



Middle
East
Institute



CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception

October 12, 2025
Washington, DC



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 Third 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 challenges and opportunities facing the United States and its regional partners.

This afternoon's program comes against the backdrop of over two years of intense warfare across the Middle East. Since October 2023, America and its allies have battled Iran and its Axis of Resistance from Lebanon to Tehran and the Persian Gulf to the Bab el-Mandeb, while Israel maintains its campaign against Hamas in Gaza. The fighting is ongoing in many theaters, and too many innocents are suffering still, but tremendous opportunities lie before us if the governments of the United States and our allies are wise and deft enough to realize them. The risks that stem from inaction or failure remain just as high, however. If Washington and our partners are not able to

secure the opportunities before us, the threats will almost certainly grow back, possibly worse than before.

CENTCOM's ability to marshal the resources of the United States makes it one of the most important actors in any corner of the Middle East. So too do its unparalleled diplomatic ties and regionwide perspective. CENTCOM can both see and act across the region like effectively no other entity can, allowing it to offer advice or options the US President could get from no one else.

With all this in mind, we are pleased this year to have three former commanders of US Central Command speak to our select audience composed of other former senior military officers, business leaders, and defense experts and practitioners. We hope this afternoon's discussion will provide unmatched valuable insights into an increasingly complex region that remains critically vital to American interests.

Thank you all for joining us on this special occasion and for your support of MEI.



Amb. (ret.) Stuart E. Jones
President, Middle East Institute



CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception

October 12, 2025 | Washington, DC

15:30 RECEPTION BEGINS

16:25 WELCOME REMARKS
Ambassador (Ret.) Stuart Jones
President, Middle East Institute

16:30 CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS
General John P. Abizaid, USA (Ret.)
8th Commander, US Central Command
Chairman, MEI Board of Governors

**16:40 PANEL DISCUSSION WITH FORMER CENTCOM
COMMANDERS**
General Joseph L. Votel, USA (Ret.)
13th Commander, US Central Command
General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., USMC (Ret.)
14th Commander, US Central Command

Moderated By:
David Ignatius
Columnist, Foreign Affairs, The Washington Post

17:30 POST-DISCUSSION NETWORKING

18:30 RECEPTION ENDS

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

FEATURED SPEAKERS



General (Ret.) John P. Abizaid

**8th Commander of US Central Command
Chairman, Board of Governors, MEI**

John P. Abizaid served as CENTCOM Commander from July 2003 to March 2007. He retired from the US 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 until 2021, he served as US 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, Jr.

**14th Commander of US Central Command
Distinguished Military Fellow, 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 US 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 the Middle East Institute.

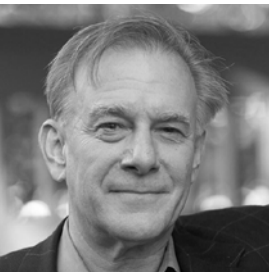


General (Ret.) Joseph L. Votel

**13th Commander, US Central Command
Distinguished Military Fellow, MEI**

Joseph L. Votel served as CENTCOM Commander from March 2016 to March 2019. He retired as a four-star General in the US Army after a nearly 40-year career, during which he was also commander of the US Special Operations Command and the Joint Special Operations Command. He is the recipient of three Defense Distinguished Service Medals, an Army Distinguished Service Medal, three Defense Superior Service Medals, two Legion of Merit medals, and four Bronze Star Medals. He previously served as President and CEO of Business Executives for National Security and is currently a Distinguished Military Fellow at MEI.

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.

HOSTS



Amb. (Ret.) Stuart E. Jones

President, Middle East Institute

Ambassador Stuart Jones joined MEI as its 18th President in January 2025. Stu came to MEI from Bechtel Corporation, a global engineering, construction and project management firm, where he was a Senior Vice President and President for Regions and Corporate Affairs. He retired from Bechtel in 2024. Prior to Bechtel, Stu served for three decades as a US Foreign Service Officer in the Department of State. His tours included US Ambassador to Iraq (2014-17), during the height of the ISIS crisis, and US Ambassador to Jordan (2011-14). Other foreign tours included Turkey, Egypt, El Salvador, and Colombia. He retired as the Senior Bureau Officer (SBO) for the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, in 2017. Hailing from Philadelphia, Stu is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania Law School and Duke University. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and the American Academy of Diplomacy.



Courtney Lobel

Chief Development Officer, Middle East Institute

Courtney Lobel is Chief Development Officer at the Middle East Institute, where she oversees advancement strategy to support MEI's non-partisan policy analysis and arts center. Courtney is a development executive with two decades of 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. Courtney served as a US Peace Corps volunteer in Bulgaria, and she majored in Political Science at the University of Central Florida. She is a member of Women in International Security.

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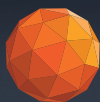
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Embassy of the
Republic of Iraq
in Washington

Iraq: A Nation that Defeated Terrorism, Inspiring Global Peace.

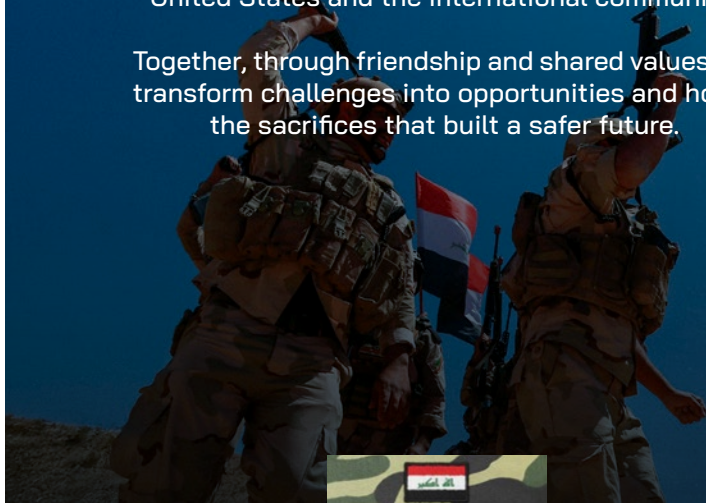


Embassy of the Republic of Iraq – Washington, D.C.

Iraq stands as a nation that has endured sacrifice, confronted terror, and emerged with resilience and dignity. Today, Iraq's voice is not only one of survival, but of leadership — a call for stability, partnership, and progress.

As Champion Sponsor of the 2025 CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception, the Republic of Iraq reaffirms its unwavering commitment to global security and to the bonds of cooperation with the United States and the international community.

Together, through friendship and shared values, we transform challenges into opportunities and honor the sacrifices that built a safer future.





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Raytheon is proud to support MEI's third annual CENTCOM Commanders Council Reception! We'd like to thank today's remarkable speakers for their service to the United States and its allies and partners around the world.

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13th Commander of US Central Command; MEI Distinguished Military Fellow; US Army Four-Star Officer, Retired

Amb. David Welch

Senior Vice President of Bechtel Corporation; former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs

Rochdi A. Younsi

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

Amb. Susan L. Ziadeh

Former Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs; former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Peninsula Affairs; former US Ambassador to the State of Qatar



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