

POSTURE STATEMENT OF
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Introduction

United States Central Command's (USCENTCOM) mission – to direct and enable military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of U.S. enduring interests – remains as valid and vital to our nation today as ever before. While acknowledging military force is not the principal answer to the region's challenges, our presence in the region provides advantage, opportunity and leverage for U.S. diplomats to operate from a position of strength, prevents losing ground to our global competitors, and protects the security of the American people by meeting challenges abroad from state and non-state adversaries who threaten the U.S. and our allies, attempt to destabilize the USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR), and inhibit access to the global commons.

USCENTCOM aligns with the President's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) to work with like-minded allies and partners to advance our shared interests to address the four global challenges that manifest across the USCENTCOM AOR: China, Russia, Iran, and Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs). Maintaining an effective posture to meet these challenges requires making hard choices. While China will remain our nation's pacing competitor for the foreseeable future, the main challenges USCENTCOM faces in its AOR occur in the present. Iran's destabilizing actions reverberate through the region daily. Iran has not indulged in idle saber rattling against the U.S. and our partners. Iran has launched state-on-state ballistic missile, cruise missile, and unmanned aerial system (UAS) attacks, as well as attacks through its proxies and aligned groups that have killed and injured Coalition forces and innocent civilians; those attacks are increasingly directed at key U.S. partners. Every day across the AOR, VEOs like al-Qaida and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) operate without respect for borders or consequence, creating instability and human suffering in an attempt to destroy

sovereign nations to remake them in their own twisted vision. And where gaps open, China and Russia pursue steady economic and military measures that encroach on U.S. presence and influence in the region.

None of these current threats to our U.S. national interests are approaching sunset, and they all continue to unfold with speed and unpredictability. Since the beginning of the year, Iranian-aligned militia groups (IAMGs) in Iraq and Syria likely conducted more than 50 improvised explosive device attacks against Iraqi-operated, Coalition-contracted logistical convoys, and nine indirect fire attacks against U.S. diplomatic facilities or Iraqi military bases hosting U.S. and Coalition personnel. Protracted conflicts across the AOR and the destruction of government services and infrastructure have caused large-scale humanitarian crises. More than 20 million displaced people are spread across the USCENTCOM AOR, representing one fourth of the nearly 80 million people displaced globally. Millions sought refuge in neighboring countries, many of which struggle with their own economic and social challenges, while millions more internally displaced persons (IDPs) struggle to find daily sustenance. Meanwhile, the underlying socio-economic factors that sparked the “Arab Spring” movements in 2011 persist and contribute to recurring unrest.

The way forward requires a whole-of-government approach applying all of the elements of U.S. national power to address the underlying conditions threatening stability. Alongside our U.S. interagency partners, USCENTCOM will continue to work with allies and partners to set the conditions for diplomacy and development. By advancing our shared interests and coming together to face shared threats, USCENTCOM develops capable regional partners to act as guarantors of their own security and sovereignty, able to secure their own borders and ensure their internal stability.

Strategic Approach

USCENTCOM's actions and activities across the AOR run the spectrum from cooperation and collaboration, to competition and conflict. To ensure synchronization throughout our ongoing missions, we align our operations, activities, and investments along three lines of effort. These lines of effort support Department of Defense (DOD) and U.S. government priorities and are aligned with DOD guidance and the INSSG.

Recognizing the importance of enhancing stability throughout the region, USCENTCOM's first line of effort is to deter Iranian aggression against U.S. forces and interests, and strengthen our partners' capabilities to defend themselves against Iranian and proxy and aligned group aggression. USCENTCOM's second line of effort is aligned against the persistent challenge of disrupting and degrading VEOs that destabilize the region and threaten the U.S. homeland, our vital interests, and our partners and allies. USCENTCOM considers this an enduring effort covering a wide range of operations and activities from active campaigns against al-Qaida, ISIS, and other VEOs in the region, to supporting whole-of-government solutions to ensure good governance and to thwart efforts by ISIS and VEOs to radicalize and make appeals to vulnerable populations, including refugees and IDPs. Success in this campaign is not defined as the absence of violence. It is militarily impossible to defeat an ideology, but when force is required, we will employ it alongside international and local partners wherever possible to bolster effectiveness and legitimacy, share burdens, and invest others in success.

