

Moving Israel to CENTCOM: Another Step Into the Light

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Jan 28, 2021

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Brief Analysis

The new command shift, which is rooted in years of growing collaboration away from the limelight, promises to facilitate bilateral and regional security cooperation and burden sharing, while the IDF-EUCOM-CENTCOM experience sets the stage for the next frontier: U.S.-Israeli military dialogue on the China-Iran partnership.

On January 15, the Pentagon reported a change in the Unified Command Plan shifting Israel from U.S. European Command (EUCOM) to U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). In announcing the new areas of responsibility, the Defense Department pointed to the recent Abraham Accords between Israel and various Arab states as “a strategic opportunity...to align key U.S. partners against shared threats in the Middle East.”

That same day, the *Wall Street Journal* characterized the decision as President Trump's last-minute bid to shape the regional agenda for the Biden administration and spur Arab-Israeli cooperation against Iran. It also described the step as a departure from decades of U.S. military command structure reflecting historical acrimony between Israel and some of the Pentagon's Arab allies, while emphasizing that pro-Israel groups have long advocated for the shift.

Yet moving Israel to CENTCOM's area of responsibility is not a unique occurrence in the history of amending the Unified Command Plan. On numerous occasions, new commands have been established and old ones have had their boundaries routinely updated following strategic or technological developments. EUCOM was established at Gen. Dwight Eisenhower's recommendation in 1952, as he recognized that U.S. force structure in Europe would be

enduring. CENTCOM followed in 1983, four years after the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution swept over Iran. At the time, the “confrontation states of Israel, Syria, and Lebanon” stayed under EUCOM’s responsibility to allow CENTCOM to be “more effective and credible in dealing with other Arab and Muslim states.”

In 2004, President Bush moved Syria and Lebanon to CENTCOM, leaving Israel and the Palestinian Authority in EUCOM. AFRICOM was established four years later, and PACOM was renamed as Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) in 2018—both moves spurred by geopolitical developments in those regions.

In short, adjusting the contours of regional combatant commands is part of the Pentagon’s routine for adapting to changing environments, and moving Israel to CENTCOM is no exception. When the environment changes, organization should follow.

Why CENTCOM Instead of EUCOM?

U. S. regional combatant commands are responsible for the deployment, support, and operational employment of U.S. forces in their area of responsibility, and for developing military relationships with allies and partners there. EUCOM’s main focus is the security of Europe, NATO, and the Mediterranean region. Although this mission focuses primarily on the challenge from Russia, EUCOM also promotes European participation in meeting challenges elsewhere in the world (e.g., Afghanistan). Moreover, EUCOM’s cooperation with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has spanned decades, from missile defense efforts and the maintenance of war reserve munitions to joint exercises and contingency missions.

Despite this deep cooperation, however, it became increasingly clear that the threats in question were a mismatch with the existing organizational boundaries. Whereas EUCOM was assisting in Israel’s defense, the incoming threats were from CENTCOM’s area—between Iran, Lebanon, and Yemen. The airspace where Israel operates against such threats is also within CENTCOM’s responsibility, as are most U.S. assets involved in the detection, suppression, and prevention of missile threats in the Middle East. And when CENTCOM prepared its operations in Syria during the last decade, there was hardly a better partner to support this campaign than the IDF, even though it sat across the EUCOM boundary. Responding to these and other common threats in a comprehensive manner necessitated aligning EUCOM, CENTCOM, and IDF efforts.

Like the Abraham Accords, Israel’s relations with CENTCOM began well before they were formally declared, undergoing years of quiet development. Although Gen. Joseph Votel was the first CENTCOM commander to formally visit Israel in 2018, Gen. Jim Mattis had already traveled there unofficially while serving in that post (2010-2013), as had deputy commander Gen. John Allen. According to a Ynet report by military correspondent Alex Fishman, a three-way dialogue named “ICE” (IDF-CENTCOM-EUCOM) was in place by 2016, led by the IDF deputy chief and his U.S. counterparts. This channel had quietly evolved over the preceding decade via numerous command and staff meetings held mainly in Israel and Germany. Throughout this period, regional turmoil, war in Syria, and the rise of the Islamic State highlighted the need for an effective CENTCOM-IDF operational interface.

Thus, when current CENTCOM chief Gen. Kenneth (Frank) McKenzie visited Israel this week, he praised the shift in responsibility as “net a good thing,” then noted that the parties were “formalizing” a preexisting relationship, not making an “overnight” change. General McKenzie follows a long line of predecessors who have interacted closely with IDF chiefs, including President Biden’s defense secretary Gen. Lloyd Austin, a past CENTCOM commander himself (2013-2016).

Addressing Criticisms

In the same *Wall Street Journal* article mentioned above, sources expressed concern that shifting Israel to CENTCOM would substantially increase the burden on the command’s headquarters. Yet General McKenzie has stated that he expects little impact on day-to-day operations.

The article also noted the potential for complications if relations between Israel and other CENTCOM partners sour over the Palestinian issue. Yet disputes among countries within the same combatant command are hardly unique. Examples include the [recently resolved Gulf crisis \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/end-gulf-crisis-big-news-middle-east-sands-always-shift\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/end-gulf-crisis-big-news-middle-east-sands-always-shift) between several CENTCOM hosts, and Turkey's friction with other NATO and EUCOM members.

