

[Home](#) > ... > Special Briefing via Telephone with Vice Admiral B...

Special Briefing via Telephone with Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, Commander, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. Fifth Fleet, and Combined Maritime Forces

SPECIAL BRIEFING

VICE ADMIRAL BRAD COOPER, COMMANDER, U.S. NAVAL FORCES CENTRAL COMMAND, U.S. FIFTH FLEET, AND COMBINED MARITIME FORCES

MAY 11, 2022

Share



SUMMARY

- ◆ **Vice Admiral Cooper** provides an update on recent U.S. Navy-led initiatives in the Middle East, including the establishment of a new international task force focused on the Red Sea, and the integration of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence into fleet operations. He then takes questions from participating journalists.



00:00

00:00



MODERATOR: Great, thank you so much. Thanks to our AT&T colleagues for helping us out with this call today. So good afternoon, good morning, good evening to everyone from the Department of State's Dubai Regional Media Hub. I would like to welcome our participants dialing in from the Middle East and America and around the world for this on-the-record press briefing with Vice Admiral Brad Cooper, Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. Fifth Fleet and Combined Maritime Forces (VADM Cooper).

VADM Cooper will provide an update on recent U.S. Navy-led initiatives in the Middle East, including the establishment of a new international task force focused on the Red Sea and the integration of unmanned systems and artificial intelligence into fleet operations. After opening remarks, Vice Admiral Cooper will take questions from participating journalists.

I'll now turn it over to VADM Cooper for his opening remarks. Vice Admiral, the floor is yours.

VADM COOPER: Well, thank you, Sam. And for everybody, good afternoon, and I thank you all for your time and interest today. It's great to join you from Bahrain. Here is located the U.S. Fleet Headquarters, the U.S. Fifth Fleet Headquarters, as well as two of the other international partnerships that I lead, the Combined Maritime Forces and the International Maritime Security Construct. I am proud to say that we serve here each and every day in the Middle East region with U.S. personnel and our international partners, who I think are just performing incredible work each and every day. In fact, everything we have accomplished in recent months is a direct result of the great work our people are doing.

I would describe our efforts at being focused in two main areas: one, strengthening partnerships; and two, accelerating innovation. As many of you know, Combined Maritime Forces expanded to 34 nations when Egypt joined last year, but another example of us strengthening partnerships is our recent launch of Combined Task Force 153. This new multinational task force helps us work more closely with our partners to focus on the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and Gulf of Aden. This is important because these waterways are critical to the free flow of commerce, and our continued presence provides both security and stability.

We're also looking to continue strengthening and expanding international cooperation by integrating advanced technologies like unmanned systems and artificial intelligence. Last September, I established a task force called Task Force 59 to bring in new systems. Integrating

new unmanned systems with artificial intelligence puts more eyes out on the water that we

simply had not had in the past. We are doing this in lockstep with our regional partners. We established operating hubs for our unmanned systems here in Bahrain and also in Aqaba, Jordan last year. And then in February of this year we conducted the largest unmanned maritime exercise in the world where 10 nations brought more than 80 unmanned systems to evaluate and operate them in regional waters. And we have conducted multiple bilateral exercises with many regional navies and nations. In fact, we just started a 10-day bilateral training exercise on Sunday with Bahrain that involves unmanned systems.

I believe that we are on the cusp of an unmanned technological revolution, and this calls for regional navies to work together more closely. As many of our partners have heard me say, I believe very deeply in the four ships here in the Middle East that are the most important: relationships, partnerships, friendship, and shared leadership. I truly believe these are the most important ships in this region. Our maritime forces are committed to upholding the international rules-based order to lead us to a more capable and effective force, one that we can lead together.

Again, thank you for your time and I look forward to your questions.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you so much, Vice Admiral. We will now begin the question and answer portion of today's call. For our colleagues who are dialing in on our simultaneous Arabic translation line, we have received a number of good pre-submitted questions from them in advance, and I'll incorporate those into our question queue.

