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**STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**  
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**BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ARMED**  
**SERVICES ON THE POSTURE OF US CENTRAL**  
**COMMAND**

**A STRATEGIC WINDOW**  
**IN THE CENTRAL REGION**



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## I. INTRODUCTION

Our Partners have described the events over the last twenty months as an earthquake; one that began on 7 October 2023 and continued to produce aftershocks across the region. After HAMAS's attack on Israel, Iran operationalized its entire proxy network and arsenal of standoff capabilities – two pillars of their strategic approach – in pursuit of one goal: to seize a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reshape the region to its advantage. The USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility (AOR) has experienced its most highly kinetic period than at any other time in the past decade. American servicemembers have come under direct fire by nearly 400 unmanned aerial systems, 350 rockets, 50 ballistic missiles, and 30 cruise missiles launched by Iran-backed groups. We have been at the brink of regional war several times with the first state-on-state attacks between Iran and Israel in their history. In the Red Sea, Houthi attempts to kill Americans operating in the Red Sea necessitated an aggressive response to protect our sailors and mariners and restore freedom of navigation. This is while Tehran is continuing to progress towards a nuclear weapons program – threatening catastrophic ramifications across the region and beyond.

The fall of the Assad Regime may be the most significant event in the region in several years. What was a puppet state of Iran, a superhighway of weapons for Lebanese Hezbollah, and a strategic foothold for Russia is now very much in flux as a new government attempts to assert control and develop a governing structure to stabilize a country that has been locked in civil war for almost 14 years. Global violent extremists are attempting to exploit this turmoil along with the porous border areas

between Afghanistan and Pakistan to sustain their networks and regenerate capability. ISIS-Khorasan (ISIS-K) and ISIS in Syria continue to demonstrate their capability, will, and intent to strike beyond Middle Eastern and Central Asian borders and against Western interests – including the U.S. Homeland. On 22 March 2024, ISIS-K operatives committed the worst terror attack on Russian soil since 2004 when they killed 144 civilians at the Crocus City Hall music venue in Moscow. Authorities continue to disrupt plots against the United States, including planned mass shootings at a Jewish Center in Brooklyn and polling locations in Oklahoma City on Election Day. The tragic New Years Day attack in New Orleans that killed 14 people was committed by an individual inspired by ISIS ideology and the group's relentless propaganda machine.

However, from this cacophony of disorder emerges opportunity. Iran is in a weaker position than at any point in the past forty years. In the past year, Lebanese Hezbollah was decimated, Iran's vaunted missile program and air defense were defeated, and Soleimani's vision of a Shia Crescent from Iran, through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon, was shattered as the Syrian regime collapsed. Violent extremists are under relentless pressure as USCENTCOM's sustained campaign against ISIS removed hundreds of ISIS fighters and leaders from battlefields in Iraq and Syria. Assad's downfall also provides us with a historic opportunity to close the dark chapter of the Assad regime's chemical weapons program and ensure it does not pose a future threat. Finally, the pitfalls of Russian and Chinese influence were laid bare to our partners across the region as Russia is reaping a bitter harvest after supporting Assad's atrocities against the Syrian people for over a decade, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) cynically exploits the Iranian-backed violence in the Red Sea.

In contrast, our deep military-to-military have proven a catalyst to the wide-ranging opportunities that now lay before us. Our relationships provide the access, basing, and overflight (ABO) behind the Middle East Air Defense (MEAD) initiative that helped defeat Iranian aggression and continues to set conditions for the rest of the Region's defense. Our Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Partners are deployed to former Hezbollah strongholds to prevent the group's resurgence and bring hope to their country for the first time in a generation. Our Partners in Iraq and Syria remain crucial to Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS) efforts, battling the terrorist group across their countries and enabling the repatriation of ISIS prisoners and displaced persons. These successes are the result of years of continuous engagement with the Region and its commitment to integrate for a more stable and prosperous future – for the region and for the United States.

The United States now stands in a strategic window of opportunity to secure its interests in the Central Region: protect the Homeland, secure our economic prosperity, ensure freedom of navigation, and prevent a nuclear-armed Iran. U.S. Central Command's approach of People, Partners, and Innovation puts our strategic advantages at the forefront. It was our People who left the safety of their bunkers on 13 April 2024 to fuel, arm, and fly their F-15s into a fusillade of missiles and UAVs. It was our Partners who have maintained the pressure on ISIS, helped repatriate thousands of at-risk internally displaced persons (IDPs), and enabled sensitive dialogue and diplomacy to achieve a ceasefire in Lebanon and hold the door open to peace in Gaza. And it was our approach to Innovation, in concert with our Partners, that gave us our leading edge on the battlefield, protecting our forces and enabling us to optimize our limited force posture to have an outsized return on investment. Slightly more than one

percent of the Joint Force lives and fights in the USCENTCOM AOR, and their actions across the Region over the past year have prevented broader conflict – even regional war – multiple times. We now have the opportunity to relook our approach, reset our posture, and reinvigorate our whole of government policy efforts to capitalize on the unprecedented opportunity before us.

## II. **STRATEGIC CONTEXT**

The Central Region is home to significant U.S. national interests. No other Region witnesses a fraction of the scale of potential external operations (EXOPS) by violent extremists who remain intent on attacking their enemies abroad. This includes ISIS, which is actively seeking opportunities to reconstitute. If our sustained counterterrorism (CT) pressure is reduced, the intelligence community continues to assess ISIS in Syria – exploiting the turmoil caused first by the Syrian Civil War and now the post-Assad environment – retains the ability to regenerate their fighting force and seize territorial control within two years. ISIS could also capitalize on the instability to get its hands on any remnants of the Assad regime's chemical weapons program.

An estimated 2,000 of its fighters remain at large across Iraq and Syria while 8,000 are detained in facilities run by our Syrian Kurdish partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and another 20,000 are incarcerated by our partners in Iraq. The potential next generation of ISIS – a portion of approximately 34,000 internally displaced persons – awaits in IDP camps, ideal conditions for recruitment. ISIS is planning and executing insidious campaigns of radicalization among this vulnerable population and is working to break free its army in detention. Far to the East, ISIS-K remains an active branch in Central and South Asia (CASA), presenting a formidable

global EXOPS threat that requires a network of partners – such as Pakistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan – to combat. The bad actors who call the Region home are committed to harming Americans, but their methods are not limited to direct attacks on our streets.

