INSS Insight No. 1432, January 20, 2021

Winds of Change: Israel Joins the US Central Command Area

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On January 15, 2021 it was reported that the Trump administration decided to transfer Israel from the US European Command (EUCOM) area to the Central Command (CENTCOM). The decision, published on the eve of the change in administration in the United States, seeks to promote regional security arrangements, particularly in face of threats from Iran. Like the Abraham Accords, this decision brought to the surface deep, discreet, and longstanding relations between the parties, while narrowing gaps between policy and organization and the emerging strategic environment. Israel's move to CENTCOM has potential benefits for the United States, Israel, militaries in the region, and the partnerships between them, alongside challenges requiring more work.

On January 15, 2021, the Pentagon announced a change in its 2020 United Command Plan (UCP), whereby Israel was transferred from the US European Command (EUCOM) Area of Responsibility (AOR) to the Central Command (CENTCOM). The decision was made in the framework of the biannual DoD reassessment of the commands and their boundaries against the operational environment, seeking to mitigate risks and protect the interests of the United States and its partners. The same day, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that President Trump had recently ordered the Pentagon to transfer Israel to CENTCOM, to spur Israeli-Arab cooperation against Iran: the decision comes on the heels of the changes in Israel's relations with countries the region, following decades of hostility toward it on the part of many countries in CENTCOM's AOR. Like others, the article bundled the decision with a series of actions taken by the Trump administration in its final days in order to shape the Biden administration's agenda. Given the violent riots in the Capitol, and along with the barrage of last-minute decisions and orders, the inclination to broadly tar all the outgoing administration's decisions as political and negative is perhaps predictable. The transfer of Israel to CENTCOM's AOR, however, justifies a broader, deeper, and more professional assessment.

Indeed, the transfer of Israel to CENTCOM is not an irregular or unwarranted decision. Over the history of the UCP, many changes were introduced following strategic and technological developments that justified redrawing boundaries between regional commands or the creation of new ones, such as the Cyber and Space Commands.

CENTCOM was established in 1983, following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and perhaps also due to the Islamic Revolution in Iran. It was decided at the time not to add the "confrontation states of Israel, Syria, and Lebanon" to CENTCOM, to allow it to be "more effective and credible in dealing with other Arab and Muslim states," and these three countries were therefore left under the responsibility of EUCOM. In 2004, following the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, President Bush approved the transfer of Syria and Lebanon to CENTCOM. Israel, along with the Palestinian Authority, remained under EUCOM responsibility. A change of command areas, therefore, is part of the Pentagon's routine, adapting organization to the strategic environment, and reflecting ripened recognition of such changes.

The regional commands are responsible for United States forces and relations with its partners in their areas. EUCOM, which currently focuses on Russia and its threats against Europe and NATO, is responsible for strategic and operational planning, operations, intelligence, logistics, training, technology and procurement, and coordination with US partners in Europe, including Israel. A prominent sphere in EUCOM's joint operations with the IDF is missile defense, in which they work together to plan, coordinate, exercise, and link their respective operational systems, sometimes also with selected NATO countries. Tens of thousands of IDF soldiers and US EUCOM troops have taken part over the years in joint missions in both peacetime and in contingencies.

Yet even in the highly impressive realm of missile defense cooperation, gaps emerged in the comprehensive response to threats. While EUCOM is responsible for Israel's defense, the missile threats against Israel come from CENTCOM's AOR: both the launching areas stretching from Iran to Lebanon and Yemen, and the airspace in which Israel must act against them. CENTCOM also has the relevant US intelligence and strike capabilities in the region. Thus a comprehensive operational response to threats against Israel requires combining the IDF's efforts with those of CENTCOM and EUCOM, and with other strategic parts of the US defense establishment.

What has Changed?
According to the Pentagon, the Abraham Accords paved the way for the transfer of Israel to CENTCOM. In fact, however, like Israel's relations with the Gulf states, its relations with CENTCOM did not emerge overnight, or even recently. Rather, they come after years of quiet development and gradually higher profile. General Joseph Votel, who played a significant role in promoting CENTCOM-IDF relations, conducted the first official visit by a CENTCOM commander to Israel in April 2018. The current CENTCOM Commander, General Kenneth F. McKenzie, made a formal visit to Israel in November 2019, yet this was not his first time in Israel. Visits and meetings with CENTCOM commanders and their staffs have occurred since early in the last decade. In

early 2016 it was reported that a tripartite dialogue channel existed between the IDF and the two commands (ICE: for IDF, CENTCOM, EUCOM), led by the IDF Deputy Chief of the General Staff. This channel began secretly a decade earlier, and has since continued with meetings of commanders and staff officers, mainly in Israel and in EUCOM headquarters in Germany.

