



## PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

# The US Brings Israel into CENTCOM

by Yaakov Lappin

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,940, February 22, 2021

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The Pentagon's decision last month to relocate Israel to the area of responsibility of the US military's Central Command (CENTCOM) is a milestone development. It reflects a growing need to coordinate operational military activities among Israel, the US, and pragmatic Gulf States in the face of the common threat posed by the Iranian axis.

Though the move will take some time to go into effect, the Pentagon's recent decision to relocate Israel to the area of responsibility (AOR) of the US military's Central Command (CENTCOM, which operates in the Middle East) is a direct operational reflection of the Abraham Accords, in which Israel normalized relations with the UAE and Bahrain with Saudi support.

The Head of CENTCOM, Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, recently told the Middle East Institute, "We do a lot of business with Israel now just as a practical matter of fact, because their threats generally emanate from the east. In a certain way, this is just a natural recognition of that at the operational level."

In comments reported by *Defense News*, McKenzie said bringing Israel into CENTCOM will enable the US to place an "operational perspective" on the Abraham Accords, setting up "further corridors and opportunities to open up between Israel and Arab countries in the region" on a military-to-military level.

This, in turn, will pave the way toward a collective regional approach to common Middle Eastern threats. McKenzie stated that the move also lines up with a US vision in which "our friends in the region do more for themselves" and in which neighbors work closely together, adding that the CENTCOM move is "a step in that direction."

Prior to the Pentagon's decision, a detailed report released by the pro-Israel Washington-based Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA),

which includes a number of former high-ranking American military officials as members, made the case for bringing Israel into CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

According to JINSA's director of foreign policy, Jonathan Ruhe, the idea initially received mixed responses from both defense establishments, but feedback has grown consistently more positive over the past three years.

JINSA argued that such a network could lead to the creation of a region-wide missile defense network with shared early warning alerts. The cooperation could include steps to disrupt Iranian proliferation of advanced weapons to its proxies, which target Israel, US forces, and pragmatic Sunni states alike.

In the face of these threats, CENTCOM can also initiate joint exercises and contingency plans for Iran-specific threats, thereby boosting cooperation, while Israel can find a new framework within which to share critical information from its "war between the wars" to disrupt Iranian force build-up in the region.

The report explained that each US military geographic combatant command (COCOM) is in charge of implementing American defense policy in its AOR while exercising unified command over all forces in its jurisdiction. Each COCOM works with and coordinates with partner militaries in its region, making them a "primary mechanism for US-led regional cooperation on strategic planning, training, doctrine, logistics, intelligence, technology, procurement, operations, and other critical military activities."

In this context, moving Israel to CENTCOM formalizes regular military exercises among the US, Israel, and Arab states. "Such training would be crucial for developing effective theater missile defenses, as well as boosting readiness and interoperability in cyber, counter-terrorism, special operations, and maritime security," the report said.

Israel is no longer excluded by the Arab states in CENTCOM's region but rather is becoming a central member of the regional anti-Iranian alliance. The move to CENTCOM is a reflection of this historic shift.

As JINSA's report states, the move will ultimately facilitate collective regional action to roll back Iran's footprint in CENTCOM's AOR while also preparing for a looming potential war and smoothing over day-to-day operational cooperation.

Israel has been under European Command's (EUCOM) AOR since the latter's creation in 1952, an arrangement that proved beneficial to both sides for decades.

That arrangement enabled the US and other NATO members to partner closely with Israel, particularly post-9/11, as well as to develop close missile defense cooperation, which saw EUCOM forces arrive in Israel for Juniper Cobra missile defense drills every two years.

Both EUCOM and CENTCOM are undergoing changes, as JINSA's report outlines. Preparations reflecting such changes could be found as far back as March 2018, when CENTCOM released a posture statement that for the first time listed Israel in its area as a partner for theater security cooperation and partnership in light of rising threats from Iran and the Islamic State.

That same month, CENTCOM forces took part in the Juniper Cobra exercise held between the IDF and EUCOM, and Gen. Joseph Votel became the first CENTCOM commander to officially visit Israel.

At CENTCOM, there is now an acute need to create a regional cooperation network that connects the US military, the IDF, and Gulf States to one another to face common threats from Iran as well as ISIS.

Meanwhile, EUCOM is keen to return its primary focus to great power competition with Russia.

An open question raised by the move is whether the US will now be encouraged to position precision munitions on Israeli soil, which could serve both the IDF and CENTCOM in the event of a potential conflict with Iran. JINSA noted that EUCOM has no interest in replenishing this stockpile, as it wants munitions in Europe in case of conflict with Russia. CENTCOM might take a different view.

Aside from anything else, Israel's move into CENTCOM could boost deterrence against Iran by signaling a major step in the crystallization of a regional collective military partnership that recognizes the Israeli-Sunni alliance in the face of the radical Shiite axis.

*Yaakov Lappin is a Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies and a military and strategic affairs correspondent. He conducts research and analysis for defense think tanks and is the military correspondent for JNS. His book [The Virtual Caliphate](#) explores the online jihadist presence.*