Freedom of maritime navigation, which has underpinned American economic prosperity for more than 80 years came under assault by an Iranian backed terror organization that controls territory astride the strategic Bab al-Mandeb (BaM) chokepoint. It threatened the American mariners and sailors who've long secured our country's claim in the global economy and kept our adversaries at bay. The Ansar Allah movement, known widely as the Houthis, believed it could hold the world economy hostage and kill the innocent mariners who are exerting their right to traverse these waters and the American sailors who are defending them.

Meanwhile, Russia's shadow fleet of sanctions violators and Chinese ships sailing this critical Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) sea lane took full advantage of the Houthis' maritime terrorism. While most of the world's commercial shipping companies rerouted around the Cape of Good Hope, our competitors continued to enjoy safe passage, shorter shipping routes, and lesser cost of business. While a ceasefire has been achieved at this moment, a dangerous precedent has been set. The Houthis' tactics offer a template for challenging American strength elsewhere – freedom of navigation has long been key to deterring Chinese belligerent and revanchist aims in the Pacific. A fraying of this principle in the Red Sea could endanger other strategic chokepoints around the globe and threaten American access to markets.

In the Central Region, the U.S. economy benefits from direct linkages to our Partners that bolster American industries at home. Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United

Arab Emirates account for hundreds of billions of dollars in foreign direct investment (FDI). Together, they support over seventy-five thousand American jobs across the transportation, aerospace, and software and information technology industries, and they have pledged to invest hundreds of billions more, including in critical artificial intelligence research and development (R&D). This complements their current combined \$5.8B contributions to American R&D initiatives and \$9.4B contributions to American exports. Egypt is America's largest export market for goods and services in Africa – our trade surplus is driven by over \$5B in exports of oil seeds, mineral fuels, plastics, cereals, and other goods. Texas and Louisiana are the United States' two biggest exporters, each exporting nearly \$1B in goods annually to Egyptian ports.

The Region holds nearly half of the world's proven oil and natural gas reserves. Middle Eastern crude still accounts for 10% of U.S. oil imports. While the global economy continues to cope with Red Sea terrorism, the potential for major disruptions and consumer impact remains high. The Region includes three of the world's eight strategic waterways – the Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, and BaM, which in total see nearly a third of the world's container shipping and seaborne oil trade and are increasingly vulnerable to disruption by state and non-state actors. Chronic instability and the newly established precedent of state conflict can quickly send the Region careening toward an all-consuming war, which threatens catastrophic disruptions to global oil markets and financial costs for consumers around the world.

Finally, Iran already has an active chemical weapons program developing pharmaceutical-based agents for offensive purposes, and there is the looming threat of nuclear armament. Stockpiles of enriched uranium continue to accumulate in facilities across the country under the guise of a civilian nuclear program. As evidenced by the

most recent International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report that shows Tehran virtually doubling its enrichment capabilities over the past six months, Iran continues to gain knowledge and skills directly linked to nuclear weapon production. As one of our Partners commented, a nuclear-armed Iran would change the Middle East overnight and forever, potentially setting off a regional arms race with catastrophic consequences. It is within this context that USCENTCOM's Lines of Effort (LOEs): Deter Iran, Counter Violent Extremist Organizations, and Compete Strategically advance our national interests for a stronger, more secure, and more prosperous America.

### **Deterring Iran**

Since the 1979 revolution, Iran's strategic objectives have remained consistent: preserve the Regime, drive an ideological alternative to the West, and destroy the State of Israel. In direct support of these objectives, Iran's strategic approach to the region has long been defined by three key pillars: (1) the use of proxy forces to project power throughout the region, (2) the development and deployment of standoff capabilities to threaten the region, and (3) the threat of developing a nuclear weapon.

The last twenty months have seen the foundations of this approach systematically undone. HAMAS and Lebanese Hezbollah, two of the most prolific agents of Tehran's program of state-sponsored terror, have suffered devastating losses. Nearly all their senior leaders have been killed – including Yahya Sinwar, chief architect of HAMAS's barbarism on 7 October, and his brother and successor Mohammed Sinwar; Hassan Nasrallah and his henchmen Fuad Shukr and Ibrahim Aqil, Hezbollah lifers implicated in the 1983 U.S. Embassy and barracks bombings that killed 258

Americans; and Ismail Haniyeh, HAMAS's political leader who was killed while under Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) protection in Tehran.

HAMAS and Hezbollah battlefield losses have mounted while the collapse of the Assad Regime denied them a crucial lifeline of weapons, advisors, and logistical support. This dealt a massive blow to a terror network who, for decades, has targeted and killed hundreds of U.S. personnel across the Region. But while battered in the Levant, the ITN still draws breath. Its Iran-aligned militia groups in Iraq threaten to undermine the government, showing their fealty to Tehran while undercutting the Iraqi Security Forces and legitimate Popular Mobilization Forces working toward a better Iraqi future. Most significantly, Iran firmly established its new front line against the West squarely in Yemen, where the ITN fully embraced the Houthis as its newest stalwart.

The Houthis are an opportunist terrorist organization with an extremist ideology and though they hold territory, they are unable and unwilling to govern in a way that benefits the Yemeni people who suffer economic hardship, acute food insecurity, and health crises. In the months following October 7, 2023, the Houthis conducted over 300 attacks on U.S. Navy and international merchant ships, employing hundreds of Anti-Ship Ballistic Missiles (ASBMs) and UAVs, and dozens of Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles (ASCMs). In addition to targeting shipping, the Houthis directly targeted Israel, launching over 90 attacks using dozens of Land-Attack Cruise Missiles (LACMs) and Medium Range Ballistic Missiles (MRBMs) and over a hundred UAVs against civilian targets.

The BaM became the only maritime chokepoint in the world requiring a deliberate military operation to ensure safe passage, and now the Houthi threat has metastasized beyond the BaM itself by making inroads with like-minded groups on the coast of Africa.

