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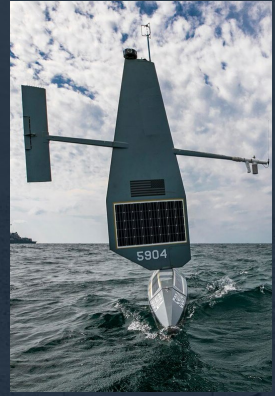


# CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception

*An initiative of MEI's Defense and Security Program*

**10.13.2024**

Washington, D.C.



MEI's **Defense and Security Program** provides rigorous and multidisciplinary analysis of the current and emerging defense and security challenges and opportunities facing the United States and its regional partners. It also works to create a unique, credible, and independent platform for defense and security stakeholders from both the United States and the region to more closely interact, exchange views, and share experiences regarding various matters of national security.



# Dear Distinguished Guests,

On behalf of the Middle East Institute's Board of Governors, scholars, and staff, it is my pleasure to welcome you to MEI's Second Annual CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception. We thank you for your continued support of our organization and mission by participating in today's proceedings.

First convened in September 2023, the CENTCOM Commanders Council series exemplifies MEI's longstanding commitment to providing rigorous analysis of the current and emerging defense and security challenges and opportunities facing the United States and its regional partners. For the first time this year, we are expanding the remit of this event to include two distinguished diplomatic leaders on the dais, highlighting the critical importance of combining military and diplomatic means to achieve America's objectives in the region.

As we look ahead to this afternoon's program, we are reminded of the context in which we gather, both for the United States and the Middle East. Last week we observed the one-year anniversary of Hamas' October 7th attack on Israel, beginning what has become a year-long period of captivity for hostages held in Gaza. In equal measure we recognize

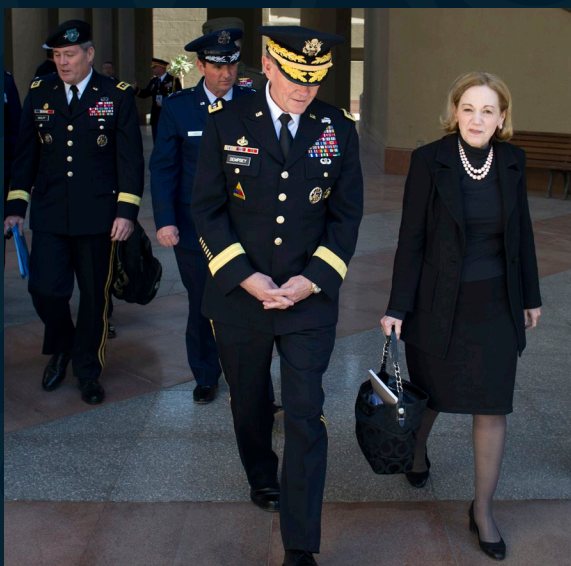
the devastation that has followed for so many civilian non-combatants in the region, as the scale and scope of the conflict widens. This is the regional picture likely to face the United States' next Commander-in-Chief, whom Americans will choose in just under a month's time.

Regardless of that outcome, MEI's Defense and Security Program will continue its critical work to create a platform for defense and security experts to exchange views, an endeavor bolstered by the depth of MEI's relationships with civilian scholars, former CENTCOM Commanders, and diplomatic leaders.

To that end, we are honored today to be joined by the current CENTCOM Commander General Kurilla, three former CENTCOM Commanders, including the Chairman of our Board, and two former Secretaries of State for Near Eastern Affairs. Thank you all for joining us on this special occasion and for your support of MEI.



**Dr. Susan E. Saxton**  
*President and CEO (Interim)*



# CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception

October 13, 2024 | Washington, DC

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**15:30**      **Reception Begins**

**16:20**      **Welcome Remarks**

Dr. Susan E. Saxton  
*President and CEO (interim), Middle East Institute*

**16:25**      **Keynote Remarks**

**General Michael E. Kurilla**  
***Commander, U.S. Central Command***

**Introduced by:**

General (Ret.) Joseph L. Votel  
*13th Commander of U.S. Central Command*  
*MEI Distinguished Sr. Fellow on National Security*

**16:40**      **Panel Discussion with Former CENTCOM Commanders and Former Assistant Secretaries of State for Near Eastern Affairs**