Our third line of effort is long-term strategic competition with China, combined with countering Russia. Both nations leverage their proximity to the region, historical relations, and a perceived decline in U.S. engagement to establish and strengthen opportunistic relationships. China and Russia each seek ends in their own self-interest using different approaches. Russia

plays the part of spoiler to the U.S., using military means, influence operations and grey-zone activities to undermine and disrupt U.S. influence and reassert its own global influence. China uses predominantly economic means to establish regional in-roads, with a long-term goal of expanding its military presence to secure vital routes of energy and trade.

Line of Effort 1 – Deterring Iran

Iran views the U.S. presence in the region as the greatest threat toward achieving its ambition of regional hegemony. The regime uses a combination of coercion and IAMG violence to bring about the removal of U.S. forces from Iraq, despite U.S. and Coalition forces being in Iraq at the request of the Government of Iraq (GoI). Iran’s political maneuverings toward this end have failed to date, while the U.S. and GoI continue strategic dialogue to maintain momentum in the Global Defeat ISIS (D-ISIS) campaign.

Iran currently possesses one of the most capable militaries in the Middle East, and its offensive capabilities include nearly 3,000 short- and long-range ballistic missiles as well as an array of land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) and UASs. The Iranian regime demonstrated both the capability and willingness to employ all of these offensive weapons in complex attacks against Saudi Arabia’s oil facilities in 2019, and again against U.S. forces in Iraq in 2020.

Iran provides weapons, parts, and expertise to Houthi forces in Yemen for the purpose of attacking Saudi Arabia. Since January 2021, Iranian-aided Houthi forces have launched more than 150 ballistic missile, LACM, and one-way UAS attacks against military, infrastructure, and civilian targets in Saudi Arabia. These attacks have varied in scope and complexity, with UAS detection and interdiction particularly challenging not just for Saudi forces, but also for U.S. and Coalition forces supporting Saudi Arabia’s defense. These small- and medium-sized UAS

proliferating across the AOR present a new and complex threat to our forces and those of our partners and allies. For the first time since the Korean War, we are operating without complete air superiority. As a result, USCENTCOM has made the counter-UAS effort one of its top priorities, and employs a variety of systems and tactics to defeat these threats. Until we are able to develop and field a networked capability to detect and defeat UAS, the advantage will remain with the attacker.

USCENTCOM remains committed to helping defend Saudi Arabia. U.S. assistance to the Kingdom focuses on providing information to Saudi Arabia's armed forces to assist them in thwarting Houthi UAV, ballistic missile, and explosive boat attacks that contravene international law and undermine diplomatic efforts. USCENTCOM does not provide offensive military support to the Saudi-led Coalition. Saudi Arabia understands that the only way to end the Houthi UAV and missile attacks is to end the war in Yemen. Deputy Minister of Defense Khalid bin Salman and other senior Saudi officials have engaged consistently and constructively with U.S. Special Envoy Tim Lenderking and UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in an effort to find a negotiated end to the conflict. Under a proposed UN agreement, which Saudi Arabia has publicly endorsed, parties would agree to a nationwide ceasefire in exchange for the opening of Hudaydah Port and Sanaa Airport, then transition to political talks. USCENTCOM supports these diplomatic efforts and remains postured to support a UN-backed ceasefire if directed. However, international efforts to end the war have been met with political intransigence and more Houthi attacks, including a sustained ground Houthi offensive to seize Marib, an attack targeting the Republic of Yemen Government Parliament while it was deplaning in Aden, and unprecedented missile and UAS strikes against civilian targets in Saudi Arabia. The Iranian regime's provisioning of lethal aid to the Houthis to enable such attacks prolongs the conflict in

Yemen, exacerbates regional tensions, threatens the security of Saudi Arabia, and extends the suffering of the Yemeni people who are subject to widespread food and water shortages, malnutrition, and insufficient healthcare services.

