

THE DEPARTMENTS: NATIONAL GUARD

Gen. Frank J. Grass, center, chief of the National Guard Bureau, along with other officers and advisers, lands in the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt to visit National Guard troops in June.



SGT. 1ST CLASS JIM GREENHILL/U.S. ARMY NATIONAL GUARD

HOLDING STEADY

Guard deployments continue to support U.S. efforts overseas

By Matt Alderton

ON DEC. 15, 2011, the United States declared the Iraq War officially “over.” Four years later, however, the National Guard continues to conduct missions in Iraq in support of ongoing U.S. military operations.

“What we have over there is approaching 10,000 individual soldiers for 2015,” according to Col. Chip Lynn, Mobilization and Readiness Division chief of the Army

National Guard, who said U.S. Central Command — which includes Iraq and Afghanistan, plus 18 other countries in the Middle East — is home to two-thirds of deployed personnel in the Army National Guard on any given day. “That’s held pretty steady for the last three years.”

For a time, with the Iraq War over and the war in Afghanistan winding down, it looked as though the Guard’s presence in the Middle East would diminish. But with budget cuts forcing the U.S. Army to reduce its active-duty force and President Obama

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SEAN RAYFORD/GETTY IMAGES

As part of its response to domestic emergencies, the Army National Guard helps residents off a transport vehicle near Georgetown, S.C., in October after heavy flooding.

announcing in October that U.S. forces would remain in Afghanistan through at least 2016, that no longer seems the case, Lynn said. "We were planning to have a smaller footprint, but now it looks like we'll be maintaining our footprint."

The Army announced in July that it would reduce its active troops to 450,000 by 2018 (a 21 percent reduction from a wartime high of 570,000 soldiers in 2012). But it will reduce the size of the Army National Guard (which also responds to domestic crises such as wildfires and floods) by just 6.5 percent, from 358,200 soldiers to 335,000.

"A lot of people assume that the Guard has gotten out of the deployment business, since we've drawn down in Iraq and Afghanistan. But in reality, we have continued to provide (support across the region)," said retired Tennessee Army National Guard Adjutant General Maj. Gen. Gus Hargett, president of the National Guard Association of the United States.

"The Guard is the primary combat reserve of the Army," Hargett explained. "If they've got to use combat forces that are larger than their capacity, they're going to have to come to the Guard."

Given the escalating conflict in Syria and the war against ISIL, the potential for combat remains. For now, however, Lynn said Guard missions in areas such as Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt and Bahrain — all of which saw Guard deployments in 2015 — are focused primarily on base support operations, engineering, training and mentoring of foreign militaries, and command and control.

"Most of it is what's considered basic blocking and tackling in our business," said Lynn, who noted that the Guard also main-



TECH. SGT. ROBERT CLOY/ U.S. AIR FORCE

Tech. Sgt. Audrey Belmonte, a medical technician deployed from Charleston Air National Guard Base, W.Va., prepares for a medical evacuation mission at Bagram Air Field in Afghanistan in November.

tains activities in the Middle East through its State Partnership Program, which pairs U.S. states with foreign militaries to achieve coalition building through joint training, exercises and operations.

Of 70 Guard partnerships around the world, five are within U.S. Central Command: Kazakhstan is paired with Arizona, Jordan with Colorado, Kyrgyzstan with Montana, Tajikistan with Virginia and Uzbekistan with Mississippi.

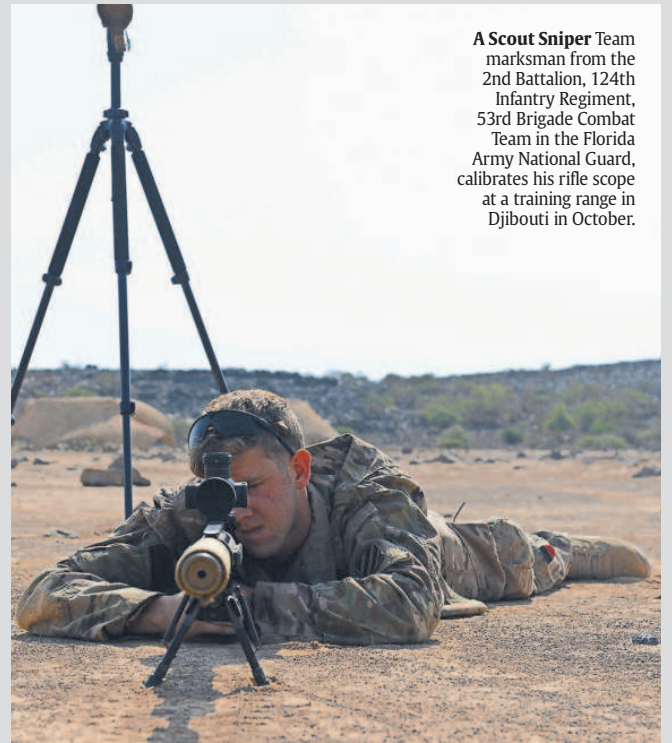
"In that region, the State Partnership Program is not as robust as we would like it to be (because) part of the conditions to be a partner with a state is having a stable government and a professional military. We've been laying the groundwork and building that capability, and we look forward to it in the future," Lynn said.

"The Guard has got to be both an operational reserve and a strategic reserve," Hargett said. ●

A LOOK AT 2015

► The Army's controversial **Aviation Restructure Initiative (ARI)** moved forward in 2015. It's a five-year cost-cutting plan to retire the active Army's Vietnam-era OH-58 Kiowa scout helicopters and replace them with AH-64 Apache attack helicopters taken from the National Guard. ARI is expected to save the Army as much as \$1.1 billion a year, but would leave the Guard without combat choppers. According to National Guard spokesman Rick Breitenfeldt, the Army National Guard will transfer up to 48 Apaches to the active Army by March 31, 2016. In exchange for its Apaches, the Guard will receive approximately 110 UH-60 Black Hawk helicopters, the transfer of which began this summer. "The Army National Guard is working with the Army to achieve the right force combination for fighting America's wars, defending the homeland and building global partnerships," Breitenfeldt said.

► In July, a National Guard battalion — the **First Combined Arms Battalion, 252nd Armor Regiment Alpha Company** from Fayetteville, N.C. — assumed command of the Multinational Battle Group-East (MNBG-E) Forward Command Post in Kosovo, which comprises multinational elements supporting the NATO peacekeeping operation known as Kosovo Force, or KFOR. The Guard has been a consistent presence in Kosovo since NATO established KFOR in 1999 and is part of a sizable Guard contingency in the former Eastern Bloc.



STAFF SGT. GREGORY BROOK/ U.S. AIR FORCE

▲ In August, the **Florida Army National Guard's 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment** deployed to the Horn of Africa to conduct security operations in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The Horn of Africa is one of several regions around the world where the Guard has a persistent active presence; others include Kosovo, the Sinai Peninsula, Guantanamo Bay and Afghanistan.

A Scout Sniper Team marksman from the 2nd Battalion, 124th Infantry Regiment, 53rd Brigade Combat Team in the Florida Army National Guard, calibrates his rifle scope at a training range in Djibouti in October.