

STATEMENT OF

GENERAL LLOYD J. AUSTIN III

COMMANDER

U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE

ON

THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

8 MARCH 2016

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**Introduction:** This is an extraordinarily challenging time throughout the Central Region. We see an almost unprecedented level of activity, turmoil, and conflict among regional state and non-state actors, along with increasing involvement by external state actors including Russia and China. Many of the challenges facing the region, most notably the threat posed by the violent extremist organization (VEO), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), transcend borders. They are symptoms of a wider set of challenges plaguing that strategically-important part of the world. The most fundamental challenge remains the heightened instability that is fueled, in large part, by certain root causes or “underlying currents.” The prevailing current is the ethno-sectarian competition that exists between groups and chiefly among Shia and Sunni and Arab and Persian populations.

The regional security environment is incredibly complex. The sharp decline in global oil prices is greatly impacting those countries that are highly-dependent upon oil revenues. The economic uncertainty is adding to the instability, while limiting partner nations’ purchasing power. The region continues to struggle with a large-scale humanitarian crisis caused primarily by the wars in Syria and Yemen. The situation is further challenged by malign actors and poisonous ideas that serve to radicalize individuals and generate movements that threaten our core national interests and the interests of partner nations. Adding to this challenge, the world today is more interconnected than ever before. The information space is borderless and physical borders are less clearly defined, if not absent altogether. As a result, events that occur in one location can and often do affect other parts of the globe. Thus, we have a vested interest in helping our regional partners to address existing challenges and, to the extent possible, prevent potential problems from developing further.

We have an important role to play in providing for the security of the Central Region. That said,

we also recognize that we cannot solve every challenge through direct U.S. military action alone. While supporting and enabling the efforts of partner nations, we must help them build additional needed military capacity. The goal is to empower them to provide for the security of their sovereign spaces and confront regional security challenges such as those posed by Iran. We must also encourage our partners to actively counter radical ideologies and address the “underlying currents” that contribute in large part to the instability in the region. American efforts, including the U.S. military, can buy time and we may encourage others to do what is necessary. However, we cannot do it for them. Only the people of the region can bring about the needed changes.

Today, despite the many challenges that exist in U.S. Central Command’s (USCENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), we do see progress being made in a number of areas. We are hurting our adversaries, while helping our partners assume a larger role in providing for the security of the region. Their conventional military capabilities far outreach those of any possible hostile adversary, and our core partnerships remain strong. At the same time, while weaker and under threat, political institutions throughout the region, including in Iraq and Afghanistan, are withstanding pressure from extremist groups and outside actors. Moreover, we have 84,000 U.S. troops in the AOR with an unmatched ability to provide rapid reinforcement in response to unforeseen contingencies. They are the best and most capable military forces in the world. Their presence and many contributions are making a significant difference in what is a very important part of the world. The Central Region is an area of great consequence and one that merits our continued, strong investment. We will need to remain present, properly postured, and actively engaged there for the foreseeable future.

**A Retrospective Look:** This past year, we worked through a number of tough challenges

throughout the Central Region. Five specific areas required a larger share of our energy and attention. Foremost among them is Operation INHERENT RESOLVE in Iraq and Syria. American military action, coupled with our leadership of the 66-member international coalition, has achieved substantial progress in combatting ISIL. We have degraded the organization, which was Phase I of the military campaign, and we are well along in Phase II operations which focus on dismantling ISIL. The forging of a whole-of-government effort has maximized the effectiveness of military and diplomatic actions. At the same time, we are providing support to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-led Coalition in Yemen. Additionally, we maintain pressure on extremist networks and actively pursue terrorists in the region on a daily basis. Next, we continue to support operations in Afghanistan where we have transitioned to a mission focused on helping the Afghans to build needed capability and fortify their security forces, while we continue to take direct action against Al Qaeda (AQ), ISIL – Khorasan Group (ISIL-KP), and others that present a threat to U.S. and coalition forces. Finally, we keep a close eye on Iran. We are hopeful that the controls put in place as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement will discourage Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon. Regardless, Iran maintains hegemonic ambitions and will continue to pose a threat to the region through the employment of various anti-access and area denial (A2/AD) capabilities, theater ballistic missile and cyber capabilities, aggressive maritime activities, and the destabilizing activities of the Iranian Threat Network (ITN) and its Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Forces (IRGC-QF), and other proxies operating in the region.

The command's primary focus this past year has been the ongoing fight against transnational VEOs, and namely ISIL or what is referred to by many in the region as "Daesh." While the group's military capabilities have been degraded in Iraq and Syria, which represents the center of ISIL's

self-proclaimed Caliphate, the group remains a legitimate terrorist threat in both countries and has expanded its reach to other parts of the globe, including Egypt, Afghanistan-Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, West Africa, and parts of the Pacific. ISIL's presence undermines nation-states while driving competition for leadership among global jihadists. This competition has led to increased activity by ISIL and AQ which, although its capability is degraded, remains relevant and active throughout the region. ISIL's insidious activities perpetuate sectarian conflict and, if not effectively addressed, could serve to spark a broader regional sectarian war. For these and a host of other reasons, ISIL poses the most immediate security threat to our interests and the interests of our partners and allies. It must be – *and it will be* – defeated.

Over the past year we have seen a trend emerge as countries have begun to take more seriously the threat from transnational and trans-regional VEOs. Many of our regional partners historically did not prioritize the threat from VEOs. They were less concerned that these organizations would attack them at home. However, ISIL has changed that paradigm. Countries, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, now are dealing with a very real threat from Sunni extremists that they did not encounter in the past. They recognize that they can no longer afford to dismiss these threats. In the same way, countries outside of the Central Region, particularly throughout Europe and Turkey, have experienced a relatively high number of terrorist attacks conducted by or inspired by VEOs in the region, including ISIL and AQ. As partner nations' perceptions begin to change, we should seize the opportunity and work with them to build additional needed capability.

The most prevalent challenge facing the Central Region continues to be the “underlying currents” that fuel many of the destructive behaviors that plague that strategically-important part of the world. These currents include a growing ethno-sectarian divide; the ongoing religious struggle

between violent extremists and moderates; and, the rejection of corruption and oppressive governance. They also include the “youth bulge,” which consists of young and unemployed or under-employed and disenfranchised individuals who feel marginalized and thus are ripe for recruitment by extremist elements. While there appears to be a greater recognition of the negative effects of these currents, we have yet to see sufficient improvements made to address them. Indeed, they are becoming even more pronounced. In many parts of the region, ethnic and sectarian affiliation has taken on greater importance, moving to the forefront of individuals’ and nation-states’ identities. For example, it is more important for some to be Sunni or Shia, Kurdish or Arab, than to be an Iraqi or a Syrian. Stakeholders recognize this changing dynamic, and they have not only sought to benefit from the growing instability, many actively exploit the sectarian tensions to promote their own goals and objectives. All of this has the effect of seriously weakening the nation states in the region.

Progress with respect to the root causes of the instability can only be achieved by the governments and the people of the region with our continued support. They must actively work to address the growing ethno-sectarian divide, elevate the voice of moderates, root out corruption, guard against freedom of movement and expanding influence by terrorist groups in ungoverned and under-governed spaces, and ensure the young people of the region have access to better opportunities and are able to contribute to society in meaningful ways. We need to see responsive governments in place and taking an active role in addressing these and other challenges facing the region.

The international community must also do its part to address the radical ideologies that serve to inspire extremist behaviors. It should be noted that the fight against ISIL is not simply a fight against a VEO. ISIL is an ideologically-motivated movement and must be addressed as such if we

hope to achieve lasting, positive effects. We are beginning to see some positive trends with an increasing number of state leaders, senior clerics, and religious leaders from Arab countries speaking out against radical extremism. We are hopeful that such ventures will bear fruit, and we will do all that we can to support them going forward.

What should concern us all, beyond the sectarian nature of today's conflicts, is the growing risk that the increased malign activity by proxy and surrogate actors could lead to perpetual armed conflict and resulting widespread instability in the region. The "underlying currents" are common to many of the problems that exist, and activities in one area often fuel challenges in other parts of the region. We will have to keep a close eye on these and other challenges present throughout our area of responsibility.

**USCENTCOM's Mission.** USCENTCOM's mission statement is: *"With national and international partners, USCENTCOM promotes cooperation among nations, responds to crises, deters or defeats state and non-state aggression, and supports development and, when necessary, reconstruction in order to establish the conditions for regional security, stability and prosperity."*

**Strategic Environment.** The Central Region is one of the most strategically-important regions, holding about half of the world's proven oil reserves and plentiful natural gas deposits, which are crucial to the global energy market. The U.S. and our partners have core national interests in the region; they include the free flow of resources through key shipping lanes, the prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the defense of our homeland against the persistent threat of terrorism and extremism. It also is an area plagued by violence and instability, political discord, economic stagnation, resource shortages (e.g., water), ethnic and religious

tensions, and wide expanses of ungoverned or under-governed spaces. These provocative factors make for a volatile environment that puts our interests and those of our partners at risk. When things go badly in the Central Region, it has a clear and sizeable impact on the affected countries and other parts of the globe. For this reason it is an area of the world that merits our continued focus and dedicated efforts.