In addition to USCENTCOM's regular force posture, the theater benefits from Dynamic Force Employment missions (DFE); Agile Combat Employment (ACE); and a balanced, visible maritime presence. Strategic bomber task force missions flown no-notice from bases in the U.S. to the Gulf from the fall of 2020 to the present and two fighter-squadron deployments demonstrate DFE over-the-horizon power projection, exercise seamless and rapid operational coordination between multiple combatant commands. They also enhance integration with numerous partners and allies across the region. Developing the capability to arm and fuel Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps aircraft from austere, expeditionary air bases in the Arabian Peninsula provides an example of how USCENTCOM generates and exercises ACE capabilities in an active combat theater. Meanwhile, U.S. carrier strike groups and other strategic maritime capabilities operating wherever international law allows provide USCENTCOM the flexibility of U.S.-sovereign deterrent options free from access, basing, or overflight restrictions.

As Iran's ballistic missile force is the most formidable in the region, USCENTCOM's missile defense assets incorporate Patriots, Sentinel and Avenger systems, and Navy cruisers/destroyers to form a layered defense, augmented by Theater High-Altitude Air Defense when ordered. Since Gulf nations field nearly 80 percent of all regional air-defense systems, USCENTCOM is working to develop a long-term, regionally-aligned effort focused on a centralized integrated air and missile defense (IAMD).

Other active and passive defense efforts to safeguard U.S. forces, deter Iranian destabilizing actions, and provide regional safety and security include:

- Critical mine countermeasure capabilities provided with Avenger-class mine countermeasure ships and MH-53E Sea Dragon heavy-lift helicopters help maintain freedom of navigation for U.S. and merchant shipping.
- ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance) platforms, such as our MQ-9s, are highly useful in monitoring and identifying potential threats or malign activities, providing early warning and attribution.
- Pursuing opportunities to enhance expeditionary basing in less vulnerable portions of the USCENTCOM AOR.
- Conducting analysis on bunker hardening proposals and implementing blast mitigation measures to improve protective shelters within missile range and mitigate the risk of traumatic brain injury in the event of missile and rocket attacks.
- Counter Rocket Artillery and Mortar and Patriot missile systems that provide proven, effective ground-based air-defense platforms critical for U.S. and partner self-defense.

In addition, as the U.S. footprint in the AOR evolves, legacy KC-135 and replacement KC-46 refueling capabilities will continue to play a critical role, enhancing USCENTCOM's ability to execute essential missions across a vast region with limited suitable airfields.

Line of Effort 2 – Countering Violent Extremist Organizations

Countering Violent Extremist Organizations – Afghanistan

The U.S. strategic objective in Afghanistan, as it has been since 2001, is to ensure Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the U.S. and our allies and partners. Success toward this objective and the path to lasting peace remains an

Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process to achieve a political settlement and comprehensive ceasefire between the Taliban and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA). USCENTCOM remains steadfast in support of ongoing interagency and diplomatic efforts to achieve a negotiated political settlement, and is committed to working with our regional partners to ensure our ability to counter a potential reemergence of terrorist threats against the homeland.

Pursuant to President Biden's April 14 policy announcement, USCENTCOM will execute a deliberate and orderly withdrawal of remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan before the 20th anniversary of September 11. We will execute this withdrawal in lockstep with our NATO allies and partners in a manner that ensures the safety of our people and security of our assets. We went in together, adjusted together, and will prepare to leave together. USCENTCOM's key focus during the withdrawal will be management of the transition and the safety of U.S., as well as NATO ally and partner personnel as they depart the country. We have told the Taliban in no uncertain terms that any attacks on U.S. troops as we undergo a safe and orderly withdrawal will be met with a forceful response.

The Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) is the primary source of funds for the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and remains a critical resource to Security Force Assistance, enabling an effective, affordable, and sustainable ANDSF. As the President has said, while we will not stay involved in Afghanistan militarily, we will continue to support the government of Afghanistan and keep providing assistance to the ANDSF. Overseeing the responsible execution of ASFF has been, and will continue to be, a team effort. USCENTCOM is committed to working with interagency partners to develop mechanisms that ensure continued oversight of and accountability for ASFF.