It is now a regional scourge, having embedded itself as a key player in illicit networks up and down Africa's Red Sea coast and a useful vector for Iranian efforts to project influence beyond the Arabian Gulf. This nexus of state and non-state expansionist terror threatens the permanent presence of Iran-aligned groups on both sides of a key shipping lane that can shut off trade at the behest of its extremist agenda, complementing Iran's current presence on the Strait of Hormuz. Houthi exceptions for Chinese and Russian sailors as well as the strategic partnership between Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran mean this would disproportionately affect American and Western interests. Russia's share of Suez transits increased significantly relative to countries targeted by the Houthis. Through this designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO), Iran retains the ability to close two strategic chokepoints and significantly impact nearly half of global commerce while benefiting U.S. competitors.

This left the United States on the horns of a dilemma: cede this space to a terrorist group supported by Iran or continue to accept the risk to force every time we sail this narrow strait. On 15 March, in response to the hundreds of missiles and UAVs fired at our forces, we began a large-scale operation against the Houthis. Our actions against these Iranian-backed terrorists were focused on reopening these sea lines of communication to our shipping and reestablishing deterrence in the region. The sustained, aggressive series of operations supporting a whole of government effort – not episodic and intermittent strikes – was designed to degrade Houthi leadership and capabilities, deny them the ability to impede merchant shipping, and ultimately compel them to cease their attacks. Following significant losses to their ranks and infrastructure, which had been repurposed away from the Yemeni people to support Iran's hegemonic ambitions, the Houthis agreed to cease maritime attacks.

USCENTCOM is closely monitoring their adherence, and we stand ready to defend America's sailors and mariners as freedom of navigation returns to the Region.

As its traditional proxy strategy fell into disarray, Tehran twice decided to directly enter the conflict and expose the region to the second pillar of their strategic approach – their vast stockpiles of standoff capabilities. On 13 April 2024, the Iranians launched a massive barrage of more than 100 ballistic missiles, over 150 one-way attack suicide drones, and over 30 cruise missiles – the largest combined barrage of these weapons in history at that time – and again on 1 October they fired more than 200 ballistic missiles at Israeli bases and cities, each time with the intent to cause mass casualties. Both times they were defeated. In a sad bit of irony, for all the purported support to the Palestinians, the only casualty of almost 500 projectiles fired by Iran was a Palestinian from Gaza living in Jericho.

Our Partnerships in the Region proved crucial in supporting USCENTCOM's MEAD initiative, which blunted the attack and saved countless lives. Iran then suffered a devastating counterattack by the Israeli Air Force, which easily penetrated Iranian airspace and destroyed their strategic air defense, exposing the Regime and laying bare their weakness. While Iran retains thousands of ballistic missiles and attack drones that threaten every American base and every partner in the Region, these experiences have forced Iran to reassess its approach to projecting power.

Iranian leadership understands their acute vulnerability, and the precision of Israel's response demonstrates that Iran will remain critically exposed to future Israeli operations, even if their former defenses are reconstituted. Significantly weakened, Iran finds itself with fewer options. In addition to an active chemical weapons program, there

is one remaining pillar the Regime may consider its best chance at restoring deterrence and imposing its will on the Region – the threat of developing a nuclear weapon.

The IAEA uses 90% enrichment as the benchmark for weapons-grade uranium, and it considers 25 kg of 90% enriched uranium enough to construct a simple nuclear weapon. The IAEA estimates current Iranian stockpiles to include over 400 kg of 60% enriched uranium – almost double of what it was just six months ago. This is mere steps from reaching the 90% threshold for weaponization. Should the Regime decide to sprint to a nuclear weapon, it is estimated that current stockpiles and the available centrifuges across several enrichment plants are sufficient to produce its first 25 kg of weapons-grade material in roughly one week and enough for up to ten nuclear weapons in three weeks.

The Regime funds its nuclear enrichment program and other destabilizing activities through a lucrative oil trade. Last year, Iran is estimated to have generated over \$34 billion in crude exports despite the imposition of Western sanctions. The Regime has established a multifaceted sanction evasion network in an industry already rife with intentionally deceptive practices including fraudulent certificates of origin, flags of convenience, and shell companies. More than 85% of all illicit Iranian oil exports in 2024 went to the CCP with an average of 1.5 million barrels per day, accounting for 10% of total Chinese oil imports. Because sanctioned Iranian oil is often sold below prevailing market prices, Beijing can purchase Iranian crude at a discounted price. This has incentivized Beijing and Tehran to develop a shadow oil trade system that generates an economic lifeline for Iran and competitive prices for China to satiate its high domestic demand. After the G7 allies capped the price of Russian oil at 60 dollars

per barrel, Russia adopted Iran's illicit export methods and joined its co-conspirators' network.

#### Opportunities for Deterring Iran

Iran is seeking to recover its losses and reset its strategic calculus in the region. Sustainable deterrence with Iran requires complementary military and interagency efforts that demonstrate the will to hold Iran accountable. Applying pressure across all elements of national power – Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic – and implementing a holistic approach with our Partners targeted at the expanse of the entire Iranian threat will maximize our effects.

Kinetic action and the designation of the Houthi organization as an FTO are necessary steps to eliminate the expansion of their weapons, extreme ideology, and campaign of maritime terror and remain so in the event of a breakdown in the ceasefire. However, there remain many options beyond the military domain to alter the Houthis' calculus. This includes efforts in the information domain, in counter-smuggling operations, using economic leverages, and supporting the legitimate Republic of Yemen Government (ROYG) and our Partners to effectively share the burden of protecting Red Sea trade. Only through a whole of government approach, of which military operations are a key component, will a sustained return of freedom of navigation be guaranteed.

In the Levant, there is significant and timely opportunity to curtail the ITN's ability to threaten our hard-fought progress toward regional integration, improve burden sharing, and right size our force posture. A coordinated international effort to reinforce the LAF, who are working to secure the Southern Litani Sector from destabilizing non-state actors, is crucial to achieving an acceptable and sustainable cessation of

hostilities. Support for key security cooperation efforts will enable the LAF to shoulder the burden. There is no alternative in Lebanon to the LAF, and if we seek a Lebanon that is not under the thumb of Hezbollah, we must support President Aoun in his efforts to reassert control by legitimate Lebanese authorities.

