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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. The Department of Defense (DOD) formally established CENTCOM on January 1, 1983. CENTCOM denotes its area of responsibility (AOR) as 21 countries: Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Uzbekistan, and Yemen. CENTCOM is headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base (AFB) in Tampa, FL. Congress has engaged in CENTCOM oversight regularly, particularly during annual posture hearings.

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, 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

A potential oversight issue for Congress is whether DOD is devoting an appropriate level of resources to the CENTCOM AOR, and whether the Administration is properly balancing demands for force deployments to the CENTCOM AOR vis-à-vis other AORs, in particular the Indo-Pacific region and Europe.

Statements and decisions suggest that the Biden Administration, similar to the Trump and Obama Administrations, wants to economize on U.S. force deployments to the CENTCOM AOR where possible so that a larger number of U.S. forces can be available for potential deployments to counter threats from China or Russia. A November 29, 2021, DOD news report on a global DOD posture review conducted by the Biden Administration stated that (1) “the Indo-Pacific is the priority region for the review, given [Secretary of Defense Austin’s] focus on China as America’s pacing challenge”; (2) in Europe, “the review looks to strengthen the U.S. combat deterrent against Russia, and enable NATO forces to operate more effectively”; and (3) in the Middle East, “there have already been some posture review changes including the redeployment of critically strained missile defense capabilities, and reallocation of certain maritime assets back to Europe and the Indo-Pacific.” The review indicates that, in Iraq and Syria, “DOD posture will continue to support the defeated Islamic State campaign and building the capacity of partner forces.” In April and June 2021, reports said that the Biden Administration had decided to withdraw certain U.S. forces, including fighter squadrons and Patriot and THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) missile defense batteries, from the Middle East, so that some could be redeployed elsewhere.

The Biden Administration’s October 2022 national security strategy (NSS) and national defense strategy (NDS) emphasize competing with China and Russia. The NDS states that DOD “continues to right-size its forward military presence in the Middle East following the mission transition in Afghanistan,” and that “continuing our ‘by, with, and through’ approach [of working with global and interagency partners] in Iraq and Syria, we will address major security challenges in the region in effective and sustainable ways.” Speaking about U.S. partnership with Arab states in November 2022, Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Colin Kahl said, “The United States remains committed to the region. We’re here and we’re not going anywhere. This administration believes that our collective security will benefit from a more integrated coalition of partners, synchronizing actions across political, economic and security sectors, all within the framework of a rules-based international order.” The CENTCOM AOR’s location and the resources and defense capabilities of some CENTCOM countries may sustain the AOR’s relevance in U.S. strategic competition with China and Russia.

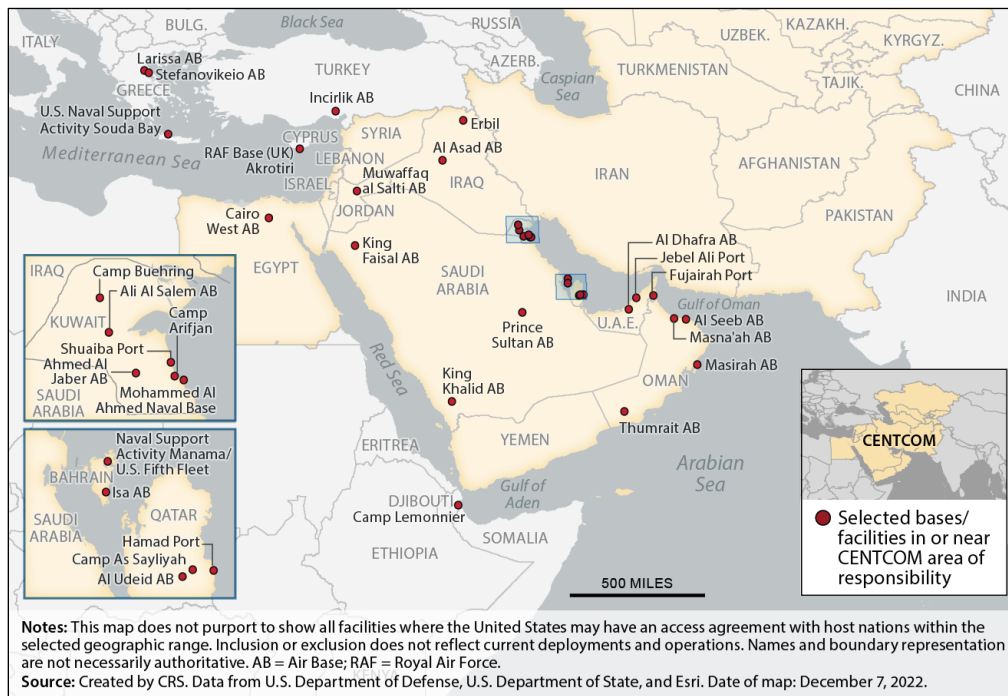
Israel in CENTCOM

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 Unified Command Plan 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 choose to limit or avoid some forms of overt cooperation with Israel (including stationing Israeli personnel on their territory).

Funding

DOD budget documentation does not delineate total funding by Combatant Command (CCMD). In general, the military services fund forces and operations assigned to the commands. CCMD funding justified in budget documentation 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 has primary responsibility for funding its headquarters. For FY2023, the Air Force requested \$331.1 million in the O&M budget sub-activity group (SAG) for Combatant Command Mission Operations – USCENTCOM and \$1.4 million for USCENTCOM Cyberspace Sustainment.

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

DOD also requested \$27.3 billion for overseas operations in the CENTCOM AOR. Of this amount, \$5.5 billion was for Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) in Iraq and Syria, with an average annual troop strength assumption of 4,017 personnel. The remaining \$21.8 billion was for other theater requirements and missions, with an average annual troop strength assumption of 55,649 personnel.

Focal Points in the CENTCOM AOR

The CENTCOM AOR contains a number of conflicts and areas of concern:

- Afghanistan.** DOD has initiated Operation Enduring Sentinel (OES) to conduct over-the-horizon operations against terrorist threats in Afghanistan, but has not carried out any strikes there since the August 2021 U.S. military withdrawal. A CIA strike in Kabul in August 2022 killed Al Qaeda leader Ayman al Zawahiri, underscoring U.S. counterterrorism concerns and capabilities.
- Syria/Iraq.** The United States has conducted operations in Syria and Iraq to defeat the Islamic State group since 2014 (OIR). 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. OIR in Iraq is an advise-and-assist mission; U.S. combat missions in Iraq ended in 2021, in agreement with the Iraqi government.
- Iran.** The United States has been engaged at times 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 then- CENTCOM Commander General McKenzie, “current CENTCOM planning is based on clear and unambiguous signaling to Iran and its threat network.”
- U.S. Advisory and Deterrence Missions in Saudi Arabia.** Using security cooperation and security assistance authorities, the U.S. military provides Saudi-purchased training to Saudi Arabian counterparts. U.S. forces also provide advice and limited information to Saudi counterparts in relation to the war in Yemen. U.S. forces also are deployed in Saudi Arabia for deterrence and for air and missile defense purposes.
- Maritime Operations.** U.S. forces participate in two maritime missions in the Persian Gulf. The Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) is a 34-nation coalition focused on defeating terrorism and preventing piracy. The International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) is a ten-member coalition focused on maritime shipping lanes, providing surveillance and 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. The Biden Administration ceased U.S. support for “offensive” operations by the Saudi-led coalition. U.S. forces in Yemen conduct operations against Al Qaeda and Islamic State affiliates.

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