A frequent argument in the past against Israel's joining CENTCOM was the hostility between Israel and the Arabs, and the damage that would be caused to their trust in CENTCOM if direct relations were conducted with Israel. This argument, justified at the time, lost its validity long ago. As a harbinger, in 2018, Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot participated in a conference of chiefs of staff hosted by US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford, with colleagues from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and other partners from the CENTCOM area. The commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, who is also in the CENTCOM area, chose to boycott the conference. Tension between partners in a Command area, however, is not unique to Israel. The prolonged crisis between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt, which was only recently declared settled, took place between host countries to CENTCOM bases, and there are also harsh disputes in the EUCOM area between Turkey and the other NATO members.

Some assert that when Israel attacked Iranian threats against it in Iraq and Syria, CENTCOM benefited from plausible deniability because Israel belonged to EUCOM, and that this deniability will now be lost. There are no serious grounds, however, for asserting that the strategic, intelligence, security, and military relations between the United States and Israel can hide behind the boundaries of a command theater. The decade of regional upheaval, the expanding Iranian influence in the region, the war in Syria, and the rise of ISIS greatly increased the need for better coordination between the IDF and CENTCOM, and for the sharing of intelligence essential for their operations. Israel has conducted its campaign between wars in the CENTCOM area for many years, and the level of coordination between them is unquestionably much deeper than the de-confliction updates between the IDF and the Russian forces in Syria. The source of the tensions between Israel's activity and CENTCOM's considerations does not stem from the Command's boundaries, but from the trans-border operations of Iran and its proxies region-wide, and from concerns that US forces in the region will be attacked in response to Israeli activity, primarily in eastern Syria and Iraq, and also in Iran itself.

Implications of the Move: Opportunities and Challenges
On the positive side, Israel's joining CENTCOM will simplify the existing coordination and cooperation with United States forces, and create potential for better integration in planning, preparation, and operations. In addition, the new configuration will help the United States promote a regional coalition with participation from Arab countries and

Israel against the threats by Iran and Salafi-jihadi groups, and provide a platform for promoting security relations between US allies, as well as regional security arrangements under American sponsorship: early warning and intelligence, counter-terrorism, air defense, anti-missile defense, training, and stockpiles. This will also make it possible to gradually transfer some of the defense burden in the region from the United States to some of its partners. Under the CENTCOM umbrella, it will be more natural and easier for the IDF to maintain military contacts with parties in the region; obtain United States military support in communications with neighboring militaries, even when Israel still has no peaceful relations with their countries; and improve the regional response to common threats. One necessary step will be to station IDF liaison officers in the CENTCOM headquarters at the MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, and in the future, possibly also in the Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar.

On the challenges side, Israel assists EUCOM as a forward operational branch for drawing operational lessons, and the latter seldom needs to ease tensions between Israel and its other partners, except possibly Turkey. In an emergency, Israel has EUCOM available and attentive to its needs, including in deployment of missiles defense ships and batteries and in munitions supply. With CENTCOM, however, Israel's emergencies are usually part of crises in its wider AOR, and so Israel will have to deal with a short blanket of resources, and to compete with the needs of US forces and other partners in the region. EUCOM's experience and its deep rooted relations with the IDF are a valuable asset for both sides. In order to maximize the potential of Israel's transfer to CENTCOM, it is important to retain its superb relations and work interfaces with EUCOM, while institutionalizing its relations with CENTCOM. Israel should prearrange an option for continuing to benefit from EUCOM's advantages, including in future security crises, given its key role in NATO. It will be wise to preserve the ICE channel, even after it has fulfilled its historic role in promoting relations between the IDF and CENTCOM under EUCOM sponsorship. Another open question is where the Palestinian Authority fits into the Command areas.

An End and a Beginning
Militaries are organizations required to promote policy in their areas of responsibility. Policy usually strives to catch up with the rapidly changing reality, while the organizational structure lags far behind. The gaps between policy and organization and the emerging environment may be bridged with flexible processes, understanding that cross-border problems require out-of-boundary responses. Like Israel and the Gulf states, the IDF and the US Armed Forces have been able to identify at an early stage the challenges that they share and the essential partners for coping with them, and accordingly have worked together quietly. Just as the rich relations that were conducted discreetly for many years surfaced publicly with the Abraham Accords, the shift of Israel

to CENTCOM constitutes the Pentagon's official recognition of this imperative for the sake of the interests and security of the United States and its allies in the region. After a wedding, however, comes marriage; the decision and declarations are only a first step. Israel and its partners in the United States and the region must wisely realize the potential of the new stage in their robust relationship, maximize its benefits, and navigate its constraints, for the benefit of all partners and their security.