As we finalize this mission, I must express my deepest gratitude to those Americans who served and sacrificed on behalf of our Nation. I realize that not all of our troops returned from their deployments while others returned home wounded and forever changed. My deepest admiration and respect goes out to our heroes and their families.

Countering Violent Extremist Organizations – Iraq and Syria

U.S. and Coalition forces remain in Iraq at the request of the GoI for one purpose – to ensure the defeat of ISIS. In July 2020, Coalition forces under command of Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve (CJTF-OIR) began Phase IV of the Global D-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria, transitioning from a focus on tactical-level Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA), to a focus on advising and enabling partner forces at the operational and strategic levels. This partnering model in Iraq uses a centralized advising approach toward the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) at higher echelons of command. The Coalition established the Military Advisory Group co-located with the Iraqi Joint Operations Command to provide on-site intelligence, operations, logistics, fires, and air support from a central location.

Iraqi Security Forces continue to make great progress, due in large part to the D-ISIS Coalition’s investment in training and equipping thousands of Iraqi troops. Many ISF units are now capable of independently planning large-scale operations and executing with Coalition enablers. Operation READY LION was a 14-day Counter Terrorism (CT) mission conducted in March 2021 to clear ISIS remnants from mountain strongholds in northeast Iraq. This ISF planned and led operation, aided by Coalition enablers, eliminated nearly 200 ISIS hide locations. As our recent Strategic Dialogue with Iraq made clear, the transition of the U.S. and other international forces to training, equipping, and assisting the ISF reflects the success of their

strategic partnership and supports the ISF's continued efforts to ensure ISIS can never again threaten Iraq's stability.

USCENTCOM also established the Special Operations Advisory Group to provide similar advisory support to the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service, one of our most effective partners in targeting ISIS leadership. Other necessary enabling functions include ISR and air strike capabilities still in nascent development in the ISF.

USCENTCOM recognizes that efforts to stabilize Iraq must go beyond CJTF-OIR's D-ISIS campaign and address the root causes of instability. NATO's contribution, through NATO Mission Iraq (NMI) is a separate, but complementary mission of Security Sector Reform targeting the institutional capacity of Iraq's Ministry of Defense. This mission is vital to taking advantage of the Coalition's hard-won gains in Iraq. Bolstering CJTF-OIR's efforts of advising and enabling partner forces, NMI is a non-combat mission that seeks to build the institutional governance of, and professionalize, the ISF at the senior levels. As CJTF-OIR's mission matures through Phase IV, NMI's role within Iraq will grow. The North Atlantic Council projects NMI's eventual end strength to expand considerably, contingent on the GoI's continued approval. USCENTCOM and NATO staffs collaborate frequently to ensure close coordination, and CJTF-OIR maintains two planners within the NMI staff to coordinate future efforts.

In Syria, efforts by Global Coalition partners and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) were critical in the territorial defeat of ISIS, and these partners remain essential to the ongoing D-ISIS campaign. Throughout 2020, the ongoing Syrian civil war, long-term displacement of civilians, destabilizing influence of Iran, disruptive role of Russia, and COVID pandemic complicated efforts to bring about the enduring defeat of ISIS in Syria. Despite these obstacles, our SDF partners continue to make progress against ISIS as the Coalition continues to provide

enabling support while developing capabilities for the SDF to operate independently. Partnered operations focus on enhancing planning, command and control capabilities, and the provision of key enablers for success to include ISR and medical support.

Notwithstanding significant attrition to its senior leadership and difficulties generating sufficient revenue, ISIS remains a learning, adaptive, and committed VEO with a dedicated core. It promotes a global cyber presence while retaining a cellular structure that allows it to carry out local attacks – with the ultimate aspiration to reestablish a physical “caliphate.”

