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United States Central Command

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 the Department of Defense (DOD) on January 1, 1983. Its area of responsibility (AOR) comprises Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Israel, Kuwait, West Bank & Gaza, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Yemen, Israel, Iran, Turkmenistan, Lebanon, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. CENTCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base (AFB) in Tampa, FL.

Component Commands

As with other Combatant Commands, 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 (with the exception of Space Force), along with a joint special operations component. Each component command may or may not have military forces assigned to it in theater.

CENTCOM and National Strategic Priorities

The Trump and Biden Administrations both described the need to effectively contend—economically, diplomatically, and militarily—with China and Russia as the key national security challenge facing the United States. Accordingly, activities vis-a-vis China and Russia would potentially be prioritized over other strategic challenges that have been prominent in the CENTCOM AOR, including deterring Iranian aggression and countering violent extremist groups such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State. Some observers maintain that a shift in U.S. resources and focus away from the CENTCOM AOR and toward Europe and Asia is advisable for several reasons. These include the reprioritization of military resources that, according to some, might be better applied to challenges in Europe—especially in the wake of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine—or the Indo-Pacific; skepticism about whether continued investments, presence, and operations in the region would result in strategic gains; and the growing threat posed by U.S. strategic competitors such as Russia and China. Others note the continuing influential role some CENTCOM countries play in world energy markets; the region’s geographic location between Europe, Africa, and the Indian Ocean basin; and the possible use of parts of the theater as a proxy for great power competition in arguing for the continued prioritization of U.S. defense presence and engagement in parts of the CENTCOM AOR, specifically the Middle East.

The Biden Administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance (INSSG) notes:

In the Middle East, we will maintain our ironclad commitment to Israel’s security, while seeking to further its integration with its neighbors and resuming our role as promoter of a viable two-state solution. We will work with our regional partners to deter Iranian aggression and threats to sovereignty and territorial integrity, disrupt al-Qaeda and related terrorist networks and prevent an ISIS resurgence, address humanitarian crises, and redouble our efforts to resolve the complex armed conflicts that threaten regional stability. But we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region’s challenges, and we will not give our partners in the Middle East a blank check to pursue policies at odds with American interests and values.

Israel in CENTCOM

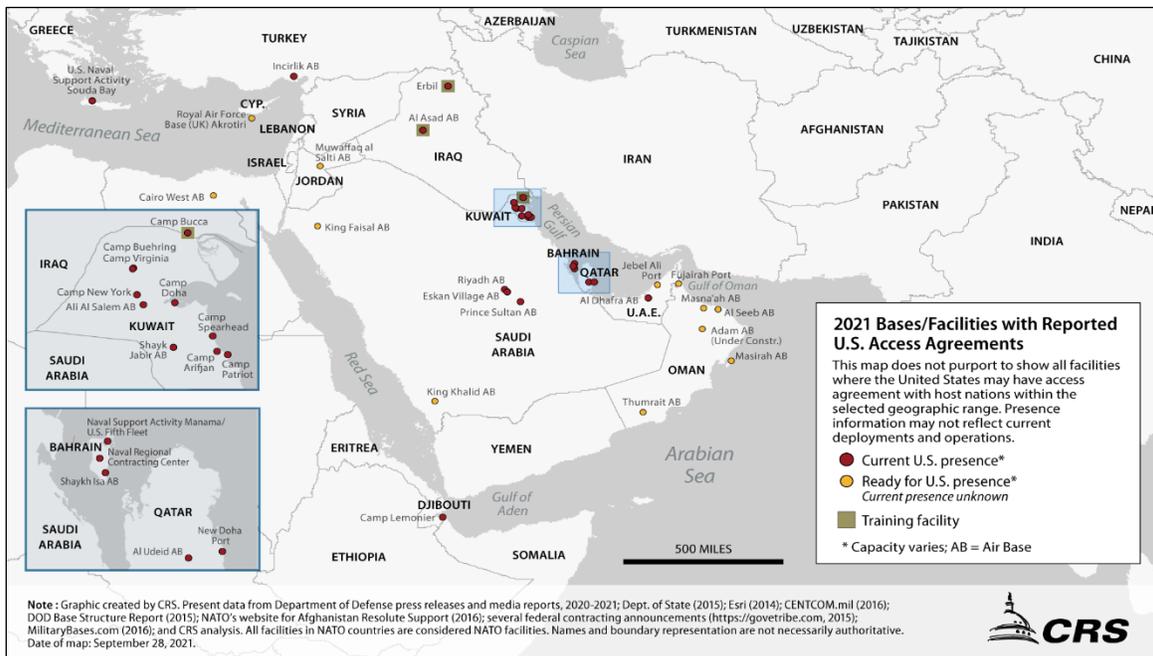
For decades, DOD placed Israel in the European Command (EUCOM) AOR due to significant tensions between Israel and its neighbors in the Middle East. On January 15, 2021, DOD announced that the 2020 UCP review resulted in shifting Israel from the EUCOM AOR to that of CENTCOM. In so doing, DOD noted, “The easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors subsequent to the Abraham Accords has provided a strategic opportunity for the United States to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East.” While improved Israeli ties with some Arab states may allow more open coordination to counter Iran, including on air and missile defense, these states may stay clear of some forms of direct cooperation with Israel (including stationing Israeli personnel on their territory) to avoid provoking Iran or sparking domestic protest.

