



February 13, 2020

United States Central Command

According to the U.S. Unified Command Plan, the Department of Defense (DOD) document that articulates the division of operational responsibilities amongst the 11 Combatant Commands (CoCOMs), United States Central Command (CENTCOM) has command authority over U.S. forces in the Middle East and West/Central Asia.

CENTCOM was formally established by DOD on January 1, 1983. Its area of responsibility (AOR) comprises Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, Yemen, Iran, Turkmenistan, Lebanon, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Accordingly, its geography spans more than 4 million square miles and is populated by more than 550 million people from 22 ethnic groups, speaking 18 languages with hundreds of dialects and professing multiple religions that transcend national borders. Headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base (AFB) in Tampa, Florida, CENTCOM is commanded by Marine Corps General Kenneth F. McKenzie, who previously served as the Director of Strategic Plans and Policy in the Joint Staff.

Component Commands

As with other CoCOMs, CENTCOM is a headquarters; no military units are permanently assigned to it. CENTCOM operates through component commands—one for each of the U.S. armed services, along with a joint special operations component. Each component command may or may not have military forces assigned to it in theater.

- **U.S. Army Central (ARCENT):** ARCENT is headquartered at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, and has a forward headquarters in Kuwait.
- **U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT):** NAVCENT has its headquarters in Manama, Bahrain, the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet.
- **U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT):** AFCENT is also headquartered at Shaw AFB, South Carolina, and has a forward headquarters in Qatar.
- **U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command (MARCENT):** MARCENT has its headquarters at MacDill AFB, Florida.
- **U.S. Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT):** SOCCENT is headquartered at MacDill AFB, Florida, and maintains a forward headquarters in Qatar.

CENTCOM and National Strategic Priorities

CENTCOM's military operations and activities are informed by the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy. In the Trump Administration's view, effectively competing—economically, diplomatically, and militarily—with China and Russia is the key national security challenge facing the United States today. Activities

that can bolster the United States within this competition are therefore to be prioritized over other strategic challenges, including countering violent extremist groups such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State, both of which have been critical challenges in the CENTCOM AOR for decades. Some observers contend that a shift in U.S. resources away from the CENTCOM AOR and toward Europe and Asia is therefore necessary. In his 2019 posture statement, General Votel, the former Commander of CENTCOM, argued that he was laying the foundation for that reprioritization, noting, “[CENTCOM] will not be the main effort of our nation's scarce resources in perpetuity.”

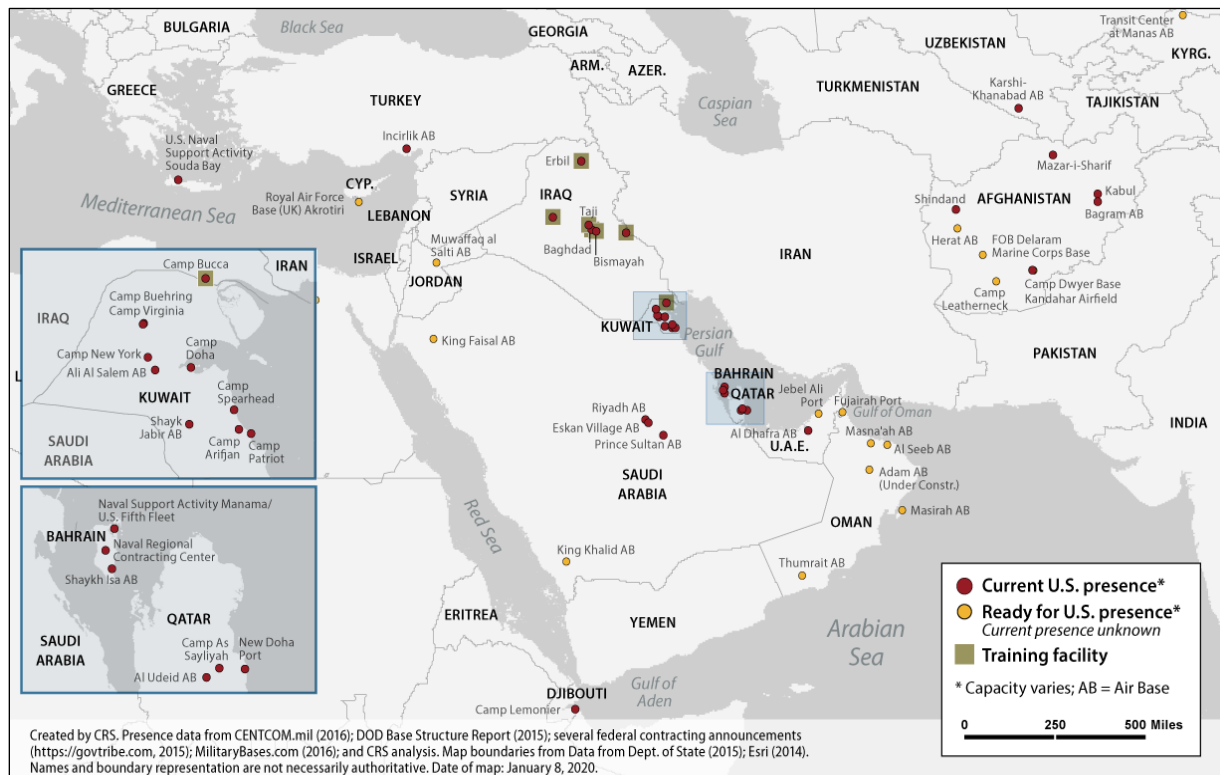
Nevertheless, Iran remains a central challenge to the United States, its allies and its interests in the CENTCOM AOR. In recent months, Iran has become an increasingly militarily assertive as it tries to compel the Trump Administration to ease sanctions. Iran and the United States have carried out strikes on each other's personnel, and Iran has been linked to attacks on U.S. partners and international energy shipments. These developments have led some observers to question whether the proposed strategic reprioritization of threats, including the redirection of assets and capabilities away from the CENTCOM AOR, is feasible. Others contend that despite these developments with Iran, the United States should reduce its strategic emphasis on the region given the scale of the challenges posed by China and Russia. Still others contend that force planning concepts like “dynamic force employment”—that is, the ability to rapidly shift key U.S. military assets from one theater to another—mitigate some of the risk associated with diverting resources away from CENTCOM.

