



Israel's Move to USCENTCOM is Transformational

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel's shift from USEUCOM to USCENTCOM is no less than a formal recognition of Israel as a regional heavyweight. The move has transformed the strategic landscape. Under USCENTCOM's umbrella, the IDF is now conducting exercises with Arab militaries, opportunities in long-range air operations have emerged, efficiencies in missile defense have been created, and former adversaries are now eager to purchase Israel's military technology. Also, the shift creates a more natural and cooperative military environment for the IDF.

The second anniversary of Israel's shift to US Central Command (USCENTCOM) has arrived, and the regional and strategic impact of the change is readily apparent. Security cooperation with Arab states, multinational exercises, and frequent visits by the USCENTCOM commander are all indications of Jerusalem's deepening role as a regional power.

In January 2021, as part of the Trump administration's adjustments to the Unified Command Plan (UCP), Israel was officially transferred from US European Command (USEUCOM) to USCENTCOM. This meant Israel was expected to engage in security cooperation (e.g., exercises, military sales, operational planning) with US regional allies and partners also in USCENTCOM - specifically, with moderate Arab states. The Abraham Accords, signed in 2020, were a vital precursor to this move and a harbinger of future Arab-Israeli collaboration.

The United States has 11 Unified Combatant Commands (COCOMs). Each is led by a four-star general or flag officer, and they all report directly to the President.

Four are functional commands, like US Strategic Command (USSTRATCOM), which oversees nuclear deterrence. Seven are geographic.

The geographic commands oversee operations in regional areas of responsibility (AORs). USEUCOM, established in 1952, was the first unified command to address the Soviet threat. It originally had auspices over the Middle East as well. USCENTCOM was created in 1983 in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the failure of Operation Eagle Claw to rescue American diplomats and embassy staff held hostage in Iran.

The IDF suffered a cultural mismatch during its tenure at USEUCOM. Ever since the fall of the Soviet Union, USEUCOM has seldom engaged in military operations (the Bosnia and Kosovo Wars were rare exceptions). Like NATO, it prefers diplomacy and soft power solutions. The IDF, by contrast, is offensive-minded and prefers a direct approach.

The relationship reached a diplomatic crisis during the First Gulf War (1991). Israel wanted a direct liaison with the operational forces of USCENTCOM but was rebuffed. During the Iraq War, Israel was required to use USEUCOM as an interlocutor when assisting US and coalition forces in Iraq, including those tasked with containing Iran.

Like the IDF, USCENTCOM is often involved in military operations. USCENTCOM has, indeed, been the most operational command of the last two decades, leading coalitions in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Its leadership is also more culturally aligned with Israel, making it the preferred partner.

USCENTCOM and the IDF face many common threats. This bond helps them overcome policy constraints and bureaucratic red tape, driving both sides to streamline cooperation. Thus, it is not surprising that Israel views the shift to USCENTCOM as a natural and welcome event. The timing is also fortunate now that USEUCOM has shifted its resources to the Russo-Ukraine War and the defense of NATO, which leave little aperture for Middle East affairs.

One of a combatant commander's functions is to serve as the top-level representative of the Department of Defense and the highest United States official on the ground alongside senior State Department ambassadors. They often meet with heads of state, heads of government, and military chiefs. They convey the President's messages and intent. A COCOM will typically serve for three to four years.

Most COCOMs aspire to visit every friendly country in their AOR during their tenure, but few find the time to reach them all. Instead, trips are prioritized by the relative importance of the countries. Gen. Michael Kurilla took command of USCENTCOM in April 2022 and has already visited Israel *three times*. This level of

attention is almost unprecedented in peacetime and signals Israel's weight as a US regional partner.

The foremost of the common adversaries and threats facing both Israel and the US in the region is Iran's nuclear weapons program. Tehran also targets the forces of both nations by providing surrogates with Iranian-made missiles, UAVs, and IEDs. While neither nation is in a formal state of war with Iran, both work to mitigate Iran's activities, collect intelligence, and interdict weapons shipments.

A disadvantage to the shift to USCENTCOM pertains to security concerns in the West Bank and the activities of the Palestinian Authority. This highly politicized issue has caused friction between the two militaries in the past. Gen. Anthony Zini served as US Special Envoy (2001-2003) to Israel and the Palestinian Authority while they were enmeshed in the Second Intifada. Zini had to negotiate the widening gap between the two parties as a result of the recalcitrant PA's refusal to address terrorism. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, newly returned to office, will have to assuage the concerns of Israel's new USCENTCOM Arab partners when he wishes to extend the Abraham Accords in response to local security issues.

The long-term implications of Israel's shift to USCENTCOM have yet to reveal themselves. However, at the second anniversary of the shift, some effects are already evident. Israel will now participate in USCENTCOM's review and updating of Middle East CONOPS (Concept of Operations, or war plans). USCENTCOM will help sway Arab states into allowing the Israeli Air Force to use their airspace to conduct distant operations. Future operations may even include refueling and other logistics support in these states.

With the move to USCENTCOM, Israel gains advantages and efficiencies at the operational level. Theater anti-ballistic missile systems are distinct from short-range rocket and missile defense systems such as Iron Dome. These systems respond faster and have a higher success rate if a radar system near the launch site detects the launch early. Being in the same COCOM AOR means missile defense is under a single command structure with one set of rules of engagement (ROE), making command and control more predictable and dependable. For example, a US Aegis capable destroyer could spot a launch over the Persian Gulf and pass targeting information to an Arrow system in Israel, greatly enhancing the likelihood of a successful engagement.

In November, Israel and the US held a joint exercise that drilled in long-range strike capability and inflight refueling. Potential adversaries, like Iran, recognize the capabilities displayed and the message sent by such exercises. Earlier this year, the IDF participated in the massive US-led International Maritime Exercise (IMX)

hosted in Bahrain. Through these exercises, the IDF is learning to work in a multinational force with other USCENTCOM partners.

On a personal level, IDF personnel have and will continue to have positive interactions with the personnel of the US and Arab militaries. As a USCENTCOM member, Israel can now send IDF liaison officers to its components' headquarters. These officers will build relationships with their counterparts in the US and the region and will plan exercises and operations together. Other officers will participate in bilateral or multinational training events, symposia, and courses. These personal relationships build trust and understanding between regional military officers who may ultimately become military commanders or senior police decision-makers.

In 1972, the American Department of Defense established the Foreign Area Officer (FAO) corps. These individuals serve as defense attachés, security assistance officers, and country desk officers on major and joint staffs. They are subdivided by region. While Israel was in USEUCOM, the FAOs were European experts. They were NATO and EU specialists and spoke European languages. In USCENTCOM, the FAOs are Middle East experts. They have served in the countries of the region and have trained with IDF and Arab military officers. They speak Arabic, Farsi, or Hebrew, and know the history, personalities, and nuances of the region. Thus, Israel's interlocutors at USCENTCOM's highest echelon are experts on regional concerns.

Israel's move to USCENTCOM is already having an impact. Jerusalem's security cooperation with Arab states is increasing, and USCENTCOM's reliance on Israel as a regional influence continues to grow. The opportunities and efficiencies gained in regional multinational exercises, unified command structure, and personal relationship-building brought about under USCENTCOM's auspices have only just begun to show results that may yield major dividends in the future.

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