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Posture Statement

STATEMENT OF GENERAL LLOYD J. AUSTIN III ON THE POSTURE OF U.S. CENTRAL COMMAND

March 8th, 2016



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, and 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 shared spaces (including the cyber commons), 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.



Iraq-Syria (Operation Inherent Resolve). 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 resupply. 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 storage 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). 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. 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 girls. 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 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 (VEO). 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":



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 (Afghanistan).

This year marks the 25th 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.

Bahrain

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.

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