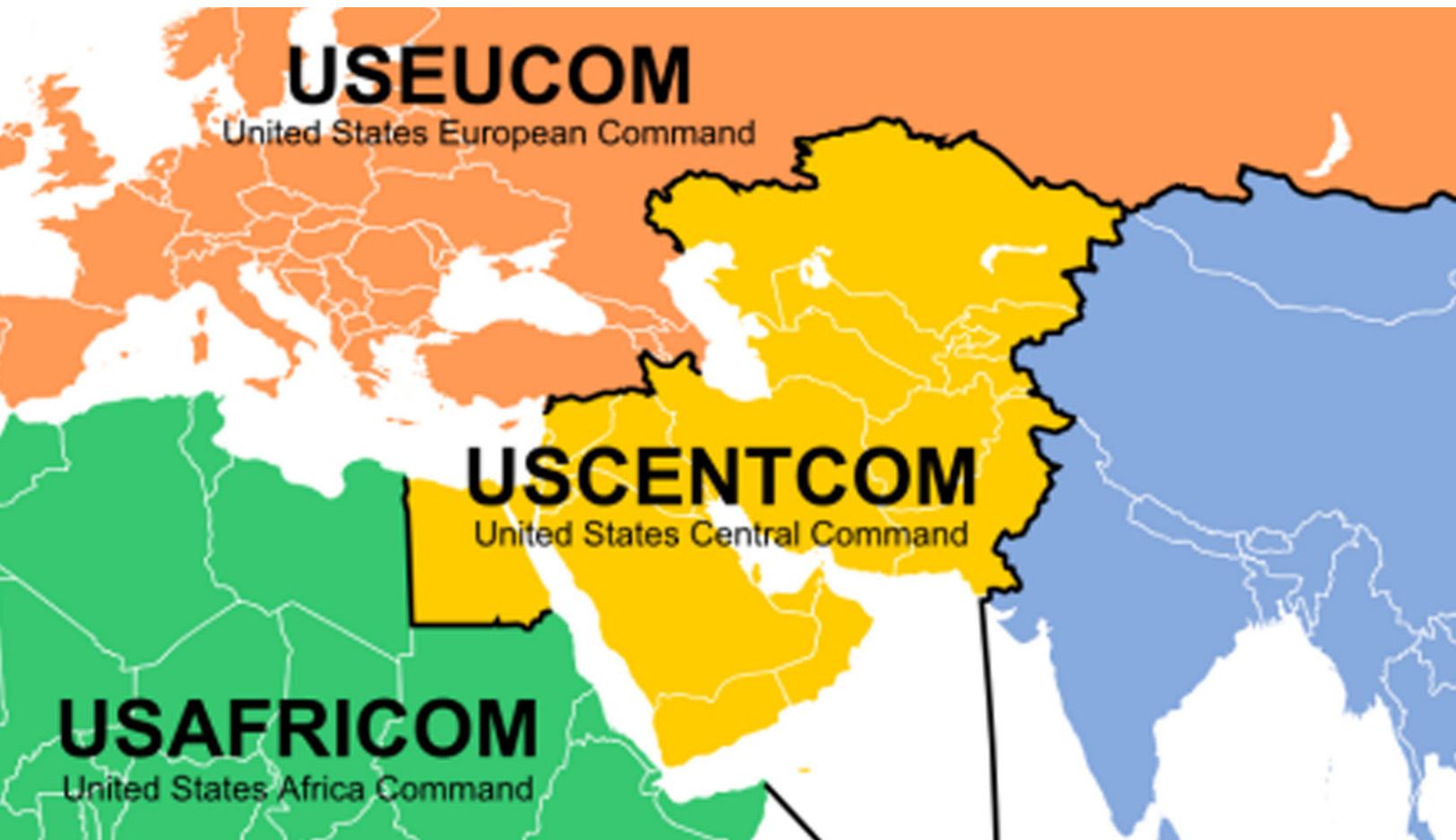


# **Abraham's Command:** *Relocating Israel to CENTCOM's Area of Responsibility*



*JINSA's Gemunder Center for Defense and Strategy*  
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**JINSA**  
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# Executive Summary

The recent Abraham Accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain both reflect and augur a growing strategic alignment between Israel and key American partners in the Middle East, driven primarily by rising Iranian nuclear and regional threats.

American diplomacy played a central role in realizing the Accords, underscoring the enduring importance of Middle East stability to our national security. The next big step, however, will have more to do with bureaucratic arcana than with the ceremony and publicity of a signing on the White House lawn.

Now is the time for the United States to relocate Israel to the area of responsibility (AOR) for American forces in the Middle East. This will enable improved strategic and operational coordination among the United States, Israel and our Arab partners throughout the region against Iran and other serious shared threats.

