



Middle  
East  
Institute



# CENTCOM Commanders Council Dinner

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

**September 14, 2023**

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,

It is our great pleasure to welcome you to the inaugural CENTCOM Commanders Council Dinner, convened by the Defense and Security Program of the Middle East Institute (MEI). On behalf of MEI's board of governors and experts, we thank you for your support of our organization and our mission by participating in tonight's proceedings.

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.

The Program has a longstanding institutional relationship with CENTCOM. Unique in the U.S. public policy community, the MEI-CENTCOM Annual Conference, to be held for the fourth time in the spring of 2024, is a flagship event of the

Program. It convenes top CENTCOM leadership and staff as well as some of the world's leading Middle East experts and practitioners to discuss U.S.-Middle East policy.

Today's dinner is a first for MEI and for the broader U.S. think tank community. We are privileged this evening to bring together four leading former commanders of CENTCOM, two of whom have chaired MEI's Board of Governors. We are grateful to them for sharing their insights about the challenges and opportunities presented by CENTCOM's historic transition from a wartime command center to a regional security integrator.

Thank you all for joining us for this occasion. We greatly value your friendship, commitment, and support.

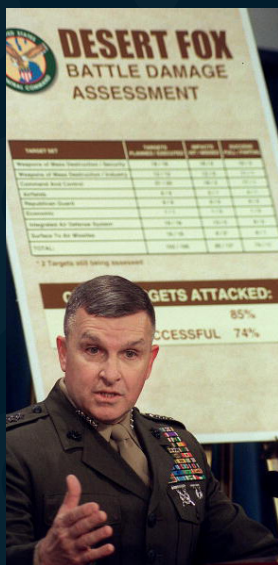
With much appreciation,



**Paul Salem**  
*President and CEO*



**Bilal Saab**  
*Senior Fellow and  
Director of the Defense  
and Security Program*



# Program

- 6:00pm** Cocktail reception
- 6:35pm** *CENTCOM Commanders Council Dinner*
- 6:40pm** **WELCOME**  
Paul Salem  
President and CEO, MEI
- 6:45pm** **PROGRAM BEGINS**  
Former CENTCOM Commanders in conversation with  
David Ignatius
- 7:55pm** Dinner served
- 8:40pm** Moderated Q&A
- 9:10pm** **CLOSING REMARKS**  
Anthony C. Zinni  
6th Commander of U.S. Central Command  
Emeritus Chairman, Board of Governors, MEI
- 9:30pm** Dinner concludes

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





## General John P. Abizaid

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

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 Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.

**14th Commander, 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.



## General Joseph L. Votel

**13th Commander, U.S. Central Command;  
Distinguished Sr. Fellow on National Security, MEI**

Joseph L. Votel served as CENTCOM Commander from March 2016 to March 2019. He retired as a four-star General in the U.S. Army after a nearly 40-year career, during which he was also commander of the U.S. 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 Senior Fellow on National Security at MEI.

## General Anthony C. Zinni

**6th Commander, U.S. Central Command;  
Chairman Emeritus, Board of Governors, MEI**

Anthony “Tony” C. Zinni served as CENTCOM Commander from August 1997 to September 2000. He retired as a four-star General in the U.S. Marine Corps after a 39 year career, during which time he earned 23 personal awards and 37 unit, service, and campaign awards. General Zinni has also served in numerous diplomatic roles, including as the U.S. special envoy to Israel and the Palestinian Authority and in missions to Pakistan, Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia. He has held faculty positions at the Virginia Military Institute and University of California, Berkeley, and served on the boards of leading U.S. companies including BAE Systems and Dynacorp. He is the author of three books about foreign affairs. He is Chairman Emeritus of the Board of Governors of MEI.