And so our first question will be one of those pre-submitted questions from our colleague Sandeep Grewal from Bahrain's *Gulf Daily News*. And Vice Admiral, Sandeep asks: "Do you see a gradual shift in the U.S. Navy's posture from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific, and would this affect the regional coalition and relations with the Gulf allies amidst the ongoing Iranian threats?" Over to you, Vice Admiral.

VADM COOPER: Thank you for the question. Let me just first say that the U.S. Navy remains highly engaged and deeply committed to this region. Let me just offer a few tangible examples of what this commitment and this engagement looks like.

First, earlier this year we completed the largest maritime exercise, a thing called IMX 22. We

brought together 60 nations over the course of a month, a large exercise that clearly based on

BRUGHT TOGETHER 30 NATIONS OVER THE COURSE OF A MONTH, A LARGE EXERCISE THAT CLEARLY BASED ON

the number of nations represented an opportunity for those nations to join from around the world.

Recently, as I said from the outset, we established Combined Task Force 153. This is the first time in 13 years that we established a new combined task force in the Combined Maritime Forces, a 34-nation partnership which is the largest in the world.

As I mentioned earlier, we established the world's first unmanned and artificial intelligence task force and we conducted the largest maritime unmanned exercise in the world with 10 regional partners.

In the last couple of months, we expanded the membership of two of our large partnerships that I mentioned. IMSC, the International Maritime Security Construct, at the beginning of the year had eight members. It now has nine with Romania joining. I expect more members to join both IMSC and CMF over the course of this year.

And then if I look at 2021, the U.S. Navy conducted 33 exercises with our partners in this region. We're already on track in 2022 to exceed that. Thus, for me, I think this is a great signal of our commitment on a practical basis.

And then when I look into the future, what I would tell you is we're already planning for IMX 23 and I expect the level of that exercise to once again be the largest maritime exercise in this region.

All these taken together, I can confidently tell you that we are highly engaged and deeply committed to the region. And this is why you see us focusing hard on strengthening partnerships and accelerating innovation, as I mentioned before. So thanks so much.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you, sir. Our next question comes from the live queue and it goes to Jared Szuba from *Al-Monitor*. Operator, please open the line.

QUESTION: Hi, sir. Thanks for doing this. We've seen reports the Iranian Government has purported – released purported imagery of its Noor 2 satellite in the region. Just wondering if you assess that this poses a security risk to your forces there in Bahrain or in the region in general and what measures you might be taking to address this issue. Thanks.

VADM COOPER: Yes, thank you for the question. Obviously, I'm not going to talk about matters of intelligence or specific security. What I will say is, as everyone can appreciate, on a daily basis, we play – we pay very close attention to what's happening around the region in terms of maritime security. It's our number one focus.

And the reason we do this is because our goal here is to make sure that we maintain and sustain the free flow of commerce throughout the region. And to do that, we need to focus on maritime security. So that's really where our focus is. In terms of what other nations are doing, we certainly acknowledge that, but our focus is keeping the main thing the main thing, which is maritime security.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you, sir. We had a number of questions from regional journalists about cooperation with some of our regional partners and allies. I'll ask two of those questions together to make it simpler. And we have a question from our colleague Bander Alwarthan from Saudi Arabia's *Alyaum* newspaper, and he asks: "Can you tell us more about the collaboration with Saudi Arabia to bring stability and security to the region?" And then we have a similar question from our colleague Waleed Al-Ghandour from Bahrain's *Al Watan* newspaper, and he asks: "From your point of view, sir, how does Bahrain contribute to navigation security in the Arabian Gulf and the protection of energy supplies and oil tankers in the region through its cooperation with the U.S.?"

So I think, sir, Vice Admiral, if you don't, I'll ask you to kind of combine an answer on those questions in terms of talking a little bit about our cooperation with some of our specific partners and allies in the region. Over to you, sir.

