

Enduring Interests and Partnerships

Military-to-Military Relationships in the Arab Spring

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During the past decade, the most visible military activities in the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR) have been decidedly kinetic, showcased primarily through operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. This year marks important transitions in both of these campaigns as Afghan National Security Forces begin to take the lead on security operations and the United States shifts to a more traditional security relationship with Baghdad. Building partner capacity in Afghan and Iraqi forces—one of USCENTCOM’s key *nonkinetic* activities—is a central component to success in both of these missions.

Another major series of events in 2011, however, has elevated the importance of military-to-military (mil-to-mil) engagements beyond mere partner-nation capacity-building: the Arab Spring. As the dynamics in the Middle East continue to evolve in response to popular calls for reform, mil-to-mil engagements have been, and will remain, critical to supporting and advancing U.S. relationships and strategic interests in the region.

As this article illustrates, mil-to-mil engagements are integral to the general purpose and activities of U.S. combatant commands (COCOMs) and are particularly crucial for USCENTCOM in light of recent events in the AOR. Mil-to-mil engagements serve as vital “connective tissue” in our relationships with partners and allies as the United States seeks to respond effectively to Arab Spring reform movements while continuing to ensure regional security and stability.

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Mil-to-Mil Engagements and COCOMs

The purpose of the six geographic COCOMs is to coordinate and direct the role of the Armed Forces in executing national-level policy guidance. COCOM theater campaign plans, which provide U.S. forces with detailed objectives, flow from more expansive theater strategies.

Theater strategies, in turn, stem from the National Security Strategy and various department-specific documents that originate from it. The Guidance for the Employment of the Force outlines the parameters in which COCOMs plan, prioritize, and operate. Additionally, COCOMs align their activities with the Quadrennial Defense Review, which assesses the threat environment facing the United States and organizes national assets accordingly.

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When necessary, COCOMs execute kinetic operations in accordance with national-level guidance. However, a major portion of our efforts concentrates on a wide range of mil-to-mil engagements intended to strengthen relationships with regional allies and to maintain a posture that supports mutual security interests, as well as to help partner militaries build their capacities to face both conventional and asymmetric threats.

The activities that fall under the mantle of mil-to-mil engagement range from exchanges with key leaders, port visits, and multilateral plans and exercises to security assistance. This

includes both event-based activities, such as partnering with Pakistan's military to provide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief following the 2010 floods, and longer term efforts such as International Military Education and Training (IMET), Foreign Military Financing (FMF), and Foreign Military Sales.¹ In all mil-to-mil engagements, our efforts are firmly nested within the policy paths laid out by the Department of State and its role as lead administrator of U.S. security cooperation programs.

Conducting mil-to-mil engagements produces both tangible and intangible benefits for all COCOMs, including a deeper understanding of the regions in which they operate. As Admiral James Stavridis, Commander of U.S. European Command, notes, "Understanding the history of Europe helps us see our allies' world view and why they approach problems and situations in the manner they do. Without a sense of this view, we are like moviegoers arriving late to a film and wondering what is going on and why major characters are reacting so strongly."²

This need for understanding how allies and partners—as well as adversaries—view the world, history, and their place in it is particularly strong in the USCENTCOM AOR and is reinforced by both current operations and U.S. military engagements in the region. We operate in a region where the concept of history is markedly more circular and fluid than the often rigidly linear Western way of filtering events. William Faulkner's famous observation that "The past isn't dead—it isn't even past" offers an apt paradigm for understanding the view of history in our AOR. The breadth and depth of USCENTCOM's mil-to-mil engagements, some of which date back only a few years and some of which are decades old, are serving as an important foundation for understanding and reacting to the unfolding Arab Spring.