**USCENTCOM Priorities.** At U.S. Central Command, our aim is to see a positive transformation of the region over time, achieved “by, with, and through” our regional partners. Looking ahead, USCENTCOM will remain ready, engaged and vigilant. Our priority efforts include:

- Dismantle and eventually defeat ISIL in order to prevent further trans-regional spread of sectarian-fueled radical extremism, and to mitigate the continuing Iraq-Syria crisis.
- Continue support to Afghanistan, in partnership with NATO, to assist Afghanistan as it establishes itself as a regionally integrated, secure, stable, and developing country; continue planning and coordination for the enduring U.S. and NATO partnerships in Afghanistan beyond the end of 2016.
- Defeat Al Qaeda, deny violent extremists safe havens and freedom of movement, and limit the reach of terrorists, to enhance protection of the U.S. homeland and allies and partner nation homelands.
- Counter the Iranian Threat Network’s malign activities in the region, to include the impacts of surrogates and proxies.
- Support a whole of government approach to developments in Yemen, preventing Yemen from growing as an ungoverned space for AQ/VEOs; and supporting regional stability efforts that retain U.S. CT capacity in the region.

- Maintain a credible deterrent posture against Iran’s evolving conventional and strategic military capabilities.
- Prevent, and if required, counter the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; disrupt their development and prevent their use.
- Protect lines of communication, ensure free use of the global commons and cyberspace, and secure unimpeded global access for legal commerce.
- Shape, support, incentivize, and maintain ready, flexible regional Coalitions and partners, as well as cross-CCMD and interagency U.S. whole-of-government teams, to support crisis response; optimize military resources.
- Develop and execute security cooperation programs, improving bilateral and multi-lateral partnerships, building partnered “capacities,” and improving information sharing, security, and stability.

**Critical Focus Areas.** While we remain focused on the broad range of challenges present today in the Central Region, there are several areas that merit a larger share of our attention and resources. These areas are strategically-important because of their potential impact on our core national interests and the interests of partner nations.

**Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (Iraq-Syria).** We remain intensively focused on the crisis in Iraq and Syria and the ongoing fight against the terrorist organization, ISIL. Our military campaign to defeat ISIL requires that we rely on indigenous forces and that we support and enable their efforts using our precision air operations and by advising and assisting their leadership and training and equipping their ground forces. Eighteen-plus months into the campaign, we are putting

increased pressure on ISIL throughout the depth and breadth of the battlespace. We are achieving good effects against the enemy; we completed Phase I of the military campaign (Degrade) and are well into Phase II (Dismantle).

In Iraq, the Iraqi Security Forces, which include Iraqi Army and Counter-Terrorism Services (CTS) forces, Kurdish Peshmerga, and various Sunni and Shia volunteer elements, with the support of U.S. and Coalition air operations and advisors and materiel donations, have effectively halted ISIL's advance. The enemy is now almost exclusively focused on defending his strongholds rather than projecting combat power. Additionally, ISIL's counter-attack capability has been reduced as a result of battlefield losses, although we see the group conducting deadly terrorist attacks against Iraqi forces in Anbar and west of Baghdad, and, worryingly, civilian targets – including in areas far from its control, in Baghdad and parts of the Shia-populated south.

In Syria, we are supporting and enabling the efforts of the indigenous forces, including Syrian Kurds, Arabs, Christians, Turkmen, and others. These forces are putting increased pressure on the enemy as they push south towards the capital of ISIL's self-proclaimed Caliphate in Raqqa. They have retaken more than 18,000 square kilometers of territory and cut a number of ISIL's key lines of communication (LOC). They also secured key border crossings between Syria and Turkey, impacting ISIL's ability to send in reinforcements and much-needed re-supply. It is quite possible that the military efforts underway in Syria could progress more rapidly given that we now have a growing number of willing and capable partners on the ground.

Since commencing air operations in early August 2014, Coalition air crews from 19 partner nations have conducted more than 10,700 strikes. They are taking the fight to the enemy, and have greatly

enabled the reach and effectiveness of the indigenous ground forces. Coalition airstrikes have removed several thousand enemy fighters from the battlefield, to include more than 160 of ISIL's leaders. We have destroyed thousands of the enemy's vehicles, tanks, and heavy weapon systems, along with training sites and storages facilities, command and control structures, and oil production facilities. We have helped to retake more than 40% of the territory in Iraq that ISIL held when we began airstrikes in August 2014, and we have restricted the enemy's freedom of movement along key routes in both Iraq and Syria. We have expanded our targeting of ISIL's oil enterprise, one of his primary sources of revenue and destroyed several bulk cash storage sites. This is further restricting ISIL's access to critical funds and other resources. This enemy hides among the civilian population; and so, we must be as precise as possible to avoid causing unnecessary civilian casualties and destruction of critical infrastructure, thereby generating resentment among the local populace. The high level of precision achieved by our air crews has ensured minimal collateral damage.

The situation in Iraq and Syria is made even more complex by the involvement of external actors, specifically Russia and Iran. It is apparent through Russia's actions that their primary objective in Syria is to bolster the Assad Regime, principally by targeting those Syrian moderate opposition forces that pose a threat to the Regime. Through its actions, Russia is effectively prolonging the civil war in Syria, which over the past five years has caused the deaths of well over 250,000 innocent men, women, and children. Assad would almost certainly not be in power today were it not for the robust support provided to the Regime by Iran and Russia. Russia's involvement in Syria exacerbates sectarian tensions as it appears they are supporting the Shiite states against the Sunnis. By putting the full range of their military capability on display in Syria, the Russians hope to impress regional actors and assert global power. Ultimately, they want to enhance their regional

influence to counter the U.S. as the indispensable power player in the Middle East. None of Russia's military actions have helped stabilize Syria or end the suffering of the Syrian people. The recent Cessation of Hostilities process is an opportunity for Russia to demonstrate a renewed commitment to play a constructive role in Syria. We will continue to judge Russia by its actions, not by its words.

Of note, Russia's cooperation with Iran appears to be expanding beyond near-term coordination for operations in Syria and is moving towards an emerging strategic partnership. The potential for a more traditional security cooperation arrangement between Russia, a state actor and member of the UN Security Council, and Iran is cause for significant concern given Iran's existing relationship with the Syrian Regime and Lebanese Hezbollah. We already see indications of high-end weapon sales and economic cooperation between the two countries.

We are making progress militarily in our efforts to defeat ISIL, as demonstrated by the recent victories in Ramadi and Shaddadi. However, military success will be lasting only if corresponding political progress is achieved in both Iraq and Syria. The Government of Iraq must take the necessary steps towards greater inclusiveness. Iraq will not remain a unified state long-term without the support of the major ethno-sectarian groups. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's actions and his deplorable treatment of the Syrian people created enormous instability in the country that allowed ISIL to flourish. ISIL will remain difficult to defeat as long as Assad remains in power. He needs to be replaced and a stable, responsive government must be established to prevent safe haven for VEOs like ISIL.

To defeat ISIL we must do as President Obama said and "squeeze its heart [in order to] make it

harder for ISIL to pump its terror and propaganda through the rest of the world.” This remains the foundation of our Military Campaign Plan – to degrade, dismantle, and eventually defeat this enemy in Iraq and Syria. This is essential; however, it is not sufficient. Beyond its strongholds in Iraq and Syria, ISIL has expanded to other parts of the globe, including to Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. Expansion is a necessary element of ISIL’s declared end-state of a global Caliphate. It also demonstrates that we are degrading the enemy’s capability in Iraq and Syria; as a result, ISIL is attempting to gain a foothold in alternate locations. Moreover, the increased activity helps to distract the international community from the setbacks that ISIL is experiencing in Iraq and Syria. To maintain its legitimacy, ISIL must achieve real or perceived military victories and it must expand territorially. While the priority must be the defeat of ISIL’s core in Iraq and Syria, we also will need to address the ISIL affiliates and franchises that exist in other parts of the region and globe. Additionally, we will need to continue in our efforts to curb the flow of foreign fighters, and take away the enemy’s ability to resource himself.

The U.S. military is not doing any of this alone. The military campaign is just one component of the broader U.S. Government (USG) strategy which consists of nine lines of effort (LOE), to be executed by all elements of the USG with the support of our coalition partners. The military is responsible for two of the nine LOEs, LOE #2 and #3. LOE #2 – “Denying ISIL Safe Haven” is being accomplished through our support to indigenous ground forces in Iraq and Syria, primarily through our precision airstrikes, employment of available Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and our advise and assist efforts. LOE #3 – “Building Partner Capacity” includes our train and equip program and advise and assist efforts in Iraq. Critically important are the many contributions being made by the 66 partners that make up the Counter-ISIL Coalition; the Coalition represents the strength of the military campaign.