VADM COOPER: Yeah, thank you for both of those. So in terms of cooperation with Saudi Arabia, we have for decades and we continue to have an excellent relationship with Saudi Arabia. We have a very large contingent of Saudi navy personnel here at the headquarters as part of both the Combined Maritime Forces and as well as the International Maritime Security Construct, the operational arm of which is called Task Force Sentinel. We're very proud of that.

Over a period of years, the Saudis have commanded multiple task forces within the Combined Maritime Forces, and in fact, this summer there will be a Saudi leader of Combined Task Force 150, which leads our maritime security operations in the North Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman.

So we're very excited about that.

On a day-to-day basis, we work very closely together. And if I just look back, even as recently as six months ago we completed a very large bilateral exercise in the Red Sea with the Saudis which was highly successful, and then just in the next couple of weeks we'll put our teams together to plan the next large bilateral exercise that will be held in the Arabian Gulf. So we're excited about that.

And then let me just go back to the partnership piece that we work every day. This is literally operating and training together as part of the Combined Maritime Forces, and it is literally operating and training together as part of the International Maritime Security Construct.

So having said all that, the relationship has been strong. It's incredibly strong today. I have a very strong relationship; I'm excited about the relationship I have with the Saudi chief of navy and I'm quite optimistic for our future.

Very quick, let me shift to – if I could shift to Bahrain. So first, none of what we do here at our headquarters is possible without the leadership and support of the Government of Bahrain. So for all the leaders who've supported us in this decades-long strategic relationship, we're grateful. And as I mentioned, the two international components of that are the Combined Maritime Forces and the International Maritime Security Construct, both of which Bahrain contributes to every single day. In fact, I would highlight that this summer Bahrain will also take command of Combined Task Force 152, which is this combined task force that patrols the Arabian Gulf and consists of GCC countries. So we're very excited about that.

And then just to give you an example of just how deep the relationship is, we actually are today conducting an exercise with the Bahrainis over a 10-day period called Neon Defender, which is bilateral in nature that has a whole series of components to it where we focus on maritime security, installation security, airfield repair, medical response, explosive ordnance disposal, and surface naval exercises. So this is just an example of our relationship here in Bahrain.

And then finally, we also have our families who live here. Our children go to school side-by-side with Bahraini brothers and sisters. And so Bahrain really is our second home for the Naval Forces Central Command and Fifth Fleet, and we're grateful for all of that. Thanks so much.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you, sir. So our next question will go to the live queue. So our next question goes to Raneem Rou Khzam from LBCI media outlet in Lebanon. Operator, if you can

QUESTION GOES TO RAJESH DOB RIZANI FROM EBC MEDIA OUTLET IN LEBANON. OPERATOR, IF YOU CAN

open the line, please.

QUESTION: Hello, I hope you can hear me.

VADM COOPER: Hello, loud and clear.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you for this opportunity. I would like to ask you about the importance of the unmanned operations, especially taking into consideration what we've heard during the past month. Some statements were a sort of accusations that the U.S. is not taking enough measures to protect the maritime security breach – to protect the maritime security of the Red Sea and more particularly when we talk about security breaches from Iran.

VADM COOPER: This is an excellent question. Let me frame the big picture with these unmanned systems. First, unmanned systems with artificial intelligence allow us to simply put more eyes out on the water that I said before that we just have not had in the past. And this is important because the waterways across the Middle East are dynamic and they're vast. It's 8,000 kilometers of coastline when you stretch from the Suez Canal all the way around the Arabian Peninsula up into the North Arabian Gulf, so that is a large volume of water. So having better awareness of what's happening in these waters simply allows us and enables us to better respond if someone warrants our attention.

So I'll give you a couple examples of how unmanned systems and artificial intelligence have been serving us well. First, we've had these drones, these USVs, remain out at sea for more than a hundred straight days. This is unimaginable previously to have platforms with these capabilities at sea for so long with no fuel requirement and no maintenance. It's just not possible for a crewed ship to be out that long without significant logistics support.