Constant surveillance and consistent pressure by the ISF in Iraq and SDF in Syria, enabled by U.S. and Coalition forces, have prevented ISIS from conducting or enabling external attacks against the U.S. and its allies. As USCENTCOM’s D-ISIS campaign continues we assess attacks inspired, enabled, or conducted by ISIS will continue in the form of an insurgency. Our objective is to develop and enable the ability of the ISF in Iraq and SDF in Syria to address and contain these threats without external assistance. Throughout 2021, our partner forces will continue to benefit from a range of financial and materiel support provided through the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund (CTEF) program that provided \$701 million of critical assistance in 2020.

As noted in the 2020 congressionally-mandated RAND study, “Strategic Evaluation of the Counter Islamic State Train and Equip Fund,” the CTEF program has proven a very effective tool in the Global D-ISIS campaign, predominantly because of the flexibility and speed with which it can be applied to dynamic conditions in Iraq and Syria. Key activities funded by CTEF include the acquisition of niche CT capacity for the ISF, support to the SDF, stipends for our Syrian and Peshmerga partners, detention facility support, and the repatriation of ISIS detainees. CTEF support for Syrian partner forces also facilitates ongoing operations to find, fix and finish

ISIS sleeper cells, and maintain control of key terrain and lines of communication in eastern Syria.

ISIS Detainees, their Family Members, and Refugees/Internally Displaced Persons

Two by-products of the Global D-ISIS campaign that cannot be solved by the use of military force are the repatriation of foreigners from detention centers and displaced persons camps in Northeast Syria and the pace of stabilization programs and reintegration of displaced people across both Syria and Iraq.

Presently, the SDF holds nearly 10,000 ISIS fighters, including nearly 2,000 hard-core foreign fighters, in more than two dozen makeshift detention centers across northeast Syria. Although U.S. forces do not directly supervise these detention activities, we mitigate risk using CTEF that helps enable the security of those facilities. While the SDF remains capable of responding to external attacks and quelling internal riots, threats persist. The SDF cannot, and should not be expected to hold these detainees indefinitely. Outside of detention centers, thousands of foreign women and children, many affiliated with ISIS detainees, are living in displaced persons camps. They too need to be repatriated. While several countries have taken responsibility to repatriate their own citizens, the overwhelming majority of countries have yet to do so.

Over the last year, increased violence in the Al-Hol displaced persons camp in northeast Syria has impeded the SDF's access to, and overall safety in, the camp, having a detrimental effect on humanitarian conditions. The adverse and insecure conditions create increased risk for camp populations and camp administration, as well as humanitarian relief organizations and non-governmental organizations operating in the camp. Al-Hol, one of the largest displaced persons

camps in Syria holds nearly 61,000 people. Ninety-four percent of Al-Hol's occupants are women and children, with two-thirds under the age of 18. Besides the near-term risk of an outbreak of disease or other conditions that could cause a humanitarian catastrophe, efforts by ISIS to radicalize elements of this population pose longer-term concerns.

Stabilization programs in northeast Syria implemented by USAID and DOS have responded to the need for basic services in communities of origin to incentivize voluntary, safe, and dignified returns of displaced populations and help maintain stability. Current resources from all international donors are insufficient to meet demand, resulting in a sense of community grievance which extremist elements attempt to exploit. This presents opportunities for ISIS to re-emerge and increases the risk to the SDF.

Countering Violent Extremist Organizations – Yemen

The critical U.S. interest in Yemen resides in maintaining our ability to conduct counterterrorism activities against al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and ISIS-Yemen. Without a lasting political solution and accompanying economic recovery, the conflict in Yemen will continue to threaten regional security and stability, and Yemen will remain a safe haven for VEOs aspiring to threaten U.S. interests and regional stability. USCENTCOM, in partnership with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the Republic of Yemen Government, has been effective in degrading VEO external operations capabilities in Yemen over the past several years.

Strategic Competition with China and the Destabilizing Influence of Russia

The USCENTCOM AOR is, and always has been, a crossroads of global interests and a historically prime arena for foreign powers to compete for influence, resources and access. In

2020, China and Russia exploited ongoing regional crises, financial and infrastructure needs, perceptions of declining U.S. engagement, and the COVID-19 pandemic to advance their objectives across the Middle East and Central and South Asia (CASA) nations to gain or enhance influence in the region.