**Moderated By:**

David Ignatius  
*Columnist, Foreign Affairs, The Washington Post*

**17:45**      **Post-Discussion Networking**

**18:15**      **Reception Ends**

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*Today's event will be conducted under the Chatham House Rule.*



## **General Michael E. Kurilla**

### **15th Commander of U.S. Central Command (current)**

Michael “Erik” Kurilla has served as the 15th commander of United States Central Command since April 2022. He is a General in the U.S. Army with 36 years of distinguished service. Prior to assuming the command of US CENTCOM, he commanded the 1st Battalion, 24th Infantry (Stryker), 2nd Ranger Battalion, the 75th Ranger Regiment, the 82nd Airborne Division, and the XVIII Airborne Corps. General Kurilla spent every year from 2004 - 2014

leading conventional and special operations forces in the U.S. Central Command Area of Responsibility. He has served as Director of Operations and Assistant Commanding General for Joint Special Operations Command, Deputy Commanding General for the 1st Infantry Division, Joint Staff Deputy Director for Special Operations and Counter-Terrorism, and Chief of Staff for U.S. Central Command. General Kurilla’s awards and decorations include the Combat Infantryman Badge with Star, Master Parachutist Badge with Combat Jump Device, Ranger Tab, and the Purple Heart with Oak Leaf Cluster.



## **General (Ret.) John P. Abizaid**

### **8th Commander of U.S. Central Command Chairman, MEI Board of Governors**

John P. Abizaid served as CENTCOM Commander from July 2003 to March 2007. He retired from the U.S. Army as a four-star General, after 34 years of service, having commanded units at every level and serving in Grenada, Lebanon, Kurdistan, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. From 2019-2021, he served as U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. He is the Chairman of the Board

of Governors for the Middle East Institute, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a Senior Advisor at Lazard Financial Advisory, and is the Senior Partner of JPA Partners, a private consulting firm.

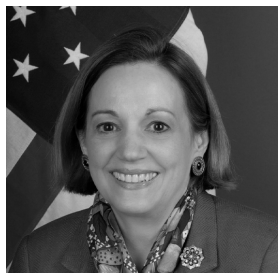


## **General (Ret.) Kenneth F. McKenzie**

### **14th Commander of U.S. Central Command Distinguished Sr. Fellow on National Security, MEI**

Kenneth F. “Frank” McKenzie, Jr. served as CENTCOM Commander from March 2019 to April 2022. He retired as a four-star General in the U.S. Marine Corps after 42 years of service at all levels, including as Director of the Joint Staff. General McKenzie led the Marine Expeditionary Unit on combat deployments to Afghanistan in 2004 and Iraq in 2005-06, and served as the Deputy to the Deputy Chief of

Staff for Stability in Kabul in 2009. He is currently Executive Director of the University of South Florida’s Global and National Security Institute and Florida Center for Cybersecurity. He is a Distinguished Senior Fellow on National Security at MEI.



## Ambassador (Ret.) Anne Patterson

**23rd Asst. Sec. of State for Near Eastern Affairs**  
**Kissinger Senior Fellow, Jackson School of Global Affairs, Yale University**

Anne W. Patterson served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and North African Affairs from 2013 to 2017. She retired in 2017 with the rank of career ambassador after more than four decades in the U.S. Foreign Service, during which she served as Ambassador to Egypt (2011-2013), to Pakistan (2007-2010), to Colombia (2000-2003), and to El Salvador (1997-2000). She also served as Assistant Secretary of State for International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs and as Deputy Permanent Representative to the United Nations. She is a two-time recipient of the State Department's Distinguished Service award. She has been appointed to two congressional commissions: the Commission on National Defense Strategy in 2017 and the Syria Study Group in 2019. She is currently the Kissinger Senior Fellow at Yale University's Jackson School of Global Affairs.



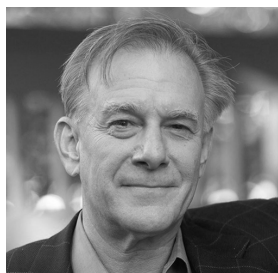
## David Schenker

**24th Asst. Sec. of State for Near Eastern Affairs**  
**Taube Senior Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy**

David Schenker served as the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs from June 2019 through January 2021. Previously, from 2002 to 2006, Schenker served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as Levant country director, the Pentagon's top policy aide on the Arab nations of the Levant. He was awarded the Office of the Secretary of Defense Medal for Exceptional Civilian Service in 2005. Schenker was the Aufzien Fellow and director of the Beth and David Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute from 2006 to 2019. He is currently the Taube Senior Fellow and Director of the Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute.