While still nascent, confidence building measures undertaken by the Syrian Government continue to signal an intention to root-out malicious actors from within its borders. These include serious efforts to remove Iranian aligned threat groups from Syria that threaten its fragile stability. Supporting Levantine Partners, such as Jordan, provides mutually reinforcing lines of defense against Iran's future designs on the Region, further disrupting the Regime's goal of reestablishing a pipeline of weapons and IRGC advisors to the Mediterranean.

For their part, Iran's state-backers seek to avoid escalation and prefer to balance their relationships with other partners across the region and exploit the chaos that Iran and its proxy network promote. Recent events have put pressure on this careful balancing act and exposed fissures in Iran's relationships. Israel's systematic destruction of strategic air defenses and targeting of Iranian proxies has not only damaged Iranian legitimacy but also that of Russia. It exposed the ineffectiveness of Russian-provided defensive systems while preoccupation with the war on Ukraine curtailed Moscow's ability to resupply Iran and save the Assad Regime.

We now have an unprecedented opportunity to advance the vision of a prosperous and integrated Middle East in which U.S. national interests are advanced and Iran's violent attempts to upend this peaceful order are defeated. Key to this is integrating and harnessing Partner capabilities and increasing collaboration and cooperation that connects the Gulf Partners to the Levant in a substantive way that

shares the burden of regional defense. There has never been a greater opportunity to drive home these relationships and holistically counter Iran's behavior.

### **Countering VEOs**

Nearly half of United States-Designated FTOs are based in the Central Region. Further, over 90% of the organizations with capability and intent to attack the Homeland operate in the USCENTCOM AOR – a powerful reminder of why USCENTCOM defends the Homeland forward. These groups represent a kaleidoscope of extremist ideologies. A significant portion espouse or draw inspiration from radical Khomeinist thought emanating from Tehran. This includes the Houthis, the Iranian Aligned Militia Groups (IAMGs) in Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah – all of whom have varying degrees of religious linkages to Tehran but nonetheless have embraced the Regime's extremist ideology. Together, these groups form the backbone of the ITN. Others, like the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and Haqqani Network, draw on fundamentalist Deobandism, a revivalist movement within Sunni Islam originating in Deoband, India. It was the Haqqani Network who partnered with fledgling al-Qaeda jihadists to repel the Soviet Union from Afghanistan, a watershed in the proliferation of Salafi Jihadism across the Region.

In 1964, Muslim Brotherhood leading member Sayyid Qutb published his seminal work *Milestones*, written during a ten-year prison sentence in Egypt. It was a landmark in violent extremism and firmly established Qutb as the architect of modern Salafi Jihadism. The views espoused by Qutb provided a philosophical framework that would underpin the actions of jihadist groups from Gaza to Afghanistan well into the twenty-first century. In the upheaval following the Arab-Israeli wars, the Muslim Brotherhood

established itself in branches and offshoots across a number of Arab states appealing to populations disillusioned by consistent Israeli victories. Though it is far from its apex of power, its ideology persists and continues to shape both political and violent Islamist movements in the Central Region and beyond. HAMAS and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, both Palestinian Muslim Brotherhood offshoots, are the group's most well-known direct progeny. But transnational jihadist figures such as Osama Bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, all former Brotherhood members, were also inspired by Qutb's writings. To this day, Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and their affiliates continue to draw on the ideas incubated in the early history of the Muslim Brotherhood to justify attacking their fellow Muslims, people of other Religions, foreigners, and governments.

As it was during the tumult of the mid-twentieth century, the Middle East continues to be the geopolitical epicenter of transnational jihadism. The intractability of the Israel-Palestine conflict and its turbocharged violence over the last year act as a unifying *raison d'être* for VEOs to use in connection with their own local causes. Al-Shabaab, for example, consistently co-opts HAMAS messaging to connect its own struggle to that of the Palestinians. Not only does this further propagate and amplify HAMAS messaging, but it also provides a useful recruitment tool among Somalis touched by events in the Central Region. The conflict continues to be a powerful motivator for violent acts against the American Homeland. The foiled 2024 terror plot against a Jewish center in Brooklyn was planned by a Pakistani national to coincide with the one-year anniversary of HAMAS's 7 October attack. New York was chosen because of its large Jewish population with the would-be gunman himself stating, "*even if we don't attack an event, we could rack up easily a lot of Jews.*"

These terrorists continue to plot, train, recruit, and operate abroad, exploiting vulnerable populations, porous borders, disparate economic conditions, and longstanding sources of enmity and violence. USCENTCOM plays a key role in the forward defense of the Homeland against these threats. In calendar year 2024, CJTF-OIR conducted 432 ground operations and 52 kinetic strikes in Iraq and Syria against ISIS and its's affiliates. These efforts have resulted in 154 ISIS killed in action, and the detention of 521 ISIS fighters. Our sustained CT pressure has driven ISIS leaders in Iraq and Syria to seek refuge in rural areas, even cave complexes, as they try to reorganize and regenerate combat power.

ISIS and ISIS-K continue to operate in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan and demonstrate the ability to direct, inspire, and enable terrorists worldwide. Turmoil in post-Assad Syria could provide ISIS the opportunity to regenerate command and control capability and refill their ranks as a distracted SDF, under pressure from multiple fronts, could result in reduced security for ISIS detention facilities and an increased risk of prison breaks. It could enable a deterioration of conditions within IDP camps and a halt in repatriations, leaving residents nowhere else to turn. Just as ISIS exploited the chaos in the early days of Assad's war on his own people, the Regime's fall also provides a window to rebuild – first in the desert, then small towns and cities, and eventually threatening our Iraqi partners.

ISIS-K has been disrupted through pressure by both the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan, though they continue to retain a significant network and freedom of maneuver in the tribal areas. These sanctuaries will give ISIS fighters the space to plan attacks against its 'near enemy' – our Partners in the Region – and its ultimate 'far

enemy' – the U.S. Homeland. I assess that despite its setbacks, ISIS retains the capability and intent to attack western interests abroad with little to no warning.