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### MODERATOR



## David Ignatius

**Columnist covering 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.

## **Paul Salem**

### **President and CEO, MEI**

Paul Salem is president and CEO of the Middle East Institute. He focuses on issues of political change, transition, and conflict as well as the regional and international relations of the Middle East. Salem is the author and editor of a number of books and reports including *Escaping the Conflict Trap: Toward Ending Civil Wars in the Middle East* (ed. with Ross Harrison, MEI 2019); *Winning the Battle, Losing the War: Addressing the Conditions that Fuel Armed Non State Actors* (ed. with Charles Lister, MEI 2019); *From Chaos to Cooperation: Toward Regional Order in the Middle East* (ed. with Ross Harrison, MEI 2017), *Broken Orders: The Causes and Consequences of the Arab Uprisings* (In Arabic, 2013), “Thinking Arab Futures: Drivers, scenarios, and strategic choices for the Arab World”, *The Cairo Review* Spring 2019; “The Recurring Rise and Fall of Political Islam” (CSIS, 2015), *Bitter Legacy: Ideology and Politics in the Arab World* (1994), and *Conflict Resolution in the Arab World* (ed., 1997). Prior to joining MEI, Salem was the founding director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, Lebanon between 2006 and 2013. From 1999 to 2006, he was director of the Fares Foundation and in 1989-1999 founded and directed the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, Lebanon’s leading public policy think tank.

## **Bilal Y. Saab**

### **Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense and Security Program, MEI**

Bilal Y. Saab is Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense and Security Program at the Middle East Institute (MEI) in Washington, D.C. In addition, he is an Associate Fellow with Chatham House in London and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut. With Georgetown University’s Security Studies Program in the School of Foreign Service, Saab is an Adjunct Professor teaching graduate courses on U.S. defense policy in the Middle East. And he is the author of *Rebuilding Arab Defense: US Security Cooperation in the Middle East* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, May 2022). Prior to MEI, Saab served as Senior Advisor for Security Cooperation (SC) in the Pentagon’s Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, with oversight responsibilities for CENTCOM. In his capacity as the Department of Defense’s lead on security cooperation in the broader Middle East, Saab supported the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy’s responsibility for SC oversight by leading prioritization and strategic integration of SC resources and activities for the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility.



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Thank you  
for  
your service and leadership

GEN (Ret.) John P. Abizaid, US Army

GEN (Ret.) Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., USMC

GEN (Ret.) Joseph L. Votel, US Army

GEN (Ret.) Anthony C. Zinni, USMC

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*Marjorie A. Adams*

*recognizes MEI Board Chair*

**General John P. Abizaid**

*and thanks tonight's speakers*

**General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr.**

**General Joseph L. Votel**

**General Anthony C. Zinni**

*for their distinguished  
service to the United States*

Ajay and Debbie Nagpal,  
and the Millennium team,  
wish to express our appreciation to  
the MEI Board Chair and tonight's  
distinguished speakers.

Thank you for your service.

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**The Middle East Institute** is the leading Washington-based institution dedicated solely to the study of the Middle East. A non-partisan, integrated think tank, MEI works to advance the US-Middle East relationship through a whole-of-society approach that includes policy, education, and cultural programming.

Housing world-class arts, education, and policy centers, 18 specialized policy programs, and over 150 leading experts from around the world, MEI works with governments, the private sector, and civil society to:

- Drive policy innovation and collaboration on the issues that will define a more prosperous and peaceful future for the region and the world
- Advance practical solutions to reduce and de-escalate conflict, promote good governance, empower women and marginalized communities, and galvanize innovation and economic opportunity
- Influence the adoption of a pragmatic and sustainable US foreign policy posture towards the region
- Connect the people of the United States and Middle East
- Build enduring cultural understanding and mutual respect through best-in-class arts and education programs and exchanges

## POLICY IMPACT

Generating analysis, convening experts, and providing insight that helps decision makers in Washington and around the world craft foreign policies that prioritize peace, prosperity, and partnership.

### An Integrated Think Tank for the 21st Century

MEI is leading the way for a new kind of think tank: one that thrives at the intersection of policy, education, and culture. Our centers reflect a dedication to promoting a more comprehensive understanding of a complex region.

Showcasing the often-overlooked cultural depth of the Middle East, and forging indelible bonds through the power of music, performance, and the arts.

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