The U.S. military divides its global presence into seven geographic combatant commands, or “COCOMs,” each of which implements U.S. defense policy and exercises unified command over all American forces in its AOR. In these capacities they also work with and coordinate among partner militaries, effectively making each COCOM a primary mechanism for U.S.-led regional cooperation on strategic planning, training, doctrine, logistics, intelligence, technology, procurement, operations and other critical military activities. Given historical animosities from many of its neighbors, however, Israel has long been an exclave in the AOR of U.S. European Command (EUCOM) while the rest of the Middle East falls under U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).

With the remarkable shifts already underway in the Middle East, and the differences in the region now compared to when Israel was assigned to EUCOM, we conclude that sound strategic logic argues strongly for relocating Israel to CENTCOM’s AOR.

Our organization initially raised this move more than two years ago, and we believe the case to be even stronger today.<sup>1</sup> We understand the leadership of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and of a growing number of countries in CENTCOM’s AOR do not oppose such a move, marking further progress in Israel’s ongoing diplomatic breakthroughs and its growing strategic alignment with American forces in the Middle East and their Arab partners.

Certainly, Israel’s inclusion in EUCOM has yielded clear mutual benefits over the years. But CENTCOM’s priority is countering Iran and other forces for extremism in the Middle East, and all our partners in the region – Israel included – are coalescing around a common view of that threat and taking bold steps like the Abraham Accords to counter it cooperatively. Furthermore, America’s core interest in Middle East stability remains unchanged even as it retrenches, leaving Israel to defend U.S. interests by rolling back Iran’s footprint in CENTCOM’s AOR and by preparing for a looming major war against those forces – all as EUCOM reverts toward its traditional focus on strengthening NATO to counter Russia.

These trends increase the opportunity costs of retaining Israel in EUCOM, while also heightening the ceiling for mutually beneficial cooperation under CENTCOM. The Pentagon has made initial moves in recent years to acknowledge and adjust to this changing strategic

landscape, including public statements, military exercises and an informal committee to coordinate among Israel, EUCOM and CENTCOM. While welcome, these steps are too ad hoc and unwieldy to enable the United States, Israel and Arab partners to pursue the full strategic and operational benefits of moving Israel to CENTCOM's AOR.

By affirming new realities on the ground embodied in the Abraham Accords, reassigning Israel to CENTCOM's AOR would send a strong deterrent message of unity and continued U.S. commitment to regional leadership against Iran. And it would help our partners in the region work together to shoulder a fair share of the burdens of collective defense, as called for in our national security and defense strategies.

Such a move also would promote closer, mutually beneficial U.S.-led cooperation on more concrete issues. It could smooth the way for the Pentagon to utilize Israel more for regional operations, most directly by updating the prepositioned U.S. stockpile there with precision-guided munitions (PGM) and other much-needed weaponry for U.S., Israeli and possibly partner Arab forces. This also would support Israel's ability to deter or prevail in a conflict at acceptable cost to itself – known as its qualitative military edge (QME) – which U.S. law requires the United States uphold. In turn, supporting its QME would bolster Israel's ability to defend U.S. and Arab partners' interests by continuing to be the tip of spear against Iran and its proxies.<sup>2</sup>

Reassigning Israel to CENTCOM's AOR also could enable the United States and Israel to extend their impressive operational and technical achievements on missile defense into a multi-layered network to shield against Iran's regionwide rocket, missile and drone proliferation. Another value-added of reassigning Israel would be more formalized and regular combined military exercises among the United States, Israel and partner Arab countries. Such training would be crucial for developing effective theater missile defenses, as well as boosting readiness and interoperability in cyber, counterterrorism, special operations and maritime security, among other key areas. Under CENTCOM's AOR, Israel also could work more closely and effectively with U.S. forces in the Middle East and Arab partner militaries, under U.S. auspices, on regional military aspects of strategic planning, command and control, logistical support, intelligence sharing and even procurement.

To be sure, some adjustments would have to be made to re-designate Israel as part of CENTCOM, but none are unprecedented or sufficiently costly to outweigh the expected benefits. Most importantly, given Israel's currently robust missile defense ties with EUCOM, any move to place it in CENTCOM's AOR would require the United States to prioritize continued strong bilateral cooperation on joint training, planning and deployments on this score. American officials also would need to make clear that reassigning Israel would not imply any U.S. intent to curb the Jewish state's sovereign right to defend itself by itself.

