

# Assessing CENTCOM's Posture in 2023

by [Nathan P. Olsen \(/experts/nathan-p-olsen\)](/experts/nathan-p-olsen)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Nathan P. Olsen \(/experts/nathan-p-olsen\)](/experts/nathan-p-olsen)

Nathan P. Olsen, a lieutenant colonel in the United States Air Force, is a 2022-23 Military Fellow at The Washington Institute. He most recently commanded the 52nd Civil Engineer Squadron at Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany. Previously, he served as chief of the Bases Branch for United States Air



Brief Analysis

**To meet ambitious goals with reduced resources, the U.S. military and its regional partners will need to continue expanding their focus on unmanned systems, artificial intelligence, agile combat employment, and integrated air defense.**

**A**s the United States shifted its focus toward great power competition in the past few years, its global military posture has adjusted accordingly. In the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility, the number of service members dwindled from around 75,000 in January 2020 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/where-us-troops-are-in-the-middle-east-and-could-now-be-a-target-visualized/2020/01/04/1a6233ee-2f3c-11ea-9b60-817cc18cf173\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/where-us-troops-are-in-the-middle-east-and-could-now-be-a-target-visualized/2020/01/04/1a6233ee-2f3c-11ea-9b60-817cc18cf173_story.html)) to roughly 40,000-60,000 ([https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220519\\_Jones\\_USDefensePosture\\_MiddleEast\\_0.pdf?60gG7N1\\_4FxFA6CNgJKAbr24zmsKXhwx](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220519_Jones_USDefensePosture_MiddleEast_0.pdf?60gG7N1_4FxFA6CNgJKAbr24zmsKXhwx)) deployed across approximately eighteen bases. Although this decrease is mainly attributable to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, it also includes the redeployment of carrier strike groups (which used to be routinely deployed to the region), missile defense assets, and combat aircraft to higher-priority missions in other parts of the world.

CENTCOM's core mission (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/2967180/posture-statement-of-general-kenneth-f-mckenzie-jr-commander-centcom-before-the/>) remains the same: to direct and enable military operations and activities with partners in a manner that increases regional stability. Yet in a great power environment where the Middle East is not the top U.S. priority, CENTCOM is more resource-constrained than before, and its leaders will have to adapt how they pursue their regional objectives. Accordingly, the military must continue adjusting to the new strategic environment in 2023, including a heightened focus on fielding unmanned systems enabled by artificial intelligence, employing agile

combat systems, and creating a regional integrated air defense architecture.

## Unmanned Systems and AI

**D**ue in part to its drawdown in the region, the military has developed a number of innovative approaches to help fulfill its mission. In 2023, CENTCOM will continue pushing the limits on two of these approaches—unmanned systems and AI—through initiatives such as Task Force 59 (TF 59).

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command established this task force on September 9, 2021, to integrate unmanned systems and AI (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-navy-task-force-aims-deter-iran-unmanned-systems>) with maritime operations. TF 59's efforts have focused on obtaining maritime domain awareness and increasing deterrence in the 5th Fleet's area of operations. The force hit its stride in 2022, when the 5th Fleet operated unmanned systems in regional waters for more than 25,000 hours (<https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/3227209/us-launches-new-unmanned-ai-systems-integration-event/>) to monitor weapons trafficking and other maritime activity. This dramatic increase in hours enabled the Navy to extensively test systems such as the Saildrone Explorer (<https://www.naval-technology.com/projects/saildrone-explorer-unmanned-surface-vessel-usv-usa/>) and MARTAC Devil Ray T38 (<https://martacsystems.com/devil-ray/>) on sixty- to ninety-day cycles (<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2022/10/13/navy-boosting-usv-presence-network-capability-in-middle-east/>).

Most notably, from November 23 through December 15, the Navy hosted (<https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2022/12/14/navys-digital-horizon-exercise-showcases-power-of-mesh-networks-ai/>) the “Digital Horizon” exercise in Bahrain with seventeen industry partners and fifteen different types of unmanned systems. Some of these were long-endurance vehicles designed for persistent surveillance missions, while others were high-speed intercept craft. The event highlighted how these systems can help the Navy observe items of interest above and below the water, among other capabilities.

Digital Horizon capped a landmark year for unmanned maritime cooperation in the region. Bahrain and Kuwait pledged to buy unmanned sea vessels by summer 2023, while the U.S. Navy partnered with Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia to conduct exercises involving a mesh network (<https://www.state.gov/telephonic-press-briefing-with-general-michael-e-kurilla-commander-u-s-central-command/>)—an interconnected group of sensors that transmit real-time data, which is then fused together through data integration and AI platforms to provide a clearer picture of the operating environment. These exercises proved the Navy's ability to establish an overlapping series of radio devices with no central hub, providing efficient data routing essential to monitoring activity in the area and maintaining AI operations. The Navy is heavily invested in the unmanned sea drone program and aims to have over 100 systems in operation by this summer.

The increased presence of such systems has also created friction with Iran. In late August (<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/08/us-navy-thwarts-irans-attempt-capture-sea-drone-gulf>), a ship affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) attempted to seize one of TF 59's sensors. The U.S. Navy was able to thwart their efforts, which CENTCOM characterized as illegal and unprofessional (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iranian-seizures-raise-questions-about-unmanned-maritime-operations>). Yet the incident reinforced the importance of a layered and redundant maritime awareness initiative in the Middle East.