We made it clear at the outset of the campaign that the defeat of ISIL would take time. There is tough work still ahead. We must remain vigilant and keep pressure on this enemy, recognizing the high stakes involved.

**Afghanistan (Operation FREEDOM'S SENTINEL/RESOLUTE SUPPORT Mission).** The Afghan's National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) have been challenged over the past several months in what was an especially tough fighting season. During the first full year in which the ANDSF were fully responsible for the security of their country, the ANDSF managed to deny the Taliban lasting gains. The Taliban saw the opportunity to exploit weaknesses in the Afghans' still-maturing capabilities. Although the Taliban achieved some initial success, the ANDSF have retaken and reestablished security in key areas, such as Kunduz. Most important, the ANDSF continue to learn from their experiences and look to grow stronger and more capable. The ANDSF also benefit from a supportive government that values the strong partnership between the U.S. and Afghanistan. The National Unity Government (NUG), led by President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah, continues to mature as both leaders work together on behalf of the country.

Meanwhile, we see positive developments across the populace. Of note, adult life expectancy has risen by 22 years from 42 years in 2002 to 64 years in 2012<sup>1</sup>. We have seen the various state institutions develop and mature; and, the Afghans continue to make progress in the areas of governance, the judiciary, and respect for human rights, women's rights, and education. In 2001, less than 900,000 Afghans were enrolled in primary and secondary schools and almost none of them were girls. Today, there are more than 8 million students enrolled in school; 36% of them are

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Agency International Development (USAID).

girls<sup>2</sup>. Progress in Afghanistan has been significant over the past 14+ years, and the U.S.-led Coalition and the ANDSF have provided the necessary security to enable these advancements. There is a strong desire to continue to make lasting improvements in all areas, including education, the economy, healthcare, infrastructure, and communications.

While the ANDSF have made significant progress, critical capability gaps do exist in some areas, including leadership, aviation, aerial fires, ISR, logistics, and sustainment. Many of the systems that support Afghan warfighters have not fully matured, and our continued support remains critical to their development and long-term success.

The ANDSF still face a significant insurgency complicated by the presence of a number of extremist elements in the region including the Taliban, Haqqani Network, AQ, and the newly-formed ISIL – Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). ISIL-KP poses a concern for the U.S. and our Afghan partners given the evolving security dynamic. The group's efforts to date have produced mixed results; however, they instability, violence, and potential for regional growth require effective pressure to deny the establishment of a safe haven. Persistent action must be taken by the Afghan government with the support of the U.S., NATO, and regional partners to disrupt the expansion of ISIL-KP and other VEOs in the region.

The Afghanistan and Pakistan (AFG-PAK) relationship remains a delicate one. Some progress was made this year, and both sides indicate a continued willingness to participate in multi-lateral and bilateral discussions. Despite long-standing distrust between elements in each country, the United

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<sup>2</sup> Afghan Central Statistics Organization (2014).

States is encouraged by both nations' continued cooperation and collaboration towards trans-regional security and stability.

On 15 October 2015, President Obama announced that the U.S. would maintain up to 9,800 U.S. forces in Afghanistan through most of 2016, before drawing down to 5,500 U.S. forces by January 2017. This decision allows for the continued training, advising, and assisting of the ANDSF through the 2016 fighting season. By maintaining the current level of forces through much of 2016, the United States will be able to: (1) reassure Afghanistan, our partners, and allies of our enduring strategic commitment; (2) continue to conduct the train, advise, and assist (TAA) mission at the Afghan National Army (ANA) corps level and Afghan National Police (ANP) equivalent levels; and, (3) support our counter-terrorism (CT) efforts against AQ and ISIL-KP. TAA at the operational-level for select ANDSF special forces units has paid significant dividends, as evidenced by the expeditionary advising performed during operations in Northern Helmand and Kunduz at the end of the 2015 fighting season, and will remain a critical component of building capacity and institutionalizing long-term ANDSF sustainment systems.

By sustaining our current troop levels through 2016, we also demonstrate a strong commitment to our NATO allies and other partner nations, many of whom have since reaffirmed their troop commitments in support of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission. NATO's continued participation is integral to the development of the ANDSF and will also help ensure donor nations provide much-needed financial support to the ANDSF. Finally, our presence sends a clear message to the Taliban that the U.S. supports the Afghan government and the ANDSF and encourages broader reconciliation efforts and lasting peace achieved through dialogue, rather than through violence and a continued insurgency.

Afghanistan remains a worthwhile and strategically-necessary investment. The Afghans continue to demonstrate that they are willing partners. Together, we have invested many lives and precious resources with the goal of improving stability in that country. We want to preserve those hard-earned gains and to enable the Afghans continued success going forward.

**Countering Terrorism and Violent Extremist Organizations.** A variety of factors that include poor governance, economic disparity, disenfranchised populaces, and deficient security forces contribute to creating conditions that promote the activities of VEOs, including ISIL and AQ. The VEOs are able to plan and launch attacks, undermine local governments, and exercise malign influence from ungoverned or under-governed spaces. In doing so, they threaten regional security and U.S. core national interests, including the defense of our homeland.

Perhaps the most significant development in recent years is the proliferation of transnational and trans-regional VEOs that desire and, in some cases, demonstrate the ability to shape and even dominate the security environment in ways that we have not seen before. These transnational extremist groups are ideologically opposed to and often target the nation states in the region. They conduct attacks and terrorize local populaces in an effort to undermine and eventually topple existing governments. This further contributes to increased instability in the region.

One related dynamic that we see developing is a growing competition between transnational extremist groups. For a long period of time, AQ was the unchallenged leader of global jihad. Then, in late spring of 2014, ISIL seized large swaths of territory in Iraq, in addition to the territory it seized in Syria. It declared a Caliphate and suddenly AQ was facing a rival. Going

forward, there is significant potential for increased expansion among VEOs as ISIL and AQ compete for resources and recruits. This will compel both groups to conduct more spectacular operations and to employ more aggressive messaging campaigns. As ISIL and AQ look to expand their influence, we can expect other VEOs to attempt to align with these groups. The resulting struggle and heightened activity will contribute to increasing instability across the region.

We must take direct military action where appropriate to counter this growing threat. We cannot allow VEOs to operate uncontested in the region, permitting them to grow stronger and expand their global reach. The long-term defeat of VEOs will require that our regional partners provide for the security of their sovereign spaces, with the U.S. and its allies providing support where possible. Until they have sufficient capability to do so, we must be prepared to take active direct measures to counter these VEOs.

**Yemen.** Yemen remains embroiled in a complex civil war that is exacerbated by sectarian tensions. In January 2015, the Huthis, a group of Zaydi Shia fighters led by Abdul Malik al-Huthi and aligned with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, displaced the legitimate government of Yemen led by President Abd Rabbu Mansur Hadi. On each side, there are a number of competing factions, including the Huthis, Saleh loyalists, southern secessionists, and tribal alliances with competing agendas that further complicate the situation on the ground. These groups are attempting to assert control over Yemen as a whole or at least gain greater autonomy within their respective areas of influence.

Iran has provided support to the Huthis, likely to gain leverage against the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This could potentially enable the Iranians to complicate maritime LOCs, including the Bab

al Mandeb Strait, from the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden and beyond. Iran has a long history of seeking to protect the Shia populace in the Gulf and using this rationale to justify a broad array of actions. Conversely, KSA desires a stable Yemen with a pro-Saudi government that effectively protects its border, prevents an Iranian proxy from gaining undue influence over strategic terrain that includes the Bab al Mandeb, and protects against safe havens for Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and other VEOs. The KSA-led Coalition has sought to counter the Huthis and associated forces with the goal to return the legitimate displaced Hadi government to power. While the coalition has experienced some significant challenges and we have expressed concerns about Coalition strikes on targets that lead to civilian casualties and damage Yemen's already poor infrastructure. Nevertheless, the Coalition's efforts have proven problematic for the Huthis.

Yemen is the poorest country in the Central Region and the ongoing conflict continues to exacerbate the very serious humanitarian crisis plaguing the country. Much of Yemen's infrastructure has been destroyed, food production is at a standstill, international trade is severely degraded, medical supplies are critically short, and little humanitarian aid is reaching those in need. The ousting of the Republic of Yemen Government (RoYG) created a large security vacuum which has greatly benefited AQAP, as well as the newly-formed ISIL affiliate, ISIL-Yemen (ISIL-Y). AQAP is strengthening and expanding its reach in the absence of a significant CT effort. Prior to the unseating of the Hadi government, the U.S. maintained a physical presence in Yemen and an effective CT partnership with the Yemeni security forces. We conducted operations against AQAP and had significantly degraded its capacity. We were also in the process of building the Yemeni forces' capacity through our advise and assist and train and equip efforts. The reduced capability coupled with the lack of a U.S. presence presents a vulnerability that must be addressed.