China's strategic engagement in the USCENTCOM AOR takes the long view with short and long-term objectives in mind. China's current interests and approach in the region are predominantly diplomatic and economic. China engaged with nearly every country in the AOR in 2020, using debt traps, the Belt and Road Initiative, and medical diplomacy to create dependence and expand its influence within the AOR. China's recent 25-year agreement with Iran could vastly expand Chinese influence in Iranian banking, telecommunications, ports, railways and dozens of economic projects in exchange for discounted oil. The agreement also proposes expanding military cooperation, potentially providing China an additional foothold in the Arabian Gulf while also undercutting U.S. efforts to negotiate with Iran. China has also emerged as an arms supplier to the region. Attempting to rival the U.S. as a "partner of choice," China sells military equipment at discount prices, unencumbered by U.S. deliberate processes, maintenance support packages, and end-use restrictions.

In 2021, China will continue to strengthen defense cooperation throughout the region through arms sales, exercises, and multilateral organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, seeking to establish and strengthen trade relationships across the Middle East, prioritizing access to energy resources. China's long-term goals are not just to cultivate trade relationships, economic investment, and comprehensive partnerships among regional states, but to exert coercive influence and eventually establish a permanent military presence in an area from which it imports nearly 50 percent of its crude oil and roughly 40 percent of its natural gas.

Russia, in contrast, does not play a long game, yet it is equally disruptive to the region. Russia seeks to undermine and disrupt U.S. influence to enhance its own, and improve its position on the global stage. Russia's engagement in the USCENTCOM AOR is largely opportunistic and transactional. Fueled in part by a desire to play "spoiler" to U.S. interests but also by a set of economic factors, Russia maintains oil production agreements and works to expand nuclear energy markets, trade, and arms sales. Russia increased its activities in Syria by establishing an enduring military presence where it regularly interferes with the Global Coalition's D-ISIS campaign, and obtaining a warm-water base for its navy in Tartus. Russian military expansion in Syria provides it with a proving ground to test emerging capabilities, technologies, and fifth-generation equipment used for electronic warfare, air defense, UAS, and information operations – all in proximity to U.S. forces. In September 2020, USCENTCOM deployed Sentinel radar and Bradley Fighting Vehicles to the Eastern Syria Security Area, and increased fighter patrols over U.S. forces in response to a dangerous increase in unauthorized, unsafe Russian interactions threatening Coalition forces. Russia will seek ways to challenge U.S. presence as opportunities present themselves, in an effort to position itself as an alternative to the West by offering to mediate regional conflicts, selling arms without end-use restrictions, offering military expertise, and participating in regional and multilateral organizations and military exercises. In Central Asia, where proximity to China and Russia is great and U.S. presence is comparatively small, every interaction holds significance. Opportunities to compete with China and Russia in this region manifest themselves through border security, counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and defense institution building.

As China and Russia compete militarily with the U.S. below the level of combat, USCENTCOM develops capabilities to address and mitigate gray-zone actions, safeguarding our

technology from rivals operating in the region. USCENTCOM represents the world's most active electromagnetic battlespace and requires a robust interoperability and information sharing capability in order to protect U.S., allied, and partner critical capabilities as we move forward with collective defense initiatives. Adversary jamming of our commercial satellite communications allows state and non-state actors to asymmetrically contest and complicate U.S. force projection. The increasing computational power and improvements in rival powers' cryptographic analysis capabilities makes it imperative that USCENTCOM and our partners plan, execute, and implement a cryptographic modernization plan to ensure maximum interoperability, mitigate potential cyber-attacks, and maintain a secure information exchange environment.