USS Carl Vinson (foreground) makes scheduled port visit to Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam after 6-month deployment to USCENTCOM and Western Pacific

U.S. Navy (Rosa A. Arzola)



Building Mil-to-Mil Relationships in the USCENTCOM AOR

The complexity of the USCENTCOM AOR is reflected in our immense and diverse mission set. The mil-to-mil engagements that we conduct are based on both well-established security cooperation channels and some of the newer authorities granted by Congress that allow the command to more nimbly respond to the pace of changes in the region. Our overall engagement agenda as it pertains to the reform movements in the region is guided by President Barack Obama’s May 2011 speech about events in the Middle East and North Africa³ and the pillars established by the Department of State earlier this year:

- ❖ support for peaceful democratic change
- ❖ strong support for economic stabilization and modernization
- ❖ pursuit of comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace
- ❖ huge and enduring U.S. stake in regional security
 - ❖ in strengthening ties to Gulf Cooperation Council states
 - ❖ in fighting terrorism
 - ❖ in preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons and setting off a catastrophic regional arms race
 - ❖ in not losing sight of Iraq’s own crucial democratic transition and reintegration into the Arab world.⁴

Although the Arab Spring began in Tunisia, which falls in the U.S. Africa Command AOR, political and economic protests spread quickly to Tunisia's neighbors, including one of USCENTCOM's most prominent regional partners, Egypt. The discussions between U.S. and Egyptian military officials draw upon a long and robust history of mil-to-mil engagements that illustrate numerous avenues of cooperation, and have been integral to our ability to remain informed and able to communicate as events in the region take place.⁵

Benefits of FMF, for example—for the United States as well as recipient nations—are numerous. According to the State Department, FMF “further U.S. interests around the world by ensuring that Coalition partners and friendly foreign governments are equipped and trained to work toward common security goals and share burdens in joint missions.” Furthermore, FMF “promotes

military training programs enable foreign officers to interact with their U.S. counterparts, live in our communities, become familiar with American culture, and form lasting personal and professional relationships

U.S. national security by contributing to regional and global stability, strengthening military support for democratically elected governments, and containing transnational threats.” Additionally, “increased military capabilities establish and strengthen multilateral coalitions with the United States, and enable friends and allies to be increasingly interoperable with the U.S., regional, and international military forces.”⁶

All of these elements are reflected in the FMF relationship with Egypt. Since 1982, in conjunction with the Camp David Accords, the United

States has provided \$1.3 billion in annual FMF to Egypt. Through FMF channels, USCENTCOM has worked to greatly modernize Egypt's weapons systems through programs such as the M1A1 Abrams battle tank joint production. On the training side, we have also maintained solid cooperation with Egypt, along with many other partners and allies in the region, through the IMET program. IMET enables the Department of Defense (DOD) to host foreign officers in U.S. military schools where the curriculum focuses not only on operational concepts, but also on U.S. doctrinal and philosophical frameworks such as the ethical use of force and respect for human rights. Military training programs further enable foreign officers to interact with their U.S. counterparts, live in our communities, become familiar with American culture, and form lasting personal and professional relationships.⁷

The relationships developed between officers, and often between families, endure well beyond just the time spent at military colleges and installations. In times of crisis or uncertainty, these relationships provide mutual points of access and lines of communication, in addition to shared understandings and experience. Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, summed this up to Congress, saying that “our assistance to Egypt was invaluable in maintaining our relationships with Egypt's military and civil society during the recent events there.”⁸

The IMET program has strengthened USCENTCOM's relationships in its AOR with many regional partners beyond Egypt. Since 9/11, 169 senior military graduates have trained in U.S. senior Service schools. Additionally, 234 intermediate military graduates in our AOR have trained in U.S. command and staff colleges, 752 military graduates trained in U.S. advanced equivalent officer courses, and 746 military graduates trained in

Egyptian, Kuwaiti, German, Pakistani, and U.S. forces participate in coalition readiness jump during multinational exercise Bright Star

U.S. Army (Lindsey M. Frazier)



U.S. basic officer courses. IMET is a strategic asset to the United States, its partners, and their mutual interests.

The benefits of mil-to-mil training and equipping efforts are further augmented by bilateral and multilateral exercises. The Bright Star exercise, for example, dates back to 1980. Originally a bilateral exercise involving the United States and Egypt, Bright Star expanded into a multilateral effort in 1995 with the addition of participating troops and observers from numerous regional, neighboring, and Western countries. This has allowed us to enhance relationships and understandings with those nations as well—relationships that have proven to be enduring and invaluable throughout the subsequent regional turmoil. In Bright Star’s most recent iteration in 2009–2010, 10 nations, including many valued regional partners, contributed personnel.