Since these groups pose a national security risk to the U.S. and partner nations, it is imperative that we seek a way to resume a partnered approach to CT operations against Yemen-based VEOs and their support networks. It is in our national interest and the interest of our partners to resolve the civil war and reinstate the legitimate government that can work to address the many challenges facing Yemen today. We are looking at how to best move this forward. The additional capability would enable them to better secure their borders and guard against internal threats from violent extremists.

**Iran.** Iran continues to pose a significant threat to the region despite the restrictions placed on its nuclear program as a result of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement. In this post-JCPOA period, the Iranian Threat Network's (ITN) Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Forces (IRGC-QF), proxies (e.g., Lebanese Hezbollah), and Iranian-backed Shia militant groups remain very active. Iran also maintains a large and diverse theater ballistic missile arsenal, along with significant cyber and maritime capabilities. Despite the fact that President Rouhani's administration has indicated an interest in normalizing relations with the international community, there are hardline elements in the country intent on undermining the efforts of the moderates. They maintain substantial influence over Iran's foreign policy and military activities.

Iran continues to pursue policies that enflame sectarian tensions and threaten U.S. strategic interests in the Central Region. Their primary focus is countering the ISIL threat in Iraq and preserving the Assad Regime in Syria. They also continue to support some Shia surrogate groups in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, Huthis in Yemen, and Lebanese Hezbollah, with a combination of money, arms, and training. Iran's emerging relationship with Russia further complicates the security environment as they look to expand their cooperation in areas that include the sale of high-end weapons. We must

consider that when ISIL is defeated and Syria stabilizes, we and our partners will face an enhanced ITN bolstered by warfighting experience, a multi-ethnic supply of radicalized Shia fighters, expanded partnerships, and an intense sectarian climate. There are additional developments within the ITN that we will have to closely monitor to fully appreciate the nature of this evolving threat. For example, Iranian-backed Shia militia groups are becoming entrenched within Iraq's formal security institutions through the Popular Mobilization Forces, a development that could provide these groups with increased resources and legitimacy and greatly complicate our relationship with Iraq's security forces going forward. Additionally, it is possible that Iran will have challenges commanding and controlling an expanded ITN, something we are already seeing play out in several places across the region. Iran exerts a considerable degree of influence over the multiple external proxies and surrogates that comprise the ITN. However, the larger the ITN becomes through the proliferation of Shia militant groups, the more difficult it may be for Iran to control their activities, especially when their interests diverge.

Our relationship with Iran remains a challenging one. We will continue to pay close attention to their actions, while supporting our regional partners and helping them to improve their capacity to counter Iran and mitigate the effects of Iran's malign activity in the region.

**A Regional Perspective.** In many ways our military-to-military relationships continue to represent the cornerstone of America's partnerships with the nation states in the USCENTCOM AOR.

Below are synopses of the status of those relationships, along with the current state of affairs in each of the 20 countries, save Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Yemen, and Iran which were addressed in the previous section, "Critical Focus Areas" (see pages 9-21):

**The Gulf States** – The Gulf States remain steadfast partners and continue to support the Counter ISIL Coalition’s operations in Iraq and Syria, primarily through the provision of robust access, basing, and overflight permissions critical to the conduct of regional operations. This support played out against the backdrop of some key developments over the past year, GCC support for the JCPOA agreement, and the GCC-led campaign in Yemen, which remains the Gulf State’s primary focus.

Last year, we witnessed an increased willingness by our Gulf partners to attempt to actively shape and influence the regional security environment, most recently in the campaign in Yemen. Several of the Gulf States have demonstrated an unprecedented level of unity and military cooperation in operations against the Huthis in Yemen, and we continue to emphasize the importance of pursuing a political solution that will lead to the reinstatement of the internationally-recognized government. We are working with the Saudi-led coalition to help mitigate civilian casualties and to ensure that humanitarian assistance flows into Yemen. Nevertheless, we are deeply concerned by the devastating toll of the crisis in Yemen, both in terms of civilian casualties and the dire humanitarian situation that Yemen faces. We continue to urge all sides to undertake proactive steps to minimize harm to civilians, including by exercising restraint, distinguishing between military objectives and civilian objects, and not positioning armaments or military equipment in areas where civilians are known to be present, as the Huthis have done.

Our GCC partners have also indicated a desire to collaborate more closely with the U.S. on the threat posed by AQAP and the newly ascendant ISIL-Y. However, the pace and scope of activity has challenged the Gulf States’ ability to sustain operations, and to conduct the same level of military-to-military engagements, training, and exercises as in previous years. Now, more than ever, there is a

need for strong U.S. engagement, vision, and leadership aimed at increasing participation and cooperation amongst and between our GCC partners.

We have worked hard to strengthen our strategic partnership with the **Kingdom of Saudi Arabia** (KSA) in support of shared security objectives. Going forward, we can expect KSA to continue to exercise influence among Sunni States throughout the Central Region.

The Kingdom continues to balance a wide range of external security challenges, including the fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, operations in Yemen against the Huthi-Saleh alliance, and the growing threat posed by AQAP, ISIL-Y, and other VEOs. While KSA is a member of the Counter-ISIL Coalition, over the past several months their primary focus has been leading the coalition in Yemen. The ongoing campaign in Yemen has provided KSA with valuable experience in building and sustaining coalitions and conducting coalition-supported operations. It also has provided some opportunities for us to identify reforms that KSA could undertake to increase their capabilities.

The Saudis continue to support the fight against ISIL. After postponing air operations for a period while they focused on Yemen, KSA recently staged F-15s at Incirlik, Turkey and will commence operations inside of Syria beginning in early March. While operational demands continue to limit the amount of support that the Saudis are presently able to devote to the Counter-ISIL Campaign, we anticipate that as the conflict in Yemen approaches a negotiated settlement, Saudi support for ongoing efforts against ISIL and other VEOs will expand.

**Kuwait** remains a model for stability in the Gulf Region. It provides one of the most supportive

environments for access, basing, overflight, and burden-sharing. As a Gulf leader, Kuwait has been able to mitigate rifts between and among partner nations, while at the same time helping to promote a regional response to crises emanating from the region (e.g., Iraq, Syria, and Yemen). We want to continue to encourage and enable the Kuwaitis in their efforts to achieve increased cooperation among the GCC partner nations.

The bilateral relationship between the U.S. and Kuwait remains strong. With robust air and sea ports, as well as modern military bases and infrastructure, Kuwait provides a critical platform for USCENTCOM to project power in response to regional contingencies. Most notably, Kuwait is home to the forward operating headquarters of USCENTCOM's U.S. Army component, U.S. Army Central (USARCENT). The support provided by the Kuwaitis has been integral to the planning and execution of Operation INHERENT RESOLVE (Iraq and Syria) and Operation FREEDOM's SENTINEL/RESOLUTE SUPPORT Mission (Afghanistan).

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the liberation of Kuwait from Iraq. The occasion provides an opportunity to acknowledge the significant contributions made by the U.S.-led coalition in 1991, while showcasing the gains made over the past quarter of a century as a result of the security cooperation agreement that exists between both countries. It is also an opportunity for pursuing additional steps to deepen and broaden our partnership with Kuwait. We remain committed to working together to address emerging threats. Although Kuwait has been largely unaffected by the fight in Iraq and Syria, it did suffer a significant bombing of a mosque in Kuwait City in June 2015 for which ISIL claimed responsibility. We remain committed to assisting the Kuwaitis in their efforts to prevent ISIL from achieving further inroads within Kuwait's borders.

Our military-to-military relationship with the **United Arab Emirates** (UAE) continues along its historically positive trajectory. The UAE shares our concerns with respect to the regional spread of violent extremist ideologies, and the Emirates recognize the threat posed to their internal security – and overall regional stability – by ISIL and its adherents and affiliates. In response to this shared threat, the UAE has undertaken several complementary lines of effort designed to counter the rise of groups like ISIL-Y and AQAP. Our continued support is critical to enabling the Emirates’ “lead by example” approach to regional security, both on the ground and in the information domain. Given our shared enduring security interests, the U.S.-UAE relationship will almost certainly grow in importance in the coming days.

The UAE’s military capability is arguably the most mature among the Gulf States. The Emirates have demonstrated the ability and political willingness to plan and conduct expeditionary military operations, as evidenced by their recent deployment of forces in support of the Saudi-led operation in Yemen. They also provide critical support for coalition operations in Afghanistan. Going forward, we will look to strengthen our security cooperation partnership with the UAE through continued engagement and a robust Foreign Military Sales program. We also will pursue opportunities for increased collaboration in support of CT initiatives across our AOR.

**Qatar** continues to play an influential diplomatic and military role throughout the Central Region and has demonstrated a commitment to strengthening relations with the United States. This year, the Qataris played a central role in the Counter-ISIL Coalition operations in Syria, in addition to providing forces to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. It is the first time Qatar has supported two simultaneous operations outside its borders. These dual track efforts place significant demand on the Qatari military’s 11,000-member force. The Qataris, with our support, will need to find ways

to manage the demand while they take steps to enhance the capability of their military forces. In 2014, Qatar was the largest FMS customer in the world with \$11 billion in new cases (Patriots, Apaches, and Javelin). Qatar is also looking to further expand its Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) system by acquiring Terminal High Altitude Area Defense and Early Warning Radar capabilities. Qatar's efforts to modernize its military and increase its self-defense capabilities, present an opportunity for the U.S. to enhance its interoperability with an important regional partner. We will coordinate those missile defense efforts as part of our broader engagement with the GCC on ballistic missile defense.

