Cooper Hands Over Command of U.S. 5th Fleet to Wikoff



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MANAMA, Bahrain Vice Adm. Brad Cooper turned over command of Middle East naval forces to Vice Adm. George Wikoff during a change of command ceremony at Naval Support Activity Bahrain, Feb. 1.

The time-honored ceremony marked Wikoff's assumption of command of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), U.S. 5th Fleet, Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), and the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC).

Cooper, who assumed command in May 2021, led more than 16,000 Sailors, Marines, Coastguardsmen, and civilians. As CMF commander, he oversaw a 41-nation maritime partnership in one

of the world’s most diverse and challenging area of operations.

Army Gen. Michael “Erik” Kurilla, commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), presided over the ceremony. During his remarks, he highlighted Cooper’s accomplishments while in command, noting the importance of people at the heart of his success in ensuring maritime security.

“His investment in our people, our partners, and to developing innovative approaches has truly made a difference in 5th Fleet and across the Central Region,” Kurilla said, noting Cooper’s leadership advanced U.S. and coalition naval forces through numerous complex joint and combined maritime operational events, resulting in enhanced security and stability in the maritime environment.

Recently, Cooper led efforts to counter Houthi malign activities in the Red Sea through Operation Prosperity Guardian, bringing more than 20 nations together to provide a persistent presence in the Red Sea, the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Gulf of Aden. Further, he led U.S. Navy efforts to diminish Houthi drone and missile capabilities through the execution of more than 100 strikes inside Houthi-controlled portions of Yemen in conjunction with Operation Poseidon Archer.

He also established the first naval unmanned and artificial intelligence task force, Task Force 59. During his tour, TF 59 went from experimentation to operations, including the first use of weapons aboard an unmanned platform.

Cooper spearheaded Operation Unified Takedown, resulting in the largest seizure of illegal weapons and drugs, smuggled out of Iran, in the history of Middle East naval operations.

With an eye toward expanding maritime security, Cooper also forged new partnerships with Caspian Sea nations and other central European countries.

As CMF commander, Cooper expanded the coalition to its greatest point in 22 years, 41 nations, and also established two new task forces: Combined Task Force (CTF) 153, focused on the Red Sea region; and CTF-154, leading multinational maritime training at locations across the Middle East. CMF task forces provided maritime security, conducted counter piracy and counter terrorism operations, and combated illegal drug smuggling, confiscating over $1.4 billion in narcotics during his tour. As the commander of IMSC, he grew its membership from eight to 12 nations.

Cooper said none of it could have been accomplished without the exceptional performance of the Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen deployed to U.S. 5th Fleet.

“Every success starts and ends with people, and that has certainly been the case here in the Middle East these past few years” Cooper said. “The extraordinary Sailors, Marines and Coast Guardsmen who have deployed to this region have been, and continue to be, at the top of their game. I could not be prouder of their achievements and consider it a privilege of a lifetime to serve alongside them during this tour.”

Cooper reports next to Central Command at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, as the CENTCOM Deputy Commander.

Wikoff assumes command following his most recent tour as Acting Commander, Naval Air Forces/Acting Commander, Naval Air Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. A naval aviator, Wikoff served operationally in Fighter Squadron (VF) 102 onboard USS America (CV 66) and VF 154 forward deployed to Atsugi, Japan on USS Kitty Hawk (CV 63). He commanded Strike Fighter Squadron (VFA) 211, deployed onboard USS Enterprise (CVN 65), VFA 122, Carrier Air Wing (CVW) 3, deployed onboard USS Harry S. Truman (CVN 75), and Carrier Strike Group (CSG) 5, forward deployed to Yokosuka, Japan, aboard USS Ronald Reagan (CVN 76).

“I am particularly excited to lead our like-minded partners in

the Combined Maritime Forces with whom the United States stands shoulder-to-shoulder in the defense of Freedom of Navigation and Rules-Based International Order," Wikoff said.

U.S. Naval Forces Central Command is the maritime component commander of U.S. Central Command in the U.S. 5th Fleet area of operations. It encompasses about 2.5 million square miles of water area and includes the Arabian Gulf, Gulf of Oman, Arabian Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea and parts of the Indian Ocean. The expanse is comprised of more than 20 countries and includes three critical choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal, and the Bab al-Mandeb.