#### Opportunities for Countering VEOs

Our Partners in the Region are the cornerstone for counter-VEO operations. Their willingness to host U.S. and Partner forces and devote CT resources has been instrumental in extending our operational reach to find, fix, and finish VEO violent extremist leadership and personnel and interdict materiel destined for use in attacking civilians. This posture disrupts terror plots against our forces and the Homeland in their earliest stages before finding their way to American shores. Sustaining and even adding operational depth by strengthening our Partnerships and exploring new opportunities is key to maintaining our position of advantage amid the changing strategic landscape. Furthermore, the United States' support for the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) as it works with the new Syrian authorities to identify, secure, and destroy any remnants of the Assad regime's chemical weapons program is crucial to prevent these weapons from falling into terrorist hands and promote regional security.

Our small presence in Iraq and Syria has been an effective mechanism to ensure the enduring defeat of ISIS. Our Partnership with the SDF has liberated over 7.7 million people of all ethnic backgrounds in Northeast Syria and over 110,000 square kilometers from the barbarity of living under the ISIS Caliphate. By denying safe haven to freely plan, train, and move resources, this sustained pressure has disrupted an untold number of plots against the United States and its allies.

USCENTCOM is in the process of optimizing its footprint in Syria, and continued direct engagement with leadership in the Region is necessary to preserve our counter-VEO mission, protect our SDF partners, and sustain the reach of the global D-ISIS coalition. This includes with the Syrian Interim Authorities who continue to take positive steps against ISIS, including targeted raids against ISIS-affiliated cells. Our Kurdish Partners have been on the front lines of the D-ISIS fight for over a decade, losing over 11,000 of their own, and they remain actively engaged against ISIS remnants. They also maintain security of over 8,000 ISIS detainees, essentially a division's worth of ISIS fighters waiting to be broken free – as a comparison, it took 5,000 ISIS fighters to seize Mosul. Developing an interagency plan to ensure a path for the continued security of ISIS detention facilities and expeditious repatriation for the roughly 36,600 Iraqi, Syrian, and foreign nationals within IDP camps, reduces risk to a manageable level.

In Iraq, USCENTCOM and our Iraqi Security Forces Partners continue to disrupt ISIS's ability to plan, organize, and conduct attacks against Iraqi civilians, as well as U.S. citizens, allies, and partners throughout the Region and beyond. Last year in August, a partnered raid in Western Iraq resulted in the death of 14 ISIS operatives, including four leaders. In October, Iraqi forces conducted precision airstrikes and follow-on raids that killed 11 ISIS operatives and senior leaders while uncovering suicide belts, weapons, explosives, and ammunition. In March of this year, the relentless pursuit of terrorist leaders paid off in the killing of the Global ISIS number two leader, Abdallah Makki Muslih al-Rifai – alias “Abu Khadijah” – after a precision strike in Iraq's Anbar Province in cooperation with Iraqi Intelligence and Security Forces. USCENTCOM will continue to work through the members of the global D-ISIS Coalition and with our Iraqi Partners and honor our commitments to the transition of Operation

INHERENT RESOLVE (OIR) to a bilateral security partnership in a way that allows the continued success of the D-ISIS Partnership and prevents the group's resurgence. The collapse of the Assad Regime and potential for volatility on Iraq's Western border underscores the importance of a responsible transition with special attention paid to appropriate levels of security cooperation.

Opportunity also exists in CASA where we can expand counterterrorism cooperation with Pakistan and other Central Asian partners. ISIS-K and other VEOs violent extremists with EXOPs aspirations continue to find sanctuary in the Region and threaten the Homeland. The actions of our Pakistani partners that led to the arrest and extradition of Mohammad Sharifullah, the ISIS-K planner behind the 26 August 2021 suicide attack at Abbey Gate that killed 13 U.S. service members and approximately 160 civilians, highlights Pakistan's value as a Partner in countering CASA terror EXOPs threats worldwide, and it will only increase as the Taliban continues to face security challenges within its borders. Other partners, such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, all are managing the risk of threats emanating from Afghanistan's borders and are seeking to expand their cooperation with the United States. Expanding on this opportunity could create additional opportunity against ISIS-K networks in the Region.

### **Competing Strategically**

The CCP continues its methodical campaign of making inroads, expanding ties, and making relative gains at the expense of American influence. It's "1+2+3" cooperation framework, announced by Chairman Xi Jinping in 2014, first outlined its engagement strategy with Arab states. Its focus on energy cooperation, infrastructure and trade, and technology highlight the preeminence of economic interests in China's

early approach to the Central Region. This framework was actualized by the CCP's flagship Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which now has investments in 20 of the Region's 21 countries.

The mutual economic interests between the Central Region and China are undeniable. 2023 saw over \$444.2B in trade with the Region including 46% and 39% of total Chinese oil and gas imports, respectively. Since 2005, China has contributed over \$400B in commercial investments, helping fuel the Region's ambitious infrastructure projects and development goals. Though economic interests remain the primary driver of engagement, increased Chinese influence and leverage have served as a mechanism for attempts to directly challenge American security interests.

Compared to 2016, the year the CCP published its "Arab Policy Paper," which devoted only a small section to security cooperation, recent years have seen aggressive attempts to expand security influence and access across the Region. This includes the Chinese-brokered 2023 diplomatic agreement between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a test case for China's Global Security Initiative (GSI), its security-based complement to the BRI. It also includes an expanded military footprint: a base in Djibouti, larger numbers of senior People's Liberation Army (SLA) general officers serving as Senior Defense Officials (SDO) or Defense Attachés, and unprecedented Naval port calls by the PLA Navy. Most significantly, China has achieved an 80% increase in military sales over the last decade, owed in large part to the relative ease by which our Partners are able to purchase from China's inexpensive – no strings attached – catalogue of hardware.