We value our strong military-to-military relationship with the Qataris. Over the past 20 years, Qatar has provided the U.S. with unmatched regional access through basing of American forces at Camp Al Sayliyah and Al Udeid Air Base (AUAB). Of note, AUAB is the single-largest U.S. logistical hub in theater and the Combined Air Operations Center at AUAB provides critical oversight and direction to all U.S. air operations in the region. Qatar's long-demonstrated history of open partnership makes it one of our strongest partners in the Central Region.

The U.S. enjoys a historically strong and productive partnership with the **Kingdom of Bahrain**. Bahrain hosts the headquarters of United States Fifth Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces in Manama (Naval Support Activity Bahrain and Isa Air Base), and it enjoys status as a major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization ally. Bahrain is also a member of the Counter-ISIL Coalition; its air crews participated in the initial airstrikes in Syria in September 2014. Additionally, the Bahrainis remain active supporters of the Saudi-led operations in Yemen. The Kingdom faces a persistent threat from Iran via malign proxy activity within its borders. USCENTCOM actively supports the Bahrainis in their efforts to counter this threat.

Our military-to-military relationship improved in recent months since full resumption of U.S. FMS after a three-year delay. Bahrain also seeks to make improvements to its aviation capabilities, specifically by purchasing new F-16s and upgrading its ageing fleet. We continue to urge the Bahrainis to further their commitment to political reconciliation and dialogue, which is fundamental to mitigating the risks posed by sectarian radicalization. The Bahraini government has implemented a number of reforms since 2011. We are encouraging them to pursue and mature these reforms and other similar institutions, as it is imperative that internal security gains against tangible threats do not lead to harsh restrictions on legitimate and non-violent expressions of political disagreement.

The U.S. and **Oman** maintain close relations based upon a shared desire for a peaceful and prosperous Gulf Region, and we greatly appreciate Sultan Qaboos bin Said al Said's leadership.

Oman is strategically positioned on the Arabian Sea and provides critical support to the U.S. in the form of access, basing, and overflight permissions that greatly enable coalition efforts in the region.

While Oman's strategic approach does occasionally cause tension between Oman and its GCC neighbors, it also presents USCENTCOM with opportunities to work with the Sultanate as an intermediary between adversarial states. In general, our bilateral military-to-military relationship with Oman remains strong, underpinned by the U.S. and Oman's shared interest in maintaining open sea lines of communication in the Gulf and strengthening land borders in order to prevent the infiltration of AQ and other VEOs into the Sultanate.

**The Levant** – The Greater Levant sub-region is the epicenter of ethno-sectarian tensions and conflict in the USCENTCOM AOR. The volatility reflects the makeup of the sub-region's

populace with Sunnis, Shia, Kurds, Christians, Druze and others living together in mixed neighborhoods. Also adding to the unrest is the growing competition between AQ and ISIL. AQ shifted some of its command and control to Syria to support its most prominent affiliate, al Nusrah Front. At the same time, the core of ISIL's self-proclaimed Caliphate resides in the Levant. Thus, the Levant is where you have two organizations' senior leadership in competition for global jihad. At the same time, the sub-region is struggling to manage the effects of the civil war in Syria. If not contained, the conflict, now in its fifth year, risks sparking a broader regional war. It also has caused a burgeoning humanitarian crisis affecting Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. Stability in the Levant is impacted by the competition for influence by outside actors, principally Iran, China, and Russia. The instability in the Levant also threatens Israel, an important U.S. ally. The close coordination between USCENTCOM and U.S. European Command is essential given Turkey and Israel's role in the Levant's security environment.

**Lebanon** is an important and valued partner in the region. Lebanon faces an array of interlocking challenges that include sustained threats from ISIL and other VEOs; a steady influx of refugees that only exacerbates long-standing sectarian tensions and ongoing humanitarian and economic crises; and a political deadlock in Beirut that has left Lebanon without a president for over 19 months with none of the major political institutions of the state – the presidency, parliament, and the cabinet – functioning adequately today. ISIL and AQ affiliate Al Nusrah Front pose potential threats to Lebanon's security and stability along Lebanon's border with Syria, but also in urban areas deep within the country's border. In November 2015, ISIL conducted coordinated suicide attacks against Shia targets in Southern Beirut killing 41 civilians. The attacks threatened to ignite increased Sunni-Shia tensions, but tensions were diffused by an immediate and coordinated response by Lebanese security forces. These attacks were at least partly in response to Lebanese Hezbollah's

(LH) active involvement in the Syria conflict. Although Lebanon's official contributions in support of the Counter-ISIL Campaign have been limited to CT efforts inside of Lebanon's borders, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have been heavily engaged in the fight against extremists with near daily engagements along Lebanon's border with Syria.

Lebanon faces a refugee crisis of historic proportion with more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees and 1.5 million Syrian refugees, which is equal to a quarter of Lebanon's population. The latter presents an economic and humanitarian burden for Lebanon, while also posing a security threat as some Syrian refugees may be vulnerable to Sunni extremist influences. In order to effectively cope with the refugee crisis resulting from the Syria conflict, Lebanon will require significant international assistance long-term. Meanwhile, top Lebanese officials have suggested that there may be a need for an international intervention to address the presidential vacancy and political impasse which has resulted in poor government services and large-scale public demonstrations.

In the context of these challenges, the LAF is one of Lebanon's only functioning national institutions. We enjoy a strong military-to-military relationship with the LAF, and our support has been critical to its success. Our special operations forces have conducted extensive joint training exercises and have well-established relationships. The LAF has been a staunch USCENTCOM partner for nearly a decade, receiving almost \$1 billion in combined assistance from the U.S. during this period. During FY2015, we provided \$84 million in foreign military financing (FMF), \$80 million in CT assistance, and also trained over 2,000 LAF soldiers in the U.S. Our special operations forces have conducted extensive joint training exercises and have well-established relationships. Because of its success against ISIL and other VEOs, the LAF enjoys strong support across Lebanese sects. Our continued support of the LAF is critical and will

focus on developing much-needed ISR, strike, and aerial fires capabilities to ensure sustained success against ISIL and Al Nusra Front along the border and to counter-balance LH.

The **Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan** remains one of the United States' most reliable partners.

Like many in the region, Jordan faces economic challenges that are exacerbated by the Syrian civil war, the associated refugee flow, and a generally unstable regional security environment. The instability caused by the "underlying currents," namely the "youth bulge," makes Jordan's populace highly susceptible to radicalization. The country's leadership is particularly concerned about the growing threat from ISIL and Al Nusra Front emanating from Syria. The Jordan Armed Forces (JAF) remain active participants in the Counter-ISIL Campaign.

Jordan's partnership and leadership are critical to advancing U.S. regional objectives. Jordan is widely considered the Arab voice of moderation in the region and Jordanian leadership continues to play a critical role in countering the extremist ideologies that contribute to instability. In return, Jordan requires economic assistance for military cooperation and to stabilize its economy. In FY 2015, Jordan received \$385 million in FMF. Congress appropriated \$450 million in FMF for Jordan in FY 2016. Additionally, Jordan receives \$3.8 million annually for International Military Education and Training (IMET), and more funding than any other partner to date from the Counterterrorism Partnerships Fund. The JAF's ability to procure U.S. weapons and equipment and increase interoperability with U.S. forces depends on this funding, which also provides Jordan with a strong message of assurance that we will help to defend them from extremist threats. Finally, Jordan requires continued international assistance to deal with its sizeable refugee population that consists of approximately 600,000 UN-registered Syrian refugees, the majority of whom compete with locals for employment and housing, creating the potential for increased

tensions. In the past 24 months, USCENTCOM invested \$5.4 million for humanitarian affairs projects inside of Jordan.

**Egypt** remains an anchor state in the Central Region. It is a key strategic partner of the United States in both the counter-ISIL fight and with respect to our many shared security interests, including securing peace with Israel, achieving regional stability, and enhancing security of the Suez Canal. While daily life is returning to normal after four years of political upheaval, including recently conducted parliamentary elections, Egypt still faces a number of internal and external challenges, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, which is now home to the ISIL affiliate, ISIL-Sinai (ISIL-S) that threatens not only Egyptian stability, but also the Multinational Force & Observers (MFO) mission, and is strongly suspected of downing a Russian civilian airliner. Egypt is also increasingly concerned about ISIL-Libya's ability to impact its western border.