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### MODERATOR



## David Ignatius

**Columnist, *Foreign Affairs*, *The Washington Post***

David Ignatius is a *Washington Post* foreign affairs columnist. He joined The Post in 1986 and, as its foreign editor, supervised the paper's Pulitzer Prize-winning coverage of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. He is also the author of 11 suspense and espionage novels. Earlier in his career, Ignatius was a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal*, covering the Departments of State and Justice, the CIA, the Senate and the Middle East. Mr. Ignatius has won numerous honors and awards including the 2018 George Polk Award; the International Committee for Foreign Journalists's Lifetime Achievement Award; and the French government's Legion D'Honneur.

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## HOSTS



### **Dr. Susan Saxton**

#### **President and CEO (Interim) and COO, MEI**

Dr. Susan E. Saxton is the interim President and CEO at the Middle East Institute in Washington, D.C. She has over 25 years of education and business expertise focused on start-ups and change of control, including transformational leadership and corporate strategy in both developed and emerging parts of the world. Previously, Dr. Saxton was the Founding President of the American University of Bahrain, where she established a first-of-its-kind campus to deliver

a unique style of education to the GCC. Dr. Saxton held senior leadership positions within the Laureate Education network such as Chief Strategy Officer of the Global Products and Services division and CEO of the University of St. Augustine for Health Sciences. She was Chief Strategy and Development Officer for the IBO in The Hague; Dean of Students and Vice President of Strategy and Product Development at Kaplan University; and Founding Dean of the School of Business and Technology at Capella University. She started her career in finance and tax with Ernst & Young and FBK. Dr. Saxton has participated on the Boards of the AmCham (Bahrain), Glion Institute (Switzerland and UK), African Initiative for Agribusiness Research (Kenya), HSM (Argentina), Santa Fe University of Art and Design (New Mexico US), Touro College South (Florida US), and several other youth-oriented, business, and educational institutions. She served as a Non-Resident Senior Fellow (Rafik Hariri Center and Middle East Programs) for the Atlantic Council and is a member of the Climate Action Committee for MENA 2050.



### **Courtney Lobel**

#### **Chief Development Officer, MEI**

Courtney Lobel is Chief Development Officer at the Middle East Institute, where she oversees advancement strategy to support MEI's non-partisan policy analysis, education programs, and arts center. Courtney is a development executive with 15 years experience in senior roles at international policy organizations and the humanitarian sector. She was formerly Senior Director of Development and Communications for Relief International, which delivers

aid in 16 countries with a particular focus on healthcare services in Syria, Yemen, Turkey, and Iran. Prior to that, she was the Director of Private Sector Initiatives at the International Crisis Group; the Deputy Director of Foundation Relations at the Council on Foreign Relations; and a development officer for American Jewish World Service. She served as a U.S. Peace Corps volunteer in Bulgaria, where she helped establish a youth organization in a town on the Turkish border. She also held the role of project coordinator for a youth nonprofit in Tallinn, Estonia. Courtney majored in Political Science at the University of Central Florida and has published op-eds on philanthropy and fundraising in the *Wall Street Journal*, Reuters, and the *Chronicle of Philanthropy*. She is a member of Women in International Security.



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Chairman of the Middle East Institute Board of Governors

is proud to support MEI's second annual

**CENTCOM Commanders  
Council Reception**

and thanks today's co-speakers

**General Michael E. Kurilla  
General (Ret.) Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.  
Ambassador Anne Patterson  
Mr. David Schenker**

for their distinguished service to the United States.



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&  
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**are proud to support the Middle East Institute**

**and thank today's speakers**

**General Michael E. Kurilla  
General (Ret.) John P. Abizaid  
General (Ret.) Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.  
Ambassador Anne Patterson  
Mr. David Schenker**

**for their distinguished service to the United States.**



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Director of Middle East and North Africa, International Government Relations, for Exxon Mobil Corporation, Washington, D.C.

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