Funding

DOD budget documentation does not delineate total funding by Combatant Command (CCMD). Forces and operations assigned to the commands are, in general, funded by the military services. CCMD funding justified in budget documentation is, with some exceptions, generally 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 FY2022, the Air Force requested \$372.4 million in the O&M budget sub-activity group (SAG) for Combatant Command Mission Operations – USCENTCOM. Congress provided \$366.54 million—\$5.8 million (1.6%) less than the request.

Figure I. Select Installations in and Around the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility



In addition, DOD requested \$14.3 billion for *direct war requirements* (i.e., combat or combat support costs that are not expected to continue after combat operations end) in the CENTCOM AOR. Of this amount, \$8.9 billion was for Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS) in Afghanistan (including the then-planned withdrawal of U.S. forces from the country) and \$5.4 billion for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria.

Conflicts in the CENTCOM AOR

A number of active conflicts are being waged in the CENTCOM AOR. The United States is a direct or indirect party to hostilities in some of these conflicts.

- **Afghanistan.** The United States prosecuted a variety of military operations in Afghanistan starting in 2001 and ending on August 30, 2021. The Taliban are now again in control of the country. President Biden has stated that the United States will manage any terrorist threats that may emerge from Afghanistan by conducting “over the horizon” counterterrorism strikes.
- **Syria/Iraq.** The United States has conducted operations in Syria and Iraq to defeat the Islamic State group since 2014 (Operation Inherent Resolve, or OIR). OIR in Iraq is an advise-and-assist mission; U.S. forces with a combat mission left Iraq in 2021, in agreement with the Iraqi government. Biden Administration officials have stated that approximately 900 U.S. troops remain in Syria, with the majority deployed in northeastern Syria in support of counter-IS operations by partner forces.
- **Iran.** The United States has been periodically engaged in a hybrid, irregular conflict with Iran for decades. Iran-supported groups in countries such as Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon have conducted missile and unmanned aerial vehicle attacks against U.S. partners and U.S. forces stationed in the region. According to March 2022 testimony from CENTCOM

Commander General McKenzie, “current CENTCOM planning is based on clear and unambiguous signaling to Iran and its threat network” to deter and respond to Iranian aggression.

- **U.S. Military Training Mission to Saudi Arabia (USMTM) and Advisory Missions.** Using security cooperation and security assistance authorities, the U.S. military provides Saudi-purchased training to Saudi Arabian counterparts. U.S. forces provide advice to Saudi counterparts in relation to the war in Yemen.
- **Maritime Operations.** There are two complementary maritime missions in the Persian Gulf. The Combined Maritime Force (CMF) is a 34-nation coalition focused on defeating terrorism, preventing piracy, encouraging regional cooperation, and promoting a safe maritime environment. The second is the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC), an eight-member coalition focused on ensuring safety of maritime shipping lanes through surveillance and naval patrolling in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el Mandeb.
- **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. CENTCOM has provided noncombat support to a Saudi-led coalition combatting the Ansar Allah/Houthi movement in Yemen, including military advice and limited information, logistics, and other support to regional forces. The Biden Administration ceased U.S. support for “offensive” operations by the Saudi-led coalition. U.S. air and naval forces deployed to the UAE in 2022 in response to Houthi attacks on that country.

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