## Agile Combat Employment

**I**n 2020, the U.S. Air Force commissioned a study on a potential shift in air warfare tactics in response to the rise of drones, the increase in swarm attacks, and the use of cruise and ballistic missiles, as seen in previous Iranian

operations throughout the Middle East. The study produced the Agile Combat Employment (ACE) doctrine note, [released \(https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDN\\_1-21/AFDN%201-21%20ACE.pdf\)](https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/AFDN_1-21/AFDN%201-21%20ACE.pdf) in August 2022. ACE has enabled the Air Force to operate more effectively with a reduced footprint by organizing combat missions into small teams of aircraft that relocate frequently in order to prevent enemies from accurately targeting these high-value assets.

More fully implementing ACE tactics, techniques, and procedures in 2023 will help CENTCOM maximize its resources while continuing to deter Iran. Last year, the Air Force conducted numerous ACE deployments, including a [February 2022 exercise \(https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/379th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/News/Display/Article/2941615/air-refueling-aircraft-maintenance-squadrons-maintain-ace-readiness/\)](https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/379th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/News/Display/Article/2941615/air-refueling-aircraft-maintenance-squadrons-maintain-ace-readiness/) in which a unit assigned to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia responded to a simulated attack by evacuating personnel, equipment, and aircraft to a partner nation within CENTCOM's area of responsibility. The exercise highlighted the unit's ability to operate its KC-135 refueling aircraft in a remote location with limited resources.

In September, the Air Force conducted a capstone event that included fighter, refueling, cargo, and bomber aircraft normally based in the United States, Europe, and Asia and operating out of the 332nd, 378th, 379th, and 386th Air Expeditionary Wings. And in November, the Air Force had the opportunity to implement ACE procedures in a real-world situation when Saudi intelligence indicated Iran was preparing an [imminent attack \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-tensions-ease-as-concerns-about-iran-grow-11672927633?st=dn8eyry61fqmus7\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-saudi-tensions-ease-as-concerns-about-iran-grow-11672927633?st=dn8eyry61fqmus7) on the kingdom. Afterward, Undersecretary of Defense Colin Kahl stated, "We think the combination of that rapid intelligence sharing and repositioning [of military assets] is what backed the Iranians off."

These events gave the Air Force important opportunities to train for combat operations on multiple fronts with different airframes. As the ACE concept continues to mature in 2023, the military will no doubt gain additional capabilities and efficiencies while furthering partner relations and rapid-response efforts.

## Integrated Air Defense

Tehran's [transfer of drones to Russia \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-irans-drones-ukraine-mean-future-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-irans-drones-ukraine-mean-future-war) has not only supported Moscow's war against Ukraine, but also [stands to bolster \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/after-ukraine-russias-potential-military-and-nuclear-compensation-iran) Iran's defense industry and improve its military capabilities. These transfers are already enabling Tehran to evaluate the capabilities of its drones in a contested environment—information [it will use \(https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/28/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/28/us/politics/iran-drones-russia-ukraine.html) to refine its designs for future conflicts.

The proliferation of these capabilities comes as no surprise to Middle Eastern actors, who know firsthand how Iran has used drones to penetrate their air defense systems. This is part of the reason why integrating regional air defenses has been a priority for the United States and its partners for years.

The Abraham Accords have breathed new life into this longstanding goal. Recent efforts include the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council working groups that convened [in March 2022 \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2962508/readout-of-the-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integrated-air-and/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2962508/readout-of-the-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integrated-air-and/), underscoring the consensus on advancing integrated defense initiatives and promoting a common vision for deterring the most pressing air, missile, and maritime threats. In June, Israeli officials [hinted \(https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-israel-is-building-a-middle-east-air-defense-alliance-against-iran/\)](https://www.timesofisrael.com/gantz-israel-is-building-a-middle-east-air-defense-alliance-against-iran/) at a regional air defense alliance with Bahrain, Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Additional indications of potential progress include new air and missile defense purchases made last year through the U.S. Foreign Military Sales program, most notably by [Egypt](#)

(<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/egypt-air-defense-radar-systems>), Kuwait (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/kuwait-national-advanced-surface-air-missile-system-nasams-medium>), Saudi Arabia (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/saudi-arabia-multifunctional-information-distribution-system-low>), and the UAE (<https://www.dsca.mil/press-media/major-arms-sales/united-arab-emirates-terminal-high-altitude-area-defense-thaad-system>). To advance such efforts in 2023, the National Defense Authorization Act [directed](https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7776/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22ndaa%22%2C%22ndaa%22%2C%22FY23%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=6) (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/7776/text?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22ndaa%22%2C%22ndaa%22%2C%22FY23%22%5D%7D&r=2&s=6>) the Pentagon to report to Congress on a U.S. strategy for implementing an integrated air and missile defense architecture with allies and partners in the Middle East.

## Conclusion

As noted, CENTCOM has developed a number of creative approaches to accomplish the same core mission in the Middle East at reduced force levels. It will need to continue innovating in 2023, using its limited resources to develop stronger ties with regional partners while countering Russian and Chinese influence in the region.

*Lt. Col. Nathan Olsen (USAF) is a 2022-23 Military Fellow at The Washington Institute. The views expressed in this article represent the personal views of the author and are not necessarily the views of the Department of Defense, the Department of the Air Force, or Air University.* ♦

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