We've also seen that combining these drones with artificial intelligence allows us to map the waters around them and really establish a pattern of life, which then allows you to better detect smuggling or other malign activities such as illegal fishing or anything else unusual, which I think gets to your point of how these systems allow us to maintain maritime security in a more vibrant manner. And they do this by sending the information that they detect either by radar or by camera using artificial intelligence back to a command center, where a human being decides what to do. It's very strong and powerful and is working well. And so this process of using

artificial intelligence really has just allowed us to expand how far we can see. And so we're

artificial intelligence really has just allowed us to expand how far we can see. And so we're

excited about this and we're working with just about every regional partner who is also excited about this, and I think there's tremendous opportunity as we go forward.

Obviously, now, if I could just –

MODERATOR: Thank you, sir. Oh, go ahead.

VADM COOPER: If I could just build upon that, as we look to the future, we've set a big goal, and that goal is to have 100 of these advanced unmanned surface vessels into navy fleets across the Middle East waters, working in close cooperation with our regional partners, by the summer of 2023. And these vessels will operate alongside our cruise ships and really enable us to have a clear picture of what's happening above, on, and below the water. And so this is exciting.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you, sir. So our next question – we've got time for a couple more questions. Our next question is a pre-submitted question from our colleague Monalisa Freiha from Lebanon's *Annahar* newspaper, and she asks: "Sir, it seems that there has been a decline in the hijackings and piracy that Iran and affiliated militias were carrying out in the Gulf waters. Were there any specific procedures taken that you can point to that you believe led to this?" Over to you, sir.

VADM COOPER: Well, thank you for that. In the two large coalitions that we lead, both Combined Maritime Forces and International Maritime Security Construct, I believe that the efforts of all the sailors from many countries who are serving in these two coalitions have contributed to a decrease, as you describe, in piracy that we're seeing throughout the region. I'm very pleased with the efforts that we have seen and continue to see.

In the case of the Combined Maritime Forces, we have a dedicated task force called Combined Task Force 151 who is leading this effort. They're doing a tremendous job each and every day, and their presence throughout the region is both a deterrent to piracy and helps really reinforce the importance of maritime security. The International Maritime Security Construct, which has the mission of deterrence and reassurance in the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb, also contributes to this strong maritime security network that we have. So both of these play a complementary role and I think, most importantly, we're doing it as part of a large coalition, a large partnership.

Thus, let me go back to my earlier point: This is why we take these successful demonstrations of our application of maritime capability and are really looking to strengthen our partnerships as we work together to look to the future.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you, sir. Our next question comes from our live queue and it goes to Mike Wagenheim from i24News. Operator, please open the line.

QUESTION: VADM Cooper, thank you for taking the time to hold this briefing. Can you give any kind of an update or insight as to the potential of Israel joining the Combined Maritime Forces and what considerations, at least from the American side, would be at play in that decision?

VADM COOPER: Yeah, a couple of thoughts here. Let me just first frame for everyone, the Combined Maritime Forces is a 34-nation maritime partnership. It is the largest maritime partnership in the world. Today, Israel is not a member of CMF, and I would defer to Israel in terms of what their national decision would be going forward.

But what I would say about CMF is the common bond and what knits everyone together is a commitment to the international rules-based order at sea, and I'm very proud to say that the nations who are part of this are deeply committed to that. And I would expect, as I mentioned before, as we look further into the year and next year, we'll have more nations joining. So thank you for that.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you, sir. We have time for one last question, and so I'd like to do again what I did earlier and combine a couple of the many pre-submitted questions we got from the Arabic-speaking journalists. And so we got a couple similar questions regarding the Houthis and NAVCENT initiatives, and so I'll just combine two of those. And we've got Khaled Alsharqawi from Kuwait's *Alrai* newspaper asks: "Does the establishment of a new international task force in the region target the Houthi militias only, or specifically target them?" And also we've got our colleague Tamam Abusafi from Bahrain's *Alayam* daily newspaper, and he asks: "When will a multinational task force be formed to confront the Houthi attacks in the region?"

So if I can ask you, Vice Admiral, to just address the NAVCENT role as it relates to the Houthis and the region. Over to you, sir.