The cornerstone of the U.S.-Egypt relationship is the military-to-military partnership with the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAF), forged through decades of close coordination, exercises, and interdependence. After a downturn in relations in 2013, we have seen the relationship enter a gradual recovery period. The Egyptians support our overflight requests and provide our naval forces with Suez Canal transit courtesies that provide expedited access to critical waterways. Egypt routinely deploys peacekeeping troops in support of operations around the globe. USG aid and support to Egypt, including FMF, remain crucial to Egypt's fight against ISIL-S as we work closely with the EAF to provide both the equipment and the training required to make the transition from a force focused on conventional warfare to one that can defeat a terrorist enemy using asymmetrical tactics. We are focused on helping Egypt improve the security of their borders in an effort to stop the flow of foreign fighters and equipment transiting from Libya and the Sudan through Egypt and

into the Central Region.

A sizeable portion of Egypt's current military leadership is U.S.-trained and has indicated a keen interest in securing additional U.S. support to address evolving security threats. It will be imperative to leverage these ties as we look to assist the Egyptian military in their ongoing efforts to bring improved stability to North Africa, including the Sinai Peninsula. Also, we want to help them to further modernize and reform their security forces to better enable them to address relevant threats and play a larger role in providing for regional stability. Specifically, we will need to focus on updating Egypt's counter-insurgency/CT doctrine and training programs to better address the unique nature of the terrorist threats facing the region. We continue to provide much-needed support to the MFO mission, whose presence has been a linchpin for Egyptian-Israeli peace and cooperation since its inception over 30 years ago. With the support of the Egyptians, we have taken significant measures in recent months to increase the protection of our forces assigned to Task Force Sinai and the MFO mission writ large.

Egypt has not contributed forces in support of the Counter-ISIL Campaign in Iraq and Syria. They are supporting the Saudi-led fight in Yemen, and they continue to place pressure on ISIL affiliates in both the Sinai and Libya. Additionally, Egypt's regional leadership carries much influence among our Arab partners and can help to promote USCENTCOM's broader regional objectives. We continue to look for ways to integrate Egypt into the Counter-ISIL Coalition and in support of our CT efforts across the region.

**Central and South Asia** – We view the CASA sub-region, not as a single entity, but as seven individual countries, each with its own political and economic trajectory and each sharing a unique bilateral relationship with the U.S. While we have many shared interests, we are paying especially

close attention to the Central Asian States' (CAS) reaction to the planned U.S./NATO downsizing in Afghanistan set to begin in late 2016. Of note, transit access by way of the Northern Distribution Network, used to supply our troops in Afghanistan, is provided by Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Our primary goal remains unchanged and that is to prevent the establishment of terrorist safe havens in the CASA sub-region, while acknowledging the challenges posed by trans-national extremism, narco-trafficking, and the return of foreign fighters. These countries face additional pressures from an increasingly assertive Russia. China is seeking to expand its economic influences in the sub-region as well. In light of these challenges, leaders in the region actively seek U.S. engagement, while we continue to encourage greater multi-lateral cooperation with the goal to promote improved security and stability in the region and to preserve the CAS' sovereignty.

We conducted our first CASA Chiefs of Defense (CHOD) Conference in late September. The event was well-attended and highly-productive. Despite their geographic proximity, many of the CHODs had not met nor communicated with one another prior to attending the conference. The conference focused on identifying opportunities for collaboration on issues such as CT, counter-narcotics (CN), border security operations, and the professionalization of their officer and non-commissioned officer corps. It was encouraging to see that, despite their previous reluctance to interact in multi-lateral forums, the CHODs actively participated in the discussions. They also expressed interest in convening a follow-on conference, and several of them expressed a desire to participate in multi-lateral military exercises going forward. The CASA CHODs also expressed a keen interest in finding ways to share intelligence that could further support regional CT operations. On 14-15 March, the CASA DMI (Director of Military Intelligence) Conference will be held at

USCENTCOM Headquarters in Tampa, Florida. Six of the seven CASA States will be represented. The U.S.-**Pakistan** military-to-military relationship remains stable. Key contributing factors are our security assistance, and the Coalition Support Fund. In December 2015, we participated in the Defense Consultative Group, a component of the U.S.-Pakistan Strategic Dialogue, which focused on future initiatives that will help to sustain U.S.-Pakistan bilateral defense cooperation on shared security interests.

We are encouraged by some signs from Kabul and Islamabad that point towards a renewed effort at improving Afghanistan-Pakistan relations, and Pakistani support for the reconciliation process in Afghanistan. The Pakistan military continues to play a visible role in efforts to reduce safe havens in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, while at the same time actively countering VEOs, including AQ, Tehrik e Taliban - Pakistan, and the newly-emerged ISIL-KP. During the most recent fighting season we saw increased collaboration among Afghan and Pakistani military leadership. Commanders at the corps level have met multiple times and continue their efforts to increase interoperability between the forces. Both countries' military leaders also are working to secure a bilateral border standard operating procedure. In the meantime, we need Pakistan to take decisive actions against the Haqqani Network (HQN). The Pakistanis are uniquely positioned to counter the HQN, which remains the greatest threat to our forces and to stability in Afghanistan long-term.

Progress on the India-Pakistan relationship is hindered by cross-border violence and territorial disputes. However, there have been some encouraging signs and lines of communication remain open as demonstrated by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's meeting in Pakistan in late December 2015 and the subsequent commitment both

parties to reinitiate the Comprehensive Dialogue. Dialogue between the two countries is critical, especially given that they are both nuclear powers. USCENTCOM will continue to do our part to help encourage and strengthen the critical relationship between Pakistan and its neighbors.

**Kazakhstan** remains the best positioned country in the CASA sub-region with respect to security given its geographic location and strong economic foundation. However, the recent downturn in oil prices and pervasive Russian influence do present growing challenges. Despite these obstacles, the U.S.' relationship with Kazakhstan remains the most well-developed among the Central Asian States. The Kazakhs seek U.S. assistance in modernizing their military forces, and we are taking advantage of the opportunity to further strengthen our bilateral relationship. Specifically, we are helping the Kazakhs to professionalize their non-commissioned officer corps, modernize their military education program, and improve training and personnel management. Additionally, we continue to help the Kazakhs to build a deployable peace-keeping capability. Kazakhstan remains the largest contributor to Afghanistan's stability among the CAS, providing technical and financial support to the Afghan security forces and educational opportunities for Afghan students to study in Kazakhstan.

The **Kyrgyz Republic** faces many of the same security challenges as its neighbors in the region, particularly with respect to the threat posed by VEOs and the flow of narcotics. While our military-to-military relationship with the Kyrgyz has been historically positive, it remains challenged by the absence of a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA), which guarantees U.S. service members legal protections while in country. The DCA with then-Kyrgyzstan ended on 11 July 2014 with the closure of the Transit Center at Manas International Airport. While this has strained our military-to-military relationship, we intend to pursue bilateral cooperation on a case-

by-case basis.

**Tajikistan** has been heavily impacted by Russia's economic downturn and by increased instability in northern Afghanistan. Moreover, intense pressure from the Kremlin, including the presence of Russian military bases inside of Tajikistan, limits our military-to-military cooperation.

Nevertheless, Tajikistan still desires a strong partnership with the U.S. to help address external security concerns, maintain internal stability, and safeguard Tajikistan's sovereignty. Our mutual security interests provide several opportunities for cooperation in the areas of CT, CN, border security along the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border, as well as the development of a deployable peacekeeping force. Our military-to-military relationship is growing comparatively faster than our other relationships in the CASA sub-region.

Like other hydrocarbon-exporting countries, **Turkmenistan** has had to confront falling gas prices and remains concerned about perceived instability in northern Afghanistan. Turkmenistan is selective in accepting military cooperation programs, declining to participate in most military events, conferences, and exercises. U.S. cooperation with the Turkmen is primarily focused on counter-narcotics, disaster preparedness, and medical service readiness. These three areas provide us with engagement opportunities to build those partner capabilities that are acceptable to the Turkmen and also help to sustain and even strengthen our relationship going forward.

A shared border with Afghanistan and a heavy domestic security presence have helped to shield **Uzbekistan** from significant threats. Despite their stated aversion to foreign blocs and multi-lateral engagements, our relationship with the Uzbeks continues to grow stronger. Bilateral military-to-military opportunities are focused on improving border security, CT, CN, and stemming the flow of foreign fighters. The Uzbeks, like other CASA nations, remain concerned about the potential

return of radicalized fighters from Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan. Our military-to-military relationship with the Uzbeks remains positive. By expanding our collaboration, we expect to improve the professionalism and capacity of Uzbekistan's armed forces, which is the largest military force in Central Asia.

**Our Strategic Approach.** The effective employment of our "Manage-Prevent-Shape" strategic approach largely depends upon the capacity and readiness of our forward-deployed military forces and Service prepositioned materiel capabilities. Equally important are our efforts aimed at building our regional partners' capacity and strengthening our bilateral and multilateral relationships. This is achieved principally through key leader engagements and our training and joint exercise programs.

