and Somalia to counter al-Shabaab. DoD's presence in Somalia forms the backbone of a whole-of-government approach that layers diplomacy, security assistance, stabilization programming, and intelligence operations to counter al-Shabaab. Our forces currently advise and assist while building the capability of Somali Counterterrorism forces while having an eye toward the December expiration of the mandate for the African Union Transition Mission in Somalia (ATMIS). The United States supports Somalia's engagement with the African Union on planning for a post-ATMIS multinational force.

Our presence in Djibouti plays a critical role in supporting these multilateral missions. Djibouti is the host of the largest contingent of U.S. military personnel in Africa. The airfield and port in Djibouti are critical to U.S. capability and capacity to disrupt VEO threats, counter illicit activities at sea, and provide timely crisis response throughout the region.

Central and Southern

DoD remains concerned with the humanitarian ramifications of the conflict in Sudan and the conflict in the Eastern part of Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). We are working with the State Department to support diplomatic efforts to ease tension and find peaceful, durable solutions.

The VEO activity at the northern border of Mozambique and southern border of Tanzania has destabilized the region. Tanzania currently contributes 2,600 military and police personnel to six UN operations and provides troops to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) Mission in Mozambique (SAMIM). In Mozambique, DoD has conducted episodic civil affairs engagements and is supporting SPCPS implementation by working closely with the Department of State and USAID to strengthen the resilience of Mozambican communities affected by violent extremism through maritime domain awareness, capacity building and special operation force training to combat the ISIS threat in Cabo Delgado.

Strategic Competition

Strategic competitors like the PRC and Russia have expanded their influence across Africa. They take advantage of governments with fragile political institutions and weak rule of law. They spread disinformation and amplify the misperception of U.S. indifference or withdrawal from the continent to ensure they are in the best position to achieve their geopolitical objectives. The PRC's influence poses a longer-term risk to the rules-based international order while the presence of the Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) and affiliated Private Military Contractors (PMCs) undermine the security and resilience of our partners.

The PRC in Africa

As in previous years, the PRC remains our most serious competitor on the continent. The PRC's large-scale economic investment, courting of African support in multinational fora, and increased security cooperation have demonstrated the importance of Africa to the PRC. These activities often undercut regional and global work to strengthen local defense institutions and improve long-term stability grounded in international rules and norms. DoD remains concerned by the PRC's ambitions to expand its military footprint, which has the potential to degrade African maritime security and adversely affect U.S. freedom of movement and influence throughout Africa.

The PRC is seeking to expand its overseas logistics and basing infrastructure to allow the PLA to project and sustain military power at greater distances. If realized, a global PLA military logistics network could disrupt U.S. military operations as the PRC's global military objectives evolve.

In August 2017, the PRC officially opened its first PLA base in Djibouti—located only a few miles from the location of a U.S. base. The PLA base in Djibouti provides the PRC with the ability to support a military response to contingencies affecting the PRC's investment and infrastructure in the region, and the approximately 1 million PRC citizens in Africa. The PLA Navy Marine Corps (PLANMC) are stationed at the base with wheeled armored vehicles and artillery but are currently limited in their ability to conduct expeditionary operations due to a lack of helicopters at the facility. The pier at the base is likely able to accommodate the PLA Navy's aircraft carriers, other large combatants, and submarines. PLA personnel at the facility have interfered with U.S. flights by lasing pilots and flying drones, and the PRC has sought to restrict Djiboutian sovereign airspace over the PLAMC base.

Beyond its base in Djibouti, the PRC is very likely considering and planning for additional military logistics facilities to support naval, air, and ground forces projection. On the African continent, the PRC probably has considered following countries as locations for PLA military logistics facilities: Kenya, Equatorial Guinea, Seychelles, Tanzania, Angola, Nigeria, Namibia, and Mozambique.

Russia in Africa

Because Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine has affected Russia's policy in Africa, Russia has been relying on its historic relationships rooted in Soviet era support for African

independence movements during the Cold War to leverage and promote its military proxies, including PMC activities in several African nations. Russia uses weapons sales to gain inroads into Africa and is the top weapons supplier in sub-Saharan Africa with 26 percent of the regions' market share.

Most concerning, in the Central African Republic (CAR), the Russian MoD and CAR leadership are negotiating a permanent Russian military base there that would only increase instability and undermine regional security. In Libya, Russia's re-branding of its Wagner presence, disregard for the country's territorial integrity, and pursuit of basing arrangements increasing military presence continues to threaten progress toward an inclusive and unified government in have turned Libya into a platform for Moscow to destabilize the region. And in the Sahel, Russia has sought to expand its own access and influence wherever there is instability in Africa. The Russians do this by stoking anti-Western sentiment and presenting Russian military proxies, or the Russian military itself, as a viable and flexible alternative to Western trainers. Additionally, Russian military and proxy presence has been established in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger following the military coups in each of the countries.

DoD also remains concerned with efforts by the Russian MOD to assume control of some aspects of Wagner's operations, while consolidating other parts of Wagner into an "Africa Corps" and other proxy organizations. The proxy organizations' security operations, illicit resource extraction, propagation of instability, and human rights violations in Africa fail to restore regional stability and provide few long-term benefits to African nations. We continue to highlight to our partners the dangers of partnering with the Russian military and their military proxies.

DoD does not force African partners to pick sides between the United States and our strategic competitors, but rather we work with our allies and Partners to provide African countries training, engagements, and products of superior quality. Through these efforts, and those of our allies, we continue to highlight to our African partners, in stark contrast with our competitors, that lasting stability and security are best achieved when defense and security forces operate professionally and respect civilian authority, the rule of law, and human rights.