Our relationships with partner nations are also fundamental to building their capacity to protect mutual security interests as events proceed and potential regional instability looms large. For example, as part of our Regional Security Architecture efforts, we work with many partners in the Gulf to advance their capacity to defend their territorial waters, counter piracy, and protect critical maritime infrastructure and littoral assets.

Our many years of engagements and relationship-building have also been crucial in counterterrorism efforts. These activities are centered on the “global train and equip” authorities from the 2006 National Defense Authorization Act, also commonly referred to as “1206” authorities.⁹ While these authorities are tied to DOD, we work hand in hand with the State Department to implement them, which has enabled us to build partner capacity and mil-to-mil relationships in countries such as Yemen and Lebanon.

The warm welcome shown earlier this year to General James Mattis, USCENTCOM Commander, along with Admiral Eric Olson, then Commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, in Kuwait in commemoration of the 20th anniversary of Operation *Desert Storm*'s successful conclusion is a superb illustration of the quality and depth of our regional relationships. In many areas of Kuwait, American flags were waved alongside Kuwaiti flags, providing visible demonstration of the friendship and common commitment to security between our two nations and with our regional allies as a whole.¹⁰

Maintaining Mil-to-Mil Relationships During the Arab Spring

President Obama, in his May 2011 speech about events in the Middle East and North Africa, remarked that “it will be years before this story reaches its end. Along the way, there will be good days and there will be bad days. In some places, change will be swift; in others, gradual. And as we’ve already seen, calls for change may give way, in some cases, to fierce contests for power.”¹¹ It is precisely this uncertainty about the events that lay ahead that makes maintaining effective mil-to-mil engagements key to achieving our national strategic objectives for three primary and interrelated reasons.

Mil-to-mil engagements serve as a steady-ing influence and signal of commitment. While mil-to-mil engagements exist to support and facilitate political relationships, the contours of the respective interactions can often be quite different. Whereas diplomatic interaction often focuses on areas of negotiation and dispute resolutions, mil-to-mil-based joint exercises and training missions center strictly on areas of mutual concern. Common cause is thus the hallmark of mil-to-mil engagements, allowing for the formation of personal and professional

relationships between officers—and, by extension, between nations. As a result, when political differences emerge, as they have and inevitably will continue to during the Arab Spring and other influential events, relationships established through mil-to-mil engagements can serve as stabilizing reminders of shared enduring interests.

As noted by former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, “Convincing other countries and leaders to be partners of the United States, often at great political and physical risk, ultimately depends on proving that the United States is capable of being a reliable partner over time.”¹² Given attempts by some malign actors in the Middle East to influence the outcome of the Arab Spring, America’s credibility among its partners and allies is essential. Mil-to-mil engagements can help establish and augment U.S. credibility due to their long-term and broad-scope structure, and U.S. and foreign officers who interact through such engagements maintain contact as they concurrently rise through the ranks. The resulting relationships help prevent security vacuums in the region and promote a reliable element of stability for regional populaces.

New pressures in the region open renewed possibilities for cooperation. At the heart of the Arab Spring is a call from the affected populations for more representative and responsive governments. Reform movements are putting historic pressure on regional leaders to consider a broader definition of security, one where an atmosphere that allows these changes to flourish is central. In the political realm, for example, the people must be able to express their will free of meddling from countries such as Iran trying to exploit differences between various groups and religious confessions. Economic development, as well, will be integral to building and sustaining political reforms, and this requires, among other conditions, open lines of shipping and commerce. These challenges

have always been hallmarks of our cooperative efforts in the region; their importance is heightened in light of current events.

Partnership on these fronts does not mean that we will refrain from encouraging internal reform from the armed services we work with where it is necessary. We have been engaging in these conversations since long before popular protest movements in the region began and will continue to do so as they progress.¹³ As the understanding of responsive governance as a precondition for stability takes root in the region, these reforms take on added urgency.

Making up for lost time in relationship-building is extremely difficult. Our history of mil-to-mil engagements with Pakistan highlights the perils of whole-cloth reductions of these types of exchanges. In accordance with the Pressler Amendment, enacted in 1985 and barring U.S. economic or military assistance to Islamabad unless the U.S. President could certify that Pakistan did not have nuclear weapons, mil-to-mil exchanges between our two nations were essentially cut off between 1989 and 2001.