Still, the scant dividends of these efforts lay bare the CCP's unwillingness and inability to contribute to regional security beyond empty platitudes. While signing "comprehensive security partnerships" with Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, it

fuels the aggressive behavior that threatens these very countries. The CCP remains close with the Iranian Regime, purchasing its sanctioned oil through a vast network of illicit maritime trade. This undercuts the U.S.-led sanctions designed to alter Iranian behavior and sap the strength of its destructive proxy network that subverts governments around the Region. China's economic lifeline bankrolls this activity, which undermines the security of its own partners including Iraq, a target of Beijing's financial manipulation. Despite its ability to project power from its base in Djibouti, the CCP preferred to ignore Houthi maritime terrorism and allow it to continue in the Red Sea because it directly benefited from the disruption to rival maritime trade. This is despite the grave harm it inflicted on Egypt's economy, another one of its "comprehensive strategic partners."

The Russian Federation is mostly repositioning from the upheaval in Syria and sudden downfall of longtime ally Bashar al-Assad. Russia's willingness to save the Assad Regime in 2015 contributed to the untold suffering of millions of innocent Syrians. This continued until President Putin, so weakened by his battlefield losses in Ukraine, was capable of only offering an escape route to Russia. Bashar al-Assad fled the wrath of his own people – the very Syrians his family had brutalized since 1971, and the value of Russian partnership was on full display for the world to see.

For more than ten years, supporting Assad's atrocities was a price Russia was willing to pay to maintain a foothold in the Region, to include one of its largest bases outside its own territory in Tartus and a warm water port on NATO's eastern maritime flank. Assad's fall not only cut off Iran's strategic lines of communication, but it also severed the bulwark of Russia's position in the Middle East. Moscow is now trying desperately to retain a foothold in Syria, and the new government is in the process of

negotiating terms with them. To mitigate this impact, Russia continues to expand its bilateral ties with Iran, another long-term partner of the Assad family, and this growing military partnership offers a mutually beneficial counterbalance. In 2024, Iran delivered several hundred ballistic missiles to Russia and built manufacturing capability which provides thousands of one-way-attack UAVs. This bolstered Iran's efforts to reduce diplomatic isolation, sustain economic activity amid sanctions constraints, and boosting development of its defense industrial base and military capabilities. In early April 2025, Russia's lower house of parliament ratified a new, two-decade strategic partnership with Iran which Presidents Putin and Pezeshkian agreed to in January. The agreement purports to expand cooperation in security, energy, trade, and nuclear energy.

#### Opportunities for Competing Strategically

In Syria, leading a peaceful reconciliation with the various warring factions and demonstrating a willingness for broader regional integration will be key in shaping a productive path forward for the new government and the Syrian people. An engagement strategy that does not jeopardize these nascent efforts and throw the country back into chaos can encourage progress. A stable Syria that does not allow opportunistic actors to once again brutalize the population or foment a hotbed of extremism is in the best interest of the United States.

Likewise, strengthening our Partnerships throughout Central and South Asia can present the United States as a reliable security partner, and we have critical overlapping security interests with our Partners there, especially in the D-ISIS fight. By further enabling our CT partnerships, specifically against ISIS-K, we can continue to leverage their physical and cultural proximity to the network, which has proven our most

productive vector against ISIS-K in Afghanistan. Further, ISIS-K and other threats emanating from Afghanistan have animated every one of our Central Asian partners to reach out to us in hopes of strengthening their border security forces. This provides us a mechanism to enhance cooperation with the Central Asian states to levels not previously thought possible. Deepening our partnership in Central Asia provides alternatives to a Region traditionally dominated by our competitors and bolsters their domestic security while simultaneously enabling our objective of protecting the Homeland.

A region in transition presents new realities the United States must manage if we are to successfully contend with our opponents who have grown in relative strength and influence. A consequence of the end of the unipolar moment is that our Partners have options they didn't have twenty years ago. They want to be involved in a collaborative process that allows them to drive input and an ability to rapidly acquire capability to address their needs. The Foreign Military Sales (FMS) process is one of the most effective mechanisms to strengthen relationships, build partner capacity, reduce the demand for U.S. forces, and improve interoperability, yet it needs significant reform if we are to realize these vast untapped benefits.

Unfortunately, the FMS process has been dysfunctional and too often ran counter to our objectives, creating friction with our Partners in an area that should be a source of strength. Unacceptable delays and significant price increases have been so prevalent they affected our Partners' decision calculus on nearly every potential purchase because they were unsure if they would ever take delivery or it would work as advertised.

The irony is that despite the number of benefits it could yield to nearly every U.S. strategic objective, FMS has been the number one frustration of our partners.

USCENTCOM has 3,797 active FMS cases worth \$363.1B. FMS cases in the Region topped \$15.98B in sales in FY24 alone, accounting for 37% of global sales, and a 49% increase from the year prior. The increased demand signal over the past decade is evidence that our partners are actively seeking to integrate with us. However, the FMS system cannot handle emerging requirements at the pace and scale required by our partners. For the past decade, unmanned aerial systems have been the most likely threat and to date we have not been able to deliver a single Counter-UAS (C-UAS) system to any of our partners. Besides the issues with our own bureaucracy, industry has also struggled to keep pace with the requirements of our partners.

Egregiously delayed FMS cases were not rare occurrences isolated to a few Partners or weapon systems; they were a frustratingly common experience. It has become something of a shared experience for our Partners, a de facto cost of doing business with the United States. Unfortunately, the cost is not only temporal. Delays often result in ballooning dollar amounts in price – in one case over a 300% increase after a 3-year delay – and, worse yet, in cost to the foundation of trust and Partnership capital built over years of engagement that has served our interests for decades. Some military wares are still not delivered after a decade from the original request, and the price the Partner is expected to pay is more than double what they originally agreed to. In one case, delays have so far resulted in over \$1B *added* to the final bill. Sometimes when the Partner does take delivery – often years beyond the scheduled delivery date – quality control issues and technical malfunctions render the item useless and generate another agonizing bureaucratic process to address the problems. These issues are

consistently raised in key leader engagements at the highest levels as a source of significant frustration.

Our Partners have real security needs. If we fail to reform this process, our regional partners will be forced to look elsewhere to fulfill them – and they will have real options. The Region’s engagement with the CCP is fueled, in part, by attractive Chinese alternatives to U.S. modes of Partnership – including our FMS system. Chinese military sales to the Region are consistently on the rise year after year. The comparative ease of the proverbial wish list China provides its customers is a tempting alternative to the opaque and lumbering bureaucratic process they encounter with their American interlocutors.