Funding

DOD budget documentation does not break out total funding by COCOM. Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military services (either in their regular, or *base*, budgets or with funding designated for *Overseas Contingency Operations*, or OCO). COCOM funding is, with some exceptions, limited to Operation and Maintenance (O&M) accounts for headquarters and mission support activities. In the case of CENTCOM, the U.S. Air Force is the Combatant Command Support Agent (CCSA) and primarily responsible for funding its headquarters.

For FY2021, the Air Force requested approximately \$313.1 million in the O&M budget subactivity group (SAG) for Combatant Command Mission Operations – USCENTCOM, including \$186.1 million in base budget funding and \$126.9 million in OCO funding. For the same fiscal year, DOD requested \$20.5 billion in OCO funding for direct war costs associated with operations in the CENTCOM AOR, including Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) primarily in Afghanistan and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) primarily in Iraq and Syria.

Figure I. Select Installations in the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility



Regional Conflicts and U.S. Military Operations in the CENTCOM AOR

A number of active conflicts are being waged in the CENTCOM AOR. The United States is a belligerent in some, but not all, of those conflicts:

Afghanistan. The United States has conducted a variety of military operations in Afghanistan since 2001. Today U.S. and coalition partners conduct counterterrorism operations (Operation Freedom's Sentinel) and train Afghan security and defense forces (Resolute Support Mission).

Syria/Iraq. The United States has conducted operations in Syria and Iraq to defeat the Islamic State since 2014 (Operation Inherent Resolve).

Persian Gulf. In fall 2019, the Trump Administration assembled the International Maritime Security Construct, a coalition that monitors Iranian threats which could use military assets to protect commercial shipping in the Gulf. As of November 2019, the IMSC's contributors included the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Albania, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain.

Iran. On January 2, 2020, the United States conducted a drone strike, killing Major General Qasem Soleimani, a move that resulted in Iranian ballistic missile strikes against bases with U.S. troops in Iraq. Apart from U.S.-Iran naval clashes during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War, the United States has been periodically engaged in a hybrid, irregular

conflict with Iran for decades. Since summer 2019, the United States has deployed capabilities to the CENTCOM AOR designed to deter further Iranian military action against U.S. forces, partners, commercial shipping and energy infrastructure in the region.

Yemen. For over a decade, the Republic of Yemen Government has been engaged in multiple armed conflicts to which several internal militant groups and foreign nations are parties.

Further Reading

CRS Report R43960, *Yemen: Civil War and Regional Intervention*, by Jeremy M. Sharp

CRS Report R45122, *Afghanistan: Background and U.S. Policy In Brief*, by Clayton Thomas

CRS Report R44017, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, by Kenneth Katzman

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