Regional Cooperation and Partnerships

As encapsulated in its overall mission, USCENTCOM will continue to focus on regional partnerships and cooperation. Two examples of maritime partnerships that promote regional collective security and demonstrate U.S. commitment to broad relationships and partners in the region are the Combined Maritime Force (CMF) and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC). The 33 nation CMF conducts maritime security operations to ensure the free flow of commerce, actively deny the use of the high seas to terrorist and illicit networks, and curtail illegal shipments of narcotics and lethal aid. The IMSC is a cooperation-based framework ensuring safety of maritime shipping and the free flow of seaborne commerce through presence, surveillance, and attribution of malign activities in international waters in and around the Arabian Gulf and the Bab al Mandeb.

The normalization of relations between Israel and a number of Muslim-majority Arab states in 2020 and the realignment of the Unified Command Plan (UCP) moving Israel from U.S. European Command to USCENTCOM provide new opportunities for enhancing regional stability and security cooperation. The UCP change better aligns the combatant command areas of responsibility with the organizational boundaries of other federal agencies, creating coordination efficiencies for whole-of-government efforts in the AOR. USCENTCOM plans to achieve initial operating capability and the shift of combatant command authority and responsibility by September of 2021. The normalization of relations between Israel and other key USCENTCOM partners, manifested initially in diplomatic and economic cooperation, reduces tensions and holds potential for eventual expansion of military cooperation and alignment toward shared threats.

USCENTCOM's senior defense officials and defense attachés (SDO/DATT) live, work, and develop close relationships with host nation officials in every country in the USCENTCOM AOR except Iran and Syria. Our partners place great weight on these relationships, and the military rank of our SDO/DATTs conveys respect and importance as to how the U.S. views the partnership we have with each nation.

COVID-19 Impacts

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, several governments in the USCENTCOM AOR faced growing economic challenges. Most governments incurred significant expenditures and revenue losses during the pandemic that exacerbated pre-existing socioeconomic conditions contributing to deepening popular unrest. Government officials largely prioritized efforts to mitigate the spread of the virus over implementing needed economic policy reforms. Impacts to regional

economies will further fuel issues fomenting unrest to include provision and equitable distribution of services, medical care, and employment.

Across the AOR, USCENTCOM rapidly responded to the COVID-19 threat, implementing non-pharmaceutical interventions, obtaining and disseminating personal protective equipment, and adapting newly-developed treatment guidelines to an austere deployed environment. Despite the pandemic, military operations and medical support for combat and non-combat casualties remain fully mission capable. Extensive public health measures and medical support across the AOR resulted in zero COVID-19-related service member deaths.

In fall 2020, USCENTCOM worked closely with the Joint Staff, Defense Health Agency, and Defense Logistics Agency to identify requirements for emerging COVID-19 vaccines released under Food and Drug Administration Emergency Use Authorization in December 2020. USCENTCOM prioritized forward-deployed forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria for early vaccine delivery and voluntary inoculation efforts.

As of 14 April 2021, over 7,114 cases of COVID-19 were identified resulting in 276 personnel medically evacuated from theater. Since March 2020, constraints associated with COVID-19 resulted in cancellation of 20 Joint or Combined exercises within the USCENTCOM AOR, impacting mission readiness and partner-nation collaboration. While many events were cancelled due to COVID-19, partners remain committed to continuing larger, multinational exercises like BRIGHT STAR and EAGER LION.

Refinement of theater deployment physical standards for all personnel helped reduce the impact to U.S., Coalition, and partner-nation civilians. Vaccinations for forward-deployed personnel in Afghanistan and the Gulf region began in late January 2021. Continued entry of COVID-19 infected personnel, finite quantities of on-hand testing consumables, limited

quarantine and hospital capacity in theater, and irregular resupply remain significant obstacles to outbreak prevention and containment. In March, USCENTCOM significantly expanded vaccine distribution throughout the AOR with the intent to provide COVID-19 vaccines for all DOD personnel, dependents, and contractors willing to receive it to provide maximal force health protection. We have received a substantial portion of the required vaccines to meet that objective. Furthermore, USCENTCOM advocates providing COVID-19 vaccines for Coalition and partner forces working alongside U.S. forces. Continuing an aggressive vaccination program for forward-deployed units, combined with further emphasis on effective pre-deployment restriction of movement and testing, clean transit routes into theater, and prioritization of deploying personnel for a CONUS-based, Service-led COVID-19 vaccination program will ensure continued mission effectiveness forward.