VADM COOPER: Yeah. so first let me just talk about broadly why we established Task Force 153

and why at this time and how that's formed and what that looks like. So we established Combined Task Force 153 to work more closely with our partners to focus on the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and Gulf of Aden. And as everyone can appreciate, those waters are critical to the free flow of commerce throughout the region. So our continued presence provides security and stability to support that free flow. Some may ask why did we do it now, and one, I would say this is as good a time as any, but two, we're always looking to strengthen and expand our international cooperation because it forms the cornerstone of maritime security in the region, as has been demonstrated many times over. And then also, last year we expanded CMF with a 34th nation when Egypt joined.

So I would defer to individual nations to speak about their participation or what they're doing, but I would highlight Egypt as an example of their participation in CTF 153 just in the last couple of weeks.

And then more broadly, where we're focused on with CTF 153 – and this is a really important point – is to strengthen maritime security cooperation and to collectively address the regional threats on the water. And I think that's the best way to address that, and by – and we also – I guess I would also add we have very good examples when we establish task forces, they prove to be effective, and here's an example: Last year, our task force who leads our efforts in counter-smuggling both in terms of weapons and drugs was highly successful. This is an excellent model. So last year we had about \$500 million in drug seizures, which were – which actually exceeded the four previous years combined. Last year we had 9,000 weapons seized, which was three times more than the previous year. This was all done under Combined Task Force organization.

So given those successes, we have applied them to a new model that's going to be focused more vibrantly than we have done in the past on the vital strategic choke points that stretch in this particular case from the Suez Canal down the Red Sea to the Bab el-Mandeb. And the operating area for this task force extends to the Gulf of Aden and basically ends at the Oman-Yemen border.

So all told, I'm excited about the work that has been done so far. I'm quite optimistic about the future and their effectiveness to enforce maritime security. So thanks so much.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you, sir. So that was our final question. Vice Admiral, I'll turn it back

over to you if you have any closing remarks that you want to say to our journalists on the line.

VADM COOPER: Yeah, thank you for taking the time for everybody. I think the thing I would leave you with is the region, the waters of the region are vast and dynamic. I think there are a lot of opportunities for us to continue this great momentum, as I described it earlier, in terms of partnerships. And that's why we have such a deep commitment both to the region and not just through words but through meaningful action of strengthening our partnerships and accelerating innovation.

So a real privilege to join you today, and we'll look forward to staying in touch. Have a great day.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you so much. That concludes today's call. We'd like to thank everyone for dialing in today and we thank our speaker, VADM Brad Cooper, Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, U.S. Fifth Fleet, and Combined Maritime Forces, for his time today. If you have any questions about today's call, you may contact the Dubai Regional Media Hub at DubaiMediaHub@state.gov. Information on how to access the English recording of this call will be provided by AT&T shortly. Thank you for joining us and have a great day.

###

TAGS

Arabian Gulf

Bahrain

Bureau of Political-Military Affairs

China

Countering Terrorism

Defense

Department of State Organization

Dubai Regional Media Hub

Egypt

International Security

Israel

Jordan

Kuwait

Lebanon

Regional Security System

Russia

Saudi Arabia

Sovereignty

Turkey



Related Articles

— NOVEMBER 16, 2021

[Telephonic Press Briefing with Mira K. Resnick, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Regional Security, Bureau of Political-Military Affairs](#)

[READ MORE](#)

— MAY 12, 2022

[Digital Briefing with State Department Acting Principal Deputy Coordinator for Counterterrorism Chris Landberg and Deputy Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Doug Hoyt](#)

[READ MORE](#)

— MAY 12, 2022

[Opening Statement to Senate Foreign Relations Committee: “U.S. Efforts to Support Ukraine Against Russian Aggression”](#)

[READ MORE](#)



U.S. DEPARTMENT *of* STATE

White House

USA.gov

Office of the Inspector General

Archives

Contact Us



Privacy Policy

Accessibility Statement

Copyright Information

FOIA

No FEAR Act