In light of this, I fully support the collaborative efforts between the Departments of State, Defense, and Commerce in implementing the President’s April 9, 2025 Executive Order on “Reforming Foreign Defense Sales.” Supporting the success of these efforts will simultaneously strengthen the capabilities of our allies and Partners and invigorate our own defense industrial base. By improving our FMS system, we will not only increase American influence, but we will reduce the requirements on our own forces as the U.S. transitions to a role of security integrator versus security guarantor.

### **III. STRATEGIC APPROACH**

#### **People**

The men and women of USCENTCOM are on the front lines against those who wish to do our Nation harm. These warriors bear our flag in combat and in a Region that sees more kinetic activity involving Americans in the air, land, and sea than any other Region in the world.

On 13 April and throughout the next morning, Airmen, Soldiers, and Sailors deployed to the USCENTCOM AOR repelled Iran's unprecedented large-scale attack against Israel, and our People continue to bring the full force of America's arsenal to our Nation's enemies. Working with our Partners, they aggressively find, fix, and finish violent extremist leadership wherever they hide – whether in the Region's deserts, cave complexes, or remote ungoverned spaces, they are on the tip of the spear of our nation's CT efforts. Over the previous three years, their efforts have resulted in more than 360 ISIS killed in action and the detention of more than 1,350 ISIS fighters. In the Red Sea, USCENTCOM air and naval forces have displayed incredible warfighting skill as they defended against Houthi terrorism. They have defeated hundreds of UAV, cruise missile, and ballistic missile attacks aimed at killing Americans, Israelis, and innocent civilian mariners asserting their right to freedom of navigation.

Within the Headquarters, USCENTCOM is spearheading initiatives to attract talent and improve force management decision making. These efforts focus squarely on our warrior teammates deployed to the AOR – crucial to ensure continued support to their wellbeing and ability to execute the mission, despite the loss of 1,050 authorized billets across the Command over the last ten years, a 30% decrease in manpower. Our “Winning the Fight for Talent” initiatives solicit interest in visiting Service Schools and Military Academies to inspire and attract the next generation of leaders to serve in USCENTCOM, as well as to educate and tell the USCENTCOM story. The Fight for Talent attracts and retains top-quality personnel to identify, assess, and address any existing gaps. We are also the pilot for Workforce 360. This OSD-funded effort enables decision dominance by validating information across disparate datasets and streamlining data analytics to provide timely, accurate, and impactful workforce

transparency for the Combatant Commands. This transparency will inform force management, support decision making, and reinforce the DoD's ability to place the right people, in the right place, at the right time.

## **Partners**

Our Partners are essential. The access granted to our forces is the key enabler to nearly everything we do and is an outgrowth of the confidence and credibility built over the course of decades. The result is our close Partnerships consistently pay off when it matters most, but we cannot take them for granted. As our Partners continue to navigate the emerging multipolar world, they will consider all options; and the consequences of American action, or inaction, will reverberate across their decision-making process. We simply cannot operate across the Region without their support to our objectives and for key basing and overflight permissions. Securing critically important access requires sustained diplomatic engagement and demonstrated commitment to achieving military objectives that not only reduce our risk, but that of our Partners.

Over the last year, our Partners have increased their burden sharing efforts to drive solutions to the Region's most pressing issues. Our Gulf Partners, for example, have consistently put their financial resources to work in support of our People deployed to the Region. Qatar has committed \$300M annually towards sustainment costs at Al Udeid Air Base, home to our largest U.S. military footprint in the Region. Our 2040 Strategic Master Plan with Qatar includes a multi-billion-dollar modernization plan for the facilities that house and sustain our forces, and Qatar intends to invest an additional \$7B over the next 20 years. Likewise, Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Iraq, and Kuwait continue to be generous hosts and commit to our Partnerships through

significant investments in strategic infrastructure and by offsetting costs. Our deepening defense cooperation with our Gulf Partners has consistently enabled the generous use of facilities, logistical support, and prepositioning of defense materials in support of USCENTCOM objectives and our LOEs.

Our Partners are on the front lines, directly engaging threats that seek to undermine their stability and threaten Americans at home and abroad. The Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service and Syrian Democratic Forces are two of the most effective mechanisms to defeat the remnants of ISIS who are seeking to regenerate their capacity to attack the West. Together, in Partnership with our forces, they are responsible for more than 500 ISIS fighters being taken off the battlefield over the last year alone. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is one of our most dedicated and dependable Partners. They are fully integrated into USCENTCOM's counterterrorism efforts against ISIS, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates and central to our operations throughout the theater. Pakistan continues to hunt ISIS-K in their border areas, executing dozens of operations to kill and capture multiple leaders, including the mastermind of the Abbey Gate attack that claimed 13 American lives. Qatar is the Region's newest major non-NATO ally, and they have been aggressively pursuing certification to enable operational contributions to the NATO mission.

Perhaps most crucially, our Partners have been the driving force behind critical diplomatic initiatives. Their unique skillset of brokering peace talks has encouraged breakthroughs in some of the Region's thorniest issues resulting in unprecedented progress toward peace, stability, and the saving of American lives. Qatar and Egypt are bulwarks in this regard. They were essential to the diplomatic efforts that freed American hostages in Gaza, and they will be crucial players in future negotiations.

Qatar continues to leverage its contacts with the Taliban to secure the release of wrongfully detained Americans with four released this year. The hard-earned trust and confidence we have developed through deep partnerships have set the conditions for these diplomatic breakthroughs, and our continued commitment is vital to maintaining these relationships.

### **Innovation**

Given the breadth and depth of evolving challenges facing our forces in the Central Region, USCENTCOM relentlessly pursues novel solutions that we can rapidly deploy. Innovation is first and foremost about creative problem-solving: a mindset permeating all aspects of operations and therefore not something done on occasion. It requires a steady drumbeat to drive iteration until synthesized within our culture, and we harness the pressure of time to drive speed of progress. USCENTCOM is investing in the tools, processes, and training to continuously drive this synthesis across the Command.