A January 16 article in the *Jerusalem Post* raised another concern: that switching commands will eliminate the “plausible deniability” that CENTCOM could invoke when Israel was striking Iranian targets in Syria and Iraq. Yet it is implausible to suggest that the 800-pound gorilla of America's strategic partnership with Israel was ever actually hidden behind the thin line of an inter-command boundary. In fact, the “campaign between wars” that the IDF has carried out in CENTCOM's area of responsibility in recent years is surely well-coordinated with U.S. authorities, not just deconflicted—even if CENTCOM has occasionally chosen to distance itself from reported strikes and their potential blowback.

Where tensions do exist between IDF and CENTCOM, they stem not from crossing command boundaries, but from differing approaches to curtailing the region-wide operations of Iran and its proxies. Another issue that will require mitigation during the shift is Israel's growing economic and security issues in the East Mediterranean. These issues involve countries in EUCOM's area of responsibility—Turkey, Greece, and Cyprus—and will therefore require the IDF to maintain close relations with that command.

Policy Implications

The benefits of Israel's alignment with CENTCOM are numerous. The shift will likely expand existing cooperation with U.S. forces, lowering obstacles to better integration. It could also help CENTCOM convene relevant partners, promote regional security frameworks, and conduct joint exercises that include the IDF, giving Israel a forum for communicating with countries that have not yet signed peace accords. The realignment might also shift some burden from the United States to regional shoulders.

From an organizational standpoint, the move will streamline U.S. operations within CENTCOM itself—namely, operations affecting Israel will no longer require EUCOM's approval. In addition, the IDF should now be able to formally assign liaison officers to CENTCOM headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida—and, hopefully in the future, to subordinate headquarters across the Gulf region.

At the same time, EUCOM's experience and deep relations with the IDF are a hard-earned resource that should be preserved and developed in parallel to CENTCOM's, maximizing their potential in future crises. Israel's security crises were rarely concurrent with EUCOM's, but the opposite dynamic will prevail under CENTCOM—the IDF will often face crises at times when critical CENTCOM assets such as [munitions and missile defense are in highest demand \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east). To keep an eye on these seams and address any future ones (e.g., problems in the Red Sea or Mediterranean maritime commons), the parties should continue the three-way ICE dialogue.

Moreover, as the United States shifts its strategic effort eastward, Israel should seek a dialogue with INDOPACOM, America's highest-priority regional combatant command. Far from being “against China”—which [is not Israel's enemy \(https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-threat/\)](https://www.inss.org.il/publication/china-threat/)—such engagement should be viewed as a means of supporting cooperation with Israel's greatest ally in a region of growing importance to Israel. According to a June 2020 report in the *Jerusalem Post*, Asia now accounts for over 40 percent of Israel's defense exports—a significant input in building INDOPACOM partner capabilities.

One way to initiate such dialogue is by expanding the existing ICE format to include INDOPACOM. The resultant

“ICE-IP” could then become a useful framework for addressing the nexus of America and Israel’s top threats: China and Iran, respectively. Relations between Beijing and Tehran are rich enough to merit “ICE-IP” attention, and their military-technological cooperation presents similar challenges to U.S. and Israeli forces: [continued development \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-precision-missile-project-moves-lebanon) and deployment of ballistic, cruise, and antiship missiles; [proliferation of rockets \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pushing-back-iraqi-militias-weighing-us-options\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/pushing-back-iraqi-militias-weighing-us-options) and drones; [expanding naval warfare \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-evolving-approach-asymmetric-naval-warfare-strategy-and-capabilities-persian\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-evolving-approach-asymmetric-naval-warfare-strategy-and-capabilities-persian) capabilities; [air defense \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-syria-air-defense-pact-could-disrupt-allied-operations\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-syria-air-defense-pact-could-disrupt-allied-operations) improvements; and [cyber threats \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-war\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/operating-gray-zone-counter-irans-asymmetric-way-war). As U.S.-Israel strategic relations adapt to the age of great-power competition, addressing these common threats should be high on each government’s agenda, alongside national innovation and technology cooperation.

Conclusion

Countries frequently rely on their militaries to initiate policy developments in a changing strategic environment, and it is often said that “structure is policy.” Since policy usually finds itself in pursuit of reality, organizational structure sometimes lags even further behind. The IDF and U.S. combatant commands have long worked with each other and the Gulf states to build flexible bridges across formal boundaries, recognizing the need for partnership long before the Abraham Accords. Shifting Israel to CENTCOM recognizes the importance of these new formal partnerships. After the wedding comes marriage, of course, so these declarations are but a first step on the long formal path. If properly developed, however, this transition could further benefit each partner’s security and interests.

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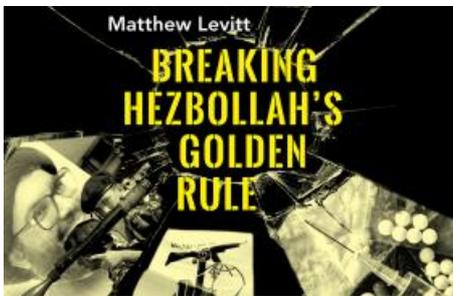
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