At USCENTCOM headquarters, restrictions on travel and movement in both the AOR and the U.S. impacted face-to-face key leader engagements and regular personnel rotations throughout much of 2020. USCENTCOM instituted robust teleworking procedures, with on-site staffing reduced to 25 percent in March 2020. This percentage increased to 50 percent in September 2020. USCENTCOM remains a warfighting headquarters, postured to support multiple active campaigns across the AOR. Partial staffing, teleworking, and effective uses of technology since March 2020 provided short-term solutions to enable safe operations in the headquarters and continuous support to forward-deployed formations.

Taking Care of Our People

The USCENTCOM workforce operates at a warfighting tempo, whether deployed or working in the Tampa headquarters. The mental and physical stressors associated with the

demands of our operational environment, exacerbated by COVID-19, present significant challenges to our workforce. Meeting the mental health and spiritual needs of our people regardless of religious affiliation remains a high priority at USCENTCOM. Our chaplains provide professional, confidential counseling across the USCENTCOM workforce addressing essential matters of the heart and soul to include sexual harassment, extremism, personal relationships, stress, and suicide prevention.

Sexual assault and sexual harassment, extremism, and discrimination break down the trust and cohesion necessary for the USCENTCOM workforce to execute its missions effectively and efficiently. To combat these challenges, USCENTCOM places command emphasis on programs that build resilience, readiness, and cohesion. It is a leadership responsibility to provide a safe work environment, and to hold accountable those who seek to disrupt it. USCENTCOM leaders understand it is not just what our people hear their leaders say, but what they see their leaders do that makes an impact.

Improving diversity and inclusion across the force is an operational imperative to meet the demands of strategic competition. USCENTCOM takes deliberate actions to build a diverse workforce promoting equality and innovation. USCENTCOM established a Diversity and Inclusion position, singularly focused on advising the command on all matters relating to discrimination and institutional biases, as well as barriers to diversity and inclusion across the organization.

USCENTCOM remains fully committed to the prevention of sexual assault and sexual harassment, improving our command climate and prevention efforts in both of these areas. We constantly work to ensure both our military and civilian workforce feel comfortable coming

forward and reporting any concerns, and ensure that leaders at all levels take appropriate action to build positive workplace climates.

USCENTCOM recently completed a command-wide stand down to address extremism. These stand downs were led by general/flag rank officers or senior civilians, and included virtual training modules featuring subject matter experts and facilitated small-group discussions to build awareness and help prevent actions associated with extremist behaviors. USCENTCOM's leaders are charged with the responsibility to continue this dialogue beyond the DOD mandate to make clear that operating in a command free of discrimination, hate, and harassment while accomplishing our mission is paramount to our success.

Taking care of our people is a very high priority for me personally as the USCENTCOM commander. I speak frequently to my subordinate commanders on these matters because this is commander's business. It requires the full attention of the chain of command, and in USCENTCOM, these critical matters have that full attention.

Conclusion

The USCENTCOM AOR remains challenging and dynamic. One constant in USCENTCOM remains the strength of our people. As nearly two decades and two of the longest conflicts in U.S. history begin to wind down, our Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen, Guardians, Civilians, and their families remain steadfast in their commitment to our mission and the vital roles they serve in U.S. national security. Their service and sacrifice over many long years of conflict is humbling and inspirational, benefiting the lives of millions across the U.S. and the AOR. We honor those who have sacrificed by ensuring the mission continues, and their sacrifices were not in vain.

USCENTCOM fulfills its missions, appreciative of the efforts and support of our civilian leadership at the Department of Defense on our behalf. We acknowledge the teamwork of the interagency and thank the members of Congress, the Defense Committees, and their staffs, without whose consistent and timely support we would be unable to accomplish our missions in support of U.S. national security interests and the will of the American people.