**Building Partner Capacity (BPC).** A key component of USCENTCOM's Theater Strategy focuses on building the capacity of partner nations to enable them to assume a greater role in providing for the security of their sovereign territories and counter common threats. Joint training exercises, key leader engagements, and FMS and FMF programs continue to represent the key pillars of our BPC strategy. Also critical are relevant authorities and programs noted in the FY2016 President's Budget, namely the Global Train and Equip authority and Counter Terrorism Partnerships Fund. BPC is a low-cost and high-return investment. Tangible by-products of our BPC efforts include increased access and influence, enhanced interoperability, and improved security for our forward deployed forces, diplomatic sites, and other U.S. interests. The practice of working "by, with, and through" our regional partners serves to enhance the legitimacy and durability of our actions and presence in the region. Most importantly, having strong partners enhances our collective capability and interoperability, allows for increased burden sharing, and

improves the likelihood of success, particularly in the event of unforeseen contingencies.

Over the past year, it has been encouraging to see a number of our regional partners take a more active role in addressing threats and protecting their sovereign territories. In particular, the GCC's role in addressing regional security challenges has grown exponentially. Our Gulf partners are to be commended for their leadership and their efforts in a number of areas. The convergence of interests, namely the need to counter the threat posed by ISIL and other VEOs, has afforded a unique opportunity to strengthen ties among nations while contributing to improving stability and security throughout the region. We should do all that we can to support and enable their continued collaboration as we work to enhance our collective capabilities.

The fact is that contingency operations provide an opportunity to take a hard look at ourselves and identify areas where we may need to make improvements. They also provide opportunities to strengthen our commitment to our regional partners. They will prove increasingly important going forward as we confront the growing threat posed by ISIL, AQ and other VEOs, and as we manage the challenges posed by Iran and other malign actors in the region.

The President reiterated our strong commitment to bolstering the defense capabilities of our GCC partners during the U.S.-GCC Summit held at Camp David in May 2015. Building on that Summit, GCC members have welcomed enhanced U.S. security engagement, but implementation of commitments to follow-up on the Camp David Summit has been uneven. In some areas – including arms transfers, ballistic missile defense, and CT cooperation – we have had productive initial engagements and follow-up efforts are underway. In other areas, most notably special operations training and maritime cooperation, the GCC has been slow to act on U.S. offers of additional cooperation and assistance. Over the next year, we will continue to build on the Camp David

Summit, prioritizing implementation of GCC commitments that would reaffirm our commitment to Gulf security and also support our two top priorities: defeating ISIL and other extremists, and addressing conflicts that are undermining regional stability. Our security assurance and assistance, and the steps we are taking with our GCC partners to strengthen their capacity to deal with asymmetric threats, are designed to put them in a far stronger position so that they can engage Iran politically – clear-eyed, without illusions, and from a position of strength. We look forward to seeing the initiatives translate into credible, enduring capabilities that contribute to improved regional security and stability.

**USCENTCOM Exercise and Training Program.** The USCENTCOM Exercise and Training Program continues to grow in complexity and relevance with extended participation throughout the AOR during FY2015 and into the 1<sup>st</sup> Quarter of FY2016. The program affords meaningful opportunities that assist with BPC efforts, improve interoperability among partner nations, maintain U.S. readiness, and provide for key leader engagements.

During FY2015, the command executed 51 USCENTCOM and/or component command-sponsored bilateral and multi-lateral exercises. These included EAGER LION 15, which was hosted by Jordan and included naval, air, and land assets from 14 partner nations operating at 14 different locations and totaling over 8,500 personnel, including some 4,500 U.S. military and civilian support personnel. The International Mine Countermeasures Exercise is planned for the spring of 2016, taking place in over 8,000 square miles of navigable waterway and uniting more than 40 nations, including over 7,000 global military service members and over 40 naval vessels and numerous other warfighting assets in defense of the region's maritime commons. Each of the 51 exercises contributes to the readiness of U.S. and partner nation forces and the advancement of our national

interests. Our exercise and training program also serves to demonstrate mutual commitment to regional security and combined command, control, and communications interoperability (C3I). Other program impacts include military-to-military engagement, integrated staff planning, the execution of joint and combined operations, the development of coalition warfare, and the refinement of complementary warfare capabilities.

**Required Capabilities and Resources.** The security environment in the Central Region is likely to remain highly volatile for the foreseeable future. We must ensure that we are ready and able to conduct steady state operations, deter our adversaries, reassure our regional partners, and respond to unforeseen contingencies from a wide range of actors and VEOs.

In order to effectively protect and promote U.S. and partner nation interests in the region, USCENTCOM must maintain a strong forward presence and be adequately resourced with the necessary capabilities and force posture, including forces, equipment, and enablers.

USCENTCOM's posture and presence remain the primary means for providing the National Command Authority with military options in the region. Our required capabilities include:

**Forces and Equipment.** Forward-deployed rotational joint forces that are trained, equipped, mission-capable, and ready to respond quickly and effectively, including fighter and airlift assets, surveillance platforms, BMD assets, naval vessels, ground forces, and cyber teams, are essential to the protection of our core interests, and supporting and reassuring our regional partners. A capable and well-supported forward presence can help to prevent conflict through deterrence, manage crisis escalation through early intervention, and provides our national-level leadership with a broad set of response options. We continue to develop a sustainable, flexible, long-term

posture that provides the necessary presence, access, and partnerships to support enduring missions and activities across the USCENTCOM AOR.

We remain increasingly concerned that our demand for replenishment of critical precision munitions continues to put a strain on Service budgets. At the same time, industry's capacity to produce key precision munitions cannot keep pace with the demand from USCENTCOM, other geographic combatant commands, as well as our Coalition partners looking to purchase munitions through existing security assistance programs in support of USCENTCOM theater-wide operations. We work with the Service headquarters to prioritize precision munitions and continue to seek increases in the procurement and AOR allocation of our most sophisticated and precise weapon systems (e.g., TLAMs, JASSM, PAC-3, ATACMs), as well as authorization for construction of munitions storage facilities within the AOR.

USCENTCOM requires continued regeneration, reset, and modernization of designated Service pre-positioned equipment capability sets. These capability sets and associated materiel represent critical enablers essential for effective force employment in support of ongoing operations and unforeseen contingencies. They allow our national-level leadership to respond to a diverse set of crisis scenarios, to include preventing disruptions to trade and security that could have disastrous impacts on the global economy. Pre-positioned equipment reconstitution and regeneration must remain a Service priority, recognizing that equipment shortfalls continue to impact indirect fire, sustainment, and troop support capabilities.

**Information Operations.** Information Operations (IO) remains a top priority for USCENTCOM and an important element of the broader 'whole of government' effort to counter our adversaries and

protect our core national interests. Our adversaries, including ISIL, use the information battlespace to great effect. We must actively counter this asymmetric threat, recognizing that IO will endure well beyond today's major combat and counter-insurgency operations. Of note, Iran and proxy actors actively threaten our interests and the interests of our regional partners and they are enabled by robust IO efforts. Our IO capabilities, both offensive and defensive, are designed to disrupt and counter these and other threats. They also may be used to promote the messages of moderates in order to counter the radical ideologies that fuel much of the conflict and instability that plague the Central Region. To date, investments in IO have produced a cost-effective, non-lethal tool for disrupting VEO activity across the region. We will need to build upon the existing capability and improve our effectiveness and that of our partners operating in the information battlespace.

**Cyber Operations.** USCENTCOM communication networks are the most critical enabler for our deployed service members and regional military partners. Our complex joint and coalition command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C5ISR) systems infrastructure is essential for enabling mission command, precision targeting, intelligence processing and dissemination, CT actions, IAMD, disaster relief missions, cyber, sustainment, and combat operations throughout the AOR. These missions require assured availability, integrity, and confidentiality to provide accurate data for precision weapons and navigation systems, as well as a robust communications backbone infrastructure that provides the required bandwidth for crucial aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) processing, exploitation, and dissemination and distributed mission command. We must also continue to develop and synchronize cyber capabilities with kinetic operations to achieve key security objectives. Congressional support is crucial to the continued improvement of cyber security and offensive capabilities necessary to provide mission assurance, deterrence and

dominance in this critical and highly contested domain. A successful cyber defense requires vigilance and continuous investment in order to sustain an advantage over adversaries that are constantly improving their cyber threat capabilities.

**Integrated Air and Missile Defense.** A robust IAMD capability remains increasingly important to us and our regional partners as threat technology improves and systems become more flexible, mobile, survivable, reliable, and accurate. Today, the global demand for BMD capabilities far exceeds supply. In particular, there is a need for additional upper- and lower-tier interceptors, surface and space-based surveillance and warning, and ISR platforms to seek and destroy ballistic missiles and rockets and unmanned aerial assets. USCENTCOM mitigates some of this risk through increased IAMD integration, interoperability, and burden-sharing with our partners. However, a gap does still exist that must be addressed. Providing IAMD protection to deployed U.S. forces and in support of critical infrastructure is crucial to mission success and provides a visible deterrence to regional aggression. Moreover, it signals U.S. commitment to regional partners, while providing flexibility to respond to regional contingencies. Our bases in the USCENTCOM AOR will increasingly be vulnerable to the threat posed by ballistic missiles if we continue along the current trajectory. Congress' support for the Department's investment in this area is essential.

**Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance Assets.** Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities remain challenged by supply-versus-demand limitations. The demand for ISR has increased substantially as a result of the Counter-ISIL Campaign, coupled with the enduring need to maintain a persistent eye on strategic risks and possible threats to critical U.S. national security interests. Meanwhile, collection in A2/AD environments continues to present a tough challenge. Our demand for multi-discipline, low-observable ISR with strike capability that

can operate in adverse weather conditions and non-permissive environments is increasing. If we do not meet the requirements, we can expect that our information dominance, situational awareness, and security posture will diminish accordingly. Although overhead systems constitute a crucial component of the intelligence collection enterprise, they lack the ubiquity, persistence, and fidelity to fulfill our ISR gaps by themselves. Low observable platforms with improved sensors and endurance are critical to a number of USCENTCOM plans, while permissive ISR systems play a key role in COIN and CT missions. With respect to Iraq and Syria, there is need for a robust ISR capability to develop and maintain situational awareness of the security environment, particularly in denied and ungoverned spaces and in the absence of a larger U.S. ground presence. While we are looking to our coalition partners to help fill some of the ISR demand, shortages do remain that must be addressed.

**Required Authorities and Resources.** The realities of the current fiscal environment continue to impact USCENTCOM HQs, our five component commands, established combined/joint task forces, and 18 country teams. Provided the right authorities and resources, our world-class Civ-Mil team can and will successfully accomplish any mission. With that in mind, we sincerely appreciate Congress' continued support for key authorities and appropriations needed to sustain current and future operations and to respond to unforeseen contingencies. The required authorities and resources listed below will enable USCENTCOM to shape positive outcomes for the future.

**Iraq Train & Equip Fund.** The Iraq Train and Equip Fund (ITEF) includes a multi-layered approach to assist the Iraqi military and other associated security forces by contributing to the Coalition effort to fill urgent equipment shortfalls and training deficiencies. As of mid-December 2015, we trained and/or equipped more than 19,000 Iraqi Security Forces, including Counter-

terrorism Service (CTS), Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF), Peshmerga, and Sunnis through ITEF-related activities. Most graduates of the ISOF Commando Course in Area IV and BPC-trained Peshmerga battalions have been involved in combat operations since completing Coalition-led training. These trained forces appear to be performing better than their contemporaries who have not undergone Coalition-led training. U.S. support in FY2017 is essential to the success of the military campaign in Iraq.

**Syria Train & Equip Fund.** The forces we train and equip continue to show resolve and effectiveness in the fight against ISIL inside of Syria. A stand-alone fund that provides the flexibility to adapt to the changing battlefield environment while permitting the execution of our strategy to train, equip, resupply, and enable forces fighting ISIL in Syria is critical to future success. Such a fund would enable streamlined funds flow, transparency, accountability, and responsiveness that positions us to reinforce success as it occurs on the battlefield.

**The Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF).** We continue to see tremendous achievements made possible by the ASFF as the ANDSF and the Afghanistan Security Institutions (ASI) steadily improve. While our ASFF budget request has decreased by 70 percent since 2011, the capabilities and activities enabled by this appropriation remain critical to continued success in Afghanistan. Furthermore, our support reflects U.S. confidence in the ANDSF's ability to develop and mature into a capable, credible, sustainable, and independent force. The FY2017 ASFF budget request for just under \$3.5 billion continues to posture the ANDSF for long-term sustainability. The Afghans greatly appreciate U.S. support, they are responsive to our advice, and they understand that funding is neither unconditional nor indefinite.

**Foreign Military Financing and Foreign Military Sales.** Our need for continued Congressional funding of FMF programs that support USCENTCOM security cooperation objectives cannot be overstated. The Central Region accounts for nearly half of all global FMS. Our partners in the region want U.S. equipment because they recognize that it is the best in the world. It also represents a very effective means for establishing long-term relationships between the U.S. and our partner nations and ensures greater interoperability between our militaries. We appreciate Congressional support for interagency initiatives designed to streamline the FMS and FMF process. We also need our regional partners to do their part to ensure the timely execution of all FMS requests.

**Excess Defense Articles (EDA)/ Foreign Excess Personal Property (FEPP).** The EDA program represents an integral component of our BPC efforts and has proven beneficial in our engagements with our regional partners. We have reaped the benefits of this authority several times in the last year, enabling us to support requirements in Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and other countries located within the USCENTCOM AOR or participating in operations with U.S. forces. Several other EDA transfers to the UAE and Egypt are pending. In the same light, the FEPP authorization has allowed us to transfer non-military equipment acquired as part of our base closures and reductions to Iraqi and Afghan security forces, and government ministries in Afghanistan, Kuwait, and the Kyrgyz Republic.

**Coalition Support.** The Coalition is central to the power of our operations and has never been stronger or more responsive than it has been over the last 18 months. The flexible authorities and funding that Congress continues to provide directly enables the size and diversity of the Coalition, which is key to its effectiveness. Together, the Coalition Support Fund, Coalition Readiness

Support Program, and Lift and Sustain facilitate broad participation in combined military operations, thereby reducing the burden on U.S. forces and enabling activities that would otherwise not be possible.

**Commander's Emergency Response Program (CERP).** Regardless of the size, shape, or mission of U.S. forces, your continued support for CERP is essential as it provides an invaluable tool to commanders. CERP funds are routinely the only time-sensitive means to respond to unanticipated events and requirements, implement small-scale efforts that provide immediate and direct benefit to local populations to enhance protection of U.S. forces, and enable U.S. forces to make condolence payments for the loss of life or property damage.

**Military Construction (MILCON).** We continue to leverage existing infrastructure and host nation funding, as well as maritime posture and reach-back capabilities to meet steady state and surge requirements. In some cases, MILCON is still required to expand infrastructure capabilities to facilitate sustainment support for U.S. forces and operations. Given our adversaries' continued development of A2/AD capabilities, it is imperative that we facilitate the dispersion and hardening of key infrastructure at our major operating hubs and spokes.

**Long-term C4 Sustainment Plan.** USCENTCOM, our Service Components, Combined Joint Task Forces (CJTF), and our deployed warfighters rely heavily on communications systems to provide critical Joint and Coalition command and control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C5ISR) and logistics services across the USCENTCOM AOR. Without a diverse and survivable communications infrastructure and bandwidth delivery, via both satellite communications and terrestrial fiber leases to the current U.S.

force posture locations, all current and future Mission Command Operations are at great risk. Continued resource support is essential to maintaining the current U.S. force presence in the USCENTCOM AOR, and to enable rapid support for any future contingency operations.

**The U.S. Central Command Team.** The outstanding men and women who make up the USCENTCOM team continue to do tremendous work in support of the command's broad mission encompassing a vast and highly volatile geographic area. They shoulder great responsibility and their day-to-day actions are of enormous consequence. We have an obligation to ensure that they are resourced appropriately and have the necessary tools and equipment, a responsive support structure, and safe, secure, and respectful environments to live and work in. We also take very seriously our obligation to our families; we could not do what we do without their support. They are important and valued members of our USCENTCOM team.

The team also benefits from the unique capability provided by our Coalition Coordination Center, which consists of more than 200 foreign military officers from nearly 60 partner nations.

USCENTCOM is the only geographic combatant command with this unique capability, and it continues to pay enormous dividends in terms of information sharing, collaboration, and outreach.

**Conclusion.** Our overarching goal at USCENTCOM is to move the Central Region in the direction of increased stability and security. It is an ambitious task and success will require that all elements of the USG and the international community work together in pursuit of this shared objective. We are seeing the power of such collaboration in the ongoing fight against ISIL in Iraq and Syria. The enemy's capability has been greatly degraded over the past 18+ months and that reflects the efforts of the indigenous forces supported and enabled by the 66-nation Counter-ISIL

Coalition. Much work remains, but we do see progress being made across the breadth and depth of the battlespace and throughout the USCENTCOM AOR. Going forward, we will take direct military action where necessary to counter malign actors and activities that pose a threat to our core national interests and the interests of our partner nations. At the same time, we will continue to support the governments and people of the region in their efforts to build needed capacity, enabling them to take a more active and pronounced role in providing for the security of their sovereign spaces. This will serve to increase burden-sharing among nations, strengthen partnerships, and expand cooperation. Ultimately, these various efforts will enable us to improve stability and security across the strategically-important Central Region.

Today, more than 84,000 of the very best Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, Coastguardsmen and Civilians assigned to or associated with U.S. Central Command are selflessly serving in difficult and dangerous places around the globe. They continue to do an exceptional job in support of the USCENTCOM mission and our Nation. Our people are our most important assets. We are enormously proud of them and their families. They are and will remain our foremost priority.

*USCENTCOM: Ready, Engaged, Vigilant!*