The result, as General Mattis has noted, is a generation of “broken contacts.”¹⁴ While some senior Pakistani officials received U.S. professional military education (PME) in the formative years of their military careers, similar opportunities were not availed to the current corps of lieutenants, captains, majors, and lieutenant colonels. Though we are still able to find areas of partnership, the relationship has been negatively affected by this gap in engagements as we continue to work through the spectrum of difficult topics facing our two nations.

On the other hand, contacts between U.S. and Egyptian military officials during the earliest stages of the protest movements in Egypt, for example, illustrate the impact of longstanding exchanges and relationship-building.

Conversations and visits between senior U.S. military officials, including Secretary Gates, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen, and General Mattis, were an important linkage between the United States and the new caretaker government in the form of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. Describing his March trip to Egypt, Secretary Gates underscored that it was “an opportunity to reaffirm America’s unwavering commitment to our bilateral relationship and to the Egyptian people” as well as an “opportunity to advance our defense partnership and to provide continuing economic and political support as Egypt goes through its period of transition,” both to key political leaders such as Prime Minister Essam Sharaf and to Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi.¹⁵

Conclusion

No single type of mil-to-mil engagement will be sufficient to maintain the robust and enduring relationships among the United States and partner nations that are always necessary but are particularly vital during this time of great change. USCENTCOM will continue to draw upon the full range of engagement options, from working with our partners at the State Department to carry out FMF, IMET, and other PME-related programs to conducting judiciously chosen and crafted joint exercises and meeting with regional leaders to understand their perspectives first hand. The U.S. diplomatic goals for the region are longstanding, but the dynamics through which we are trying to achieve them are more complex than ever.

The unique cultures, histories, and circumstances of the countries in the region make predicting individual outcomes both ill-advised and impossible. To properly respond to the dynamics of the Arab Spring, we must understand them. Listening to and learning from our

friends and allies in the region are integral parts of this strategy. Relationships facilitated through mil-to-mil engagements provide a vital channel of communications that allows for these types of open and honest exchanges. **PRISM**

Notes

¹ Department of State, Foreign Operations, vol. 2 of *Congressional Budget Justification, Fiscal Year 2012* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2011), 157–160, available at <www.state.gov/documents/organization/158267.pdf>.

² James G. Stavridis and Bart Howard, “Strengthening the Bridge: Building Partnership Capacity,” *Military Review* 90, no. 1 (January–February 2010), 3, available at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20100228_art004.pdf>.

³ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

⁴ William Burns, testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 17, 2011, available at <http://foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Burns_Testimony_Revised.pdf>.

⁵ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Situation in Egypt,” February 1, 2011, available at <www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/02/01/remarks-president-situation-egypt>.

⁶ Department of State, 159.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁸ Jeffrey D. Feltman, testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, March 10, 2010, available at <www.hcfa.house.gov/112/65055.pdf>.

⁹ Public Law 109–163, “National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2006,” January 6, 2006, 3456–3458, available at <www.dod.gov/dodgc/olc/docs/PL109-163.pdf>. The legislation states that “The President may direct the Secretary of Defense to conduct or support a program to build the capacity of a foreign country’s national military forces in order for that country to—(1) conduct counterterrorist operations; or (2) participate in or support military and stability operations in which the United States Armed Forces are a participant.” In addition, it notes that authorized activities “may include the provision of equipment, supplies, and training” and that it must promote “(A) observance of and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms; and (B) respect for legitimate civilian authority within that country.” It further outlines joint program formulation between the Department of Defense and Department of State, as well as procedures for congressional notification and limitations on the program.

¹⁰ James N. Mattis, testimony before the House Armed Services Committee, March 3, 2011, available at <http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=112_house_hearings&docid=f:65114.pdf>.

¹¹ Obama, May 19, 2011.

¹² Robert M. Gates, “Helping Others Defend Themselves: The Future of U.S. Security Assistance,” *Foreign Affairs* (May–June 2010).

¹³ Robert M. Gates, “Media Availability with Minister Juppé from the Pentagon,” February 8, 2011, available at <www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4766>.

¹⁴ Mattis.

¹⁵ Robert M. Gates, “Media Availability from Cairo, Egypt,” March 23, 2011, available at <www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4795>.