At USCENTCOM, innovation is in the air we breathe. Over the course of 2024, our Headquarters continued to internalize and iterate through recurring experimentations and initiatives that tap into the creative potential of our men and women. We continue our recurring C-UAS series of exercises to test myriad threat vectors and UAS defeat solutions in theater – an effort with exceptional relevance following the sharp uptick of One Way Attack UAS threats our forces have faced over the previous year. But singular solutions are insufficient given the rapidly evolving threats produced by innovative, resourceful, and committed adversaries. This is why USCENTCOM also drives towards C-UAS systems integration to develop holistic

solutions that prevent operators from having to ‘swivel’ between disparate capabilities and a multitude of screens while responding to time-sensitive inbound threats.

Our experimentation extends to the very software we use. We continue to build and iterate on the Combined Joint All-Domain Command and Control (CJADC2) software suite, and we are spearheading testing on low-code computer vision tools to help operators hunt for threats across the region. The former enables seamless command and control functions from the tactical to the strategic level in real time while the latter puts users in the driver’s seat for AI development, giving them more control of model training and outputs. This quantum leap in data management allows our Commanders to better serve the warfighter by harnessing real-time data from over 170 sources to make the best decision at right time and at the speed of conflict. Years ago, any one of these initiatives would have been considered an achievement for the Command. Now, this is “business as usual” – even as the Region continues to bristle with activity and the operational tempo remains higher than ever, the Command has built a “muscle memory” for innovation that has worked its way into everyday life.

Some of our most valuable inputs into this culture come directly from those in the field. USCENTCOM empowers its component-level innovation task forces to undertake highly focused efforts to create or enhance a particular capability or solve a specific problem set. Over the last year ARCENT’s TF-39, NAVCENT’s TF-59, AFCENT’s TF-99, and SOCCENT’s TF-179 have tested and fielded capabilities to address emerging needs of our warfighters. This includes improving the resiliency of maritime Inertial Navigation Systems (INS) in theater by testing solutions against INS spoofing and jamming that deny the system access to GPS. Efforts also led to the establishment of the Advanced Manufacturing Lab in the Region that facilitates rapid parts replacement

at the tactical edge, cutting down on wait times from months and weeks to days and even hours.

The next phase is to more closely partner with the Department to achieve scale where it aligns with our mission. We are learning how USCENTCOM can help reduce risk for the true engines of scale – our military departments – providing valuable insight to inform larger acquisition programs and investments. The threat landscape and the pace of technological change are moving faster than our current systems can respond, pushing USCENTCOM to become more creative. As a result, we are now generating more technology and innovation at the tactical edge than ever before.

With the right resources to nurture this value chain, and while reducing risk and informing larger program investments, USCENTCOM can scale our warfighting achievements to greater capacity, ultimately cutting costs while amplifying our high-tech impact directly on the battlefield. Our recent collaboration with OSD, and our more effective use of the program to Accelerate the Procurement and Fielding of Innovative Technologies (APFIT), have enabled us to produce attritable autonomous systems at scale. This keeps our warfighters safer while providing critical operational data to larger programs and ultimately shapes the future character of warfare – not just technologically, but also in our tools, tactics, procedures and training requirements. To achieve more success like this, fit-for-purpose to USCENTCOM's mission, a resourcing strategy similar to APFIT for the command could propel us to even greater warfighting impact, in line with the timelines demanded by emerging threats.

Each of these efforts actualize USCENTCOM's commitment to instill innovation within our workforce. *We open the door to it* – team members of all ranks and positions

must feel empowered and equipped to pursue innovative solutions. We empower our team members through explicit leadership guidance and targeted opportunities, and we heavily invest in software development environments, 3D printers, and more to facilitate that creative exploration. We *train and organize for it* – USCENTCOM has implemented required digital literacy trainings on a range of topics, from data analytics, to cloud computing, to tactical data links, and more: it has also pushed to make more in-depth training programs widely available, from multi-day digital literacy offsites, to training surges for specific software tools that are widely used across the Command, to real-world training through exercises and experiments. Lastly, we *test and field it* – after empowering, encouraging, and training for innovation, the Command must give opportunities to see whether their ideas and solutions work. In close collaboration with industry, we execute dozens of events where team members can test their hardware, software, and process innovations against realistic scenarios. Additionally, to incentivize partnership with the private sector, we periodically hold a 60–90-day Tech Residency Program to fully immerse top tech talent to test and validate operational integration and application of innovative technologies.

Innovation does not “belong” to a single individual or team – every team member is not only empowered but expected to think creatively and bring new ideas to the table. It is important to note the environment and factors that allow innovation to be particularly impactful at an organization like ours. The constant drumbeat of operations and the ever-active region creates the perfect “sandbox” for experimentation and realistic testing. In short, innovation is much more than a buzzword in our Command, it is a way of life and a critical element of the Command’s success.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The Central Region of today is not the Central Region of two years ago. The events of 7 October continue to reverberate and drive to collective consciousness of many of our partners. Similarly, events over the previous year have changed the region in ways that no one could have predicted, and we stand at a precipice overlooking uncharted waters. For decades, policy makers have grappled with the presence of a heavily armed Lebanese Hezbollah on Israel's Northern border led by Hassan Nasrallah, a seemingly permanent fixture in regional politics. The faces of Yahya Sinwar and Ismail Haniyah frequented the information space, spewing their hatred for Israel and pledging to destroy the Jewish state. The Assad family, in power since the 1970s, showed there was no limit to the depravity and brutality it would employ in its lust for power. The oft-chanted mantra, "*Assad or we burn the country*," appeared to be a literal course of action.

All these things were truths about the Middle East until they suddenly were not. This has created a strategic opportunity for the United States. But it is only a window. We can seize the initiative to optimize our posture to defend the Homeland, strengthen our economic outlook, take back our right to freedom of navigation, and sustain the upper hand against an increasingly desperate Iran – all in a way that leaves America in a sustainable position of strength vis-à-vis our adversaries that comes at a lower cost over time. Our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Guardians, and Coast Guardsmen are ready to drive this change and our Partners are engaged. But to capitalize on this opportunity requires a deliberate and holistic effort across every instrument of power before the window closes on a new chapter in the American story in the Middle East, one that makes us stronger, more prosperous, and more secure.