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CENTCOM COMMANDERS COUNCIL DINNER

An Annual Initiative of the MEI Defense and Security Program

2023 SPEAKERS

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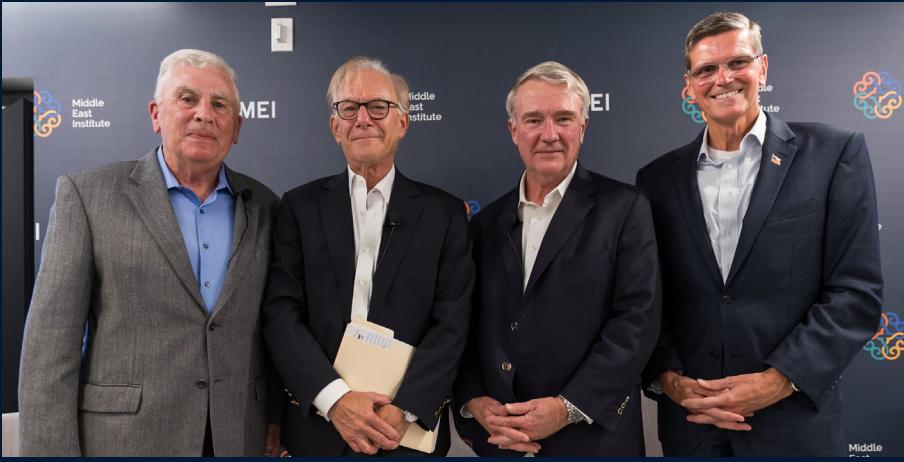
*IN CONVERSATION WITH
DAVID IGNATIUS
COLUMNIST, THE WASHINGTON POST*

THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

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The Middle East Institute, in coordination with its Defense and Security Program, hosts a unique event each year, featuring a private conversation with some of the highest ranking former military officials in the U.S. armed forces.

MEI's CENTCOM Commanders Council Dinner provides the opportunity for private sector leaders, senior government officials, and other key influencers to engage with top military experts who understand the strategic importance of the Middle East to the future of U.S. defense and security.



2023 DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

9 KEY TAKEAWAYS

1) THE NATURE OF U.S. ENGAGEMENT

- Although the American people are tired of costly U.S. intervention in the Middle East, it doesn't mean they prefer total withdrawal. Balancing U.S. engagement in the region with the top priority of competing with China, globally – which includes the Middle East – is key.
- Three concepts should drive present and future U.S. engagement in the Middle East: Power (that Washington projects), Faith (in the U.S. cause and mission), and Fantasy (a comprehensive vision for a better Middle East that goes beyond hard security matters)
- U.S. messaging to partners in the region about U.S. goals and intentions has been damaging to U.S. strategy and interests. While the content of U.S. policy may be sound, communication has been poor. The media plays a critical role in educating the American public about U.S. activities in the region.
- U.S. engagement does not necessarily mean thousands of stationed troops, but rather a combined force of empowered diplomats, intelligence analysts, and private sector representatives.

2) A U.S. STRATEGY OF BY, WITH, AND THROUGH

- The partners' buy-in is indispensable to anything the United States does in the region in terms of hard power and military operations. Local assistance and contribution are necessary. Syrian and Iraqi partners were invaluable contributors in the fight against the Islamic State. This is the model moving forward.

3) THE U.S. WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN

- The United States should have kept a residual force behind to ensure U.S. diplomats would be safe and to sustain the fight against violent extremists that seek to target the U.S. homeland.

4) U.S. IRAN POLICY

- Iran has always been a regional power and Americans need to be comfortable with the fact that even if the theocratic regime in Tehran falls, Iran will still be a powerful force in the region.

5) THE FUTURE OF IRAQ

- To be stable, Iraq must counter the IRGC Quds Force's influence, in partnership with neighboring countries as well as the United States.
- Stabilization should happen in Kurdistan first.

6) THE U.S. FIGHT AGAINST VIOLENT EXTREMISM

- The war is not limited to countering non-state actors such as Al Qaeda and the Islamic State but rather includes official state entities like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).
- Tackling this enduring threat requires working with all regional friends, democratic and autocratic.

7) THE FUTURE OF THE U.S. - SAUDI RELATIONSHIP

- Saudi Arabia has modernized significantly in the past 20 years. Although undemocratic, Saudi Arabia has many interests in common with the United States including stability, energy security, and counter-terrorism.
- Operationalizing and potentially expanding the Abraham Accords is firmly in the U.S. interest. It is also a work in progress given the complexities of the region and the tensions among Washington's regional partners.

8) THE POWER OF AMERICAN BUSINESS

- The U.S. private sector has been under-leveraged and must take on a larger role in U.S. engagement in the Middle East. The region's economic future requires U.S. business opportunities and expertise.

9) CENTCOM'S NEW FACE

- CENTCOM has undergone a quiet but historic transformation from a wartime command to a security integrator that will continue to leverage technology and innovation and utilize artificial intelligence and automated systems.

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Founded in 1946, the Middle East Institute is the oldest Washington-based institution dedicated solely to the study of the Middle East. It is a non-partisan think tank providing expert policy analysis, educational and professional development services, and a hub for engaging with the region's arts and culture.

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