
SECURITY ASSISTANCE COMMUNITY

United States Central Command: A Brief History

(The following history of the U.S. Central Command was provided courtesy of the command's web site, where numerous articles and information pertinent to that area can be found. The web site URL is: <http://www.centcom.mil>).

The United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) was established January 1, 1983. As its name implies, USCENTCOM covers the "central" area of the globe located between the European and Pacific Commands. When the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan underlined the need to strengthen U.S. interests in the region, President Jimmy Carter established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) in March 1980. To provide a stronger, more lasting solution in the region, President Ronald Reagan took steps to transform the RDJTF into a permanent unified command over a two-year period. The first step was to make the RDJTF independent of U.S. Readiness Command, followed by the activation of USCENTCOM in January 1983. Overcoming skeptical perceptions that the command was still an RDJTF in all but name, designed to support a Cold War strategy, took time. The Iran-Iraq war clearly underlined the growing tensions in the region, and developments such as Iranian mining operations in the Persian Gulf led to USCENTCOM's first combat operations.

By late 1988, the regional strategy still largely focused on the potential threat of a massive Soviet invasion of Iran. The new USCENTCOM Commander-in-Chief, General H. Norman Schwarzkopf, was convinced that the changing international climate made this scenario far less likely. He began to focus his attention on the possible emergence of a new regional threat, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and translated these concerns into the summer 1990 command post exercise internal look. There was an eerie similarity between the exercise scripts and the real-world movement of Iraqi forces which culminated in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait during the final days of the exercise. U.S. President George Bush responded quickly. A timely deployment of forces and the formation of a coalition deterred Iraq from invading Saudi Arabia, and the command began to focus on the liberation of Kuwait. The buildup of forces continued, reinforced by U.N. Security Council Resolution 678, which called for Iraqi forces to leave Kuwait. On January 17, 1991, U.S. and coalition forces launched Operation Desert Storm with a massive air interdiction campaign, which prepared the theater for a coalition ground assault. The primary coalition objective, the liberation of Kuwait, was achieved on February 27, and the next morning a cease-fire was declared, just one hundred hours after the commencement of the ground campaign.

The end of formal hostilities did not bring the end of difficulties with Iraq. Operation Provide Comfort, implemented to provide humanitarian assistance to the Kurds and enforce a "no-fly" zone in Iraq, north of the 36th parallel, began in April 1991. In August 1992, Operation Southern Watch began in response to Saddam's noncompliance with U.N. Security Council Resolution 688 condemning his brutal repression of Iraqi civilians in southeastern Iraq. Under the command and control of Joint Task Force Southwest Asia, coalition forces in this operation enforced a no-fly zone south of the 32nd parallel. In January 1997, Operation Northern Watch replaced Provide Comfort, with a focus on enforcing the northern no-fly zone. Throughout the decade, USCENTCOM operations such as Vigilant Warrior, Vigilant Sentinel, Desert Strike, Desert Thunder (I and II), and Desert Fox responded

to threats posed by Iraq to its neighbors or sought to enforce U.N. Security Council resolutions in the face of Saddam's continued intransigence.

The 1990s also brought significant challenges in the east African nation of Somalia as well as from the growing threat of regional terrorism. To prevent widespread starvation in the face of clan warfare, the command responded in 1992 with Operation Provide Relief to supply humanitarian assistance to Somalia and northeastern Kenya. USCENTCOM's Operation Restore Hope supported UNSCR 794 and a multinational Unified Task Force, which provided security until the U.N. created UNOSOM II in May 1993. In spite of some UNOSOM II success in the countryside, the situation in Mogadishu worsened, and a series of violent outbreaks ultimately led President Bill Clinton to order the withdrawal of all U.S. troops from Somalia. Throughout the decade following the Gulf War, terrorist attacks had a major impact on USCENTCOM forces in the region. Faced with attacks such as the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, which killed 19 American airmen, the command launched Operation Desert Focus, designed to relocate U.S. installations to more defensible locations (such as Prince Sultan Air Base), reduce the U.S. forward "footprint" by eliminating nonessential billets, and return dependents home. In 1998 terrorists attacked U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, killing 250 persons, including 12 Americans. The October 2000 attack on the USS Cole, resulting in the deaths of 17 U.S. sailors, was linked to Osama bin Laden's al Qaeda organization.

The terrorist attacks on American soil on September 11, 2001 led President George W. Bush to declare a war against international terrorism. USCENTCOM soon launched Operation Enduring Freedom to expel the Taliban government in Afghanistan, who were harboring al Qaeda terrorists and repressing the Afghan population. The threat from Saddam Hussein's government increased, and faced with the possibility of an Iraq armed with weapons of mass destruction, a coalition commenced Operation Iraqi Freedom to liberate the Iraqi people from Saddam's oppression. Following the defeat of both the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein's government in Iraq, USCENTCOM has continued to provide security to the new freely-elected governments in those countries, conducting counterinsurgency operations and assisting host nation security forces to provide for their own defense. Since October 2002, USCENTCOM has also conducted operations in the Horn of Africa to assist host nations there to combat terrorism, establish a secure environment, and foster regional stability. These operations primarily take the form of humanitarian assistance, consequence management, and a variety of civic action programs. The command has also remained poised to provide disaster relief throughout the region, with its most recent significant relief operations in response to the October 2005 earthquake in Pakistan and the large-scale evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon in 2006.