Separately, while it is true that several U.S. partners in CENTCOM still do not recognize Israel, that also was true for decades with EUCOM, which formerly included the Middle East and Africa. Furthermore, Israel already is assigned to the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs with much of the rest of the Middle East, meaning its prospective inclusion in CENTCOM would align the departments' respective regional divisions more coherently. Moving Israel to CENTCOM's AOR also would follow a trend of aligning COCOM boundaries to changing strategic landscapes and U.S. operational requirements, which is what drove the creation of U.S. Africa Command from part of EUCOM in 2007. And it would mitigate potential

EUCOM-CENTCOM command conflicts in a looming major war between Israel and Iran across much of CENTCOM's existing AOR, thereby satisfying one of the Pentagon's explicit considerations for realigning COCOM boundaries.<sup>3</sup> Finally, reassigning Israel to CENTCOM would not prevent continued security cooperation with countries in EUCOM's AOR, much of which occurs through partnerships with NATO.

The Abraham Accords and now normalization between Israel and Sudan mark terrific diplomatic progress. It is time to reflect and build upon those successes by moving Israel to CENTCOM's area of responsibility.

### Current U.S. COCOM Map of the Middle East



# Purpose of COCOMs

The U.S. military's global responsibilities are divided into seven geographic "combatant commands" or COCOMs – as well as four other functional COCOMs – according to a classified Unified Command Plan (UCP) prepared by the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), and approved by the president. Each of these geographic COCOMs exercises unified command over U.S. forces assigned to its area of responsibility (AOR), under an American four-star general or admiral who reports directly to the Secretary of Defense. Each COCOM is responsible for planning and implementing U.S. defense policy within its AOR, including by deterring and responding to potential conflicts. In these capacities they also work with and coordinate among partner militaries in their AOR, effectively making each COCOM a primary mechanism for U.S.-led regional cooperation on everything from diplomacy, strategy and operations to training, doctrine, logistics, intelligence, technology and procurement.<sup>4</sup>

Each geographic COCOM focuses primarily on threats spelled out in the national security and defense strategies that are specific to its AOR, and on posturing its forces and conducting cooperation with regional partners accordingly. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), which encompasses most of the greater Middle East, officially has as its "top priority" countering Iran and its proxies, including by promoting regional security cooperation against these threats.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile U.S. European Command (EUCOM) primarily concentrates on a resurgent Russia, just as U.S. Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) prioritizes deterrence and regional defense cooperation against China and North Korea.<sup>6</sup>

# Israel: CENTCOM Outlier No More

Geographical logic would seem to dictate including Israel in CENTCOM's AOR. Yet historical animosity to the Jewish state from the Arab world prompted its placement in EUCOM with primarily NATO countries and Russia, leaving it a EUCOM exclave surrounded by countries falling under CENTCOM's purview.

This made sense for decades after EUCOM's inception in 1952. Despite Israel's longstanding treaties with U.S. partners Egypt and Jordan, only in recent years have these relationships evolved beyond the cold peace of mere coexistence. Attitudes toward Israel from around the broader region traditionally ran the gamut from nonrecognition to outright hostility. In 1992, CENTCOM commander Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf noted bluntly that "European Command kept Israel, which from my viewpoint was a help: I'd have had difficulty impressing the Arabs with Central Command's grasp of geopolitical nuance if one of the stops on my itinerary had been Tel Aviv."<sup>7</sup> Former CENTCOM commanders Gen. Anthony Zinni (1997-2000) and Gen. David Petraeus (2008-10) similarly raised concerns during their respective tenures about the political and operational complications that would result from having Israel in the same COCOM as the rest of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup> As part of a 2003 study reviewing whether to move Israel into CENTCOM, the Joint Chiefs of Staff opposed the move out of concern it might disrupt the Middle East peace process and interfere with existing Israel-EUCOM cooperation.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Israel's inclusion under EUCOM helped facilitate cooperation with the United States and European countries on counterterrorism as NATO's focus shifted in that direction after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. This has since expanded to encompass extensive U.S.-Israel missile defense cooperation under EUCOM's auspices, including regular exercises, joint contingency planning and deployments to Israel of land-based and maritime U.S. missile defense systems. EUCOM also conducts combined drills between U.S., Israeli and NATO-members' air forces, navies and coast guards.<sup>10</sup>

Now, however, the Middle East looks very different than when the Pentagon assigned Israel to EUCOM's AOR. The United States is retrenching from the Middle East, driven both by public sentiment at home and the need to refocus on great power competition in Europe and Asia-Pacific.

Consequently, as Iran seeks to fill the ensuing security vacuum and dominate the region, Israel's threat environment and interests are converging with those of its U.S.-aligned Arab neighbors in CENTCOM. Tehran's aggressive proliferation of precision missiles and sectarian militias, rejuvenated nuclear weapons program, cyberattacks and support for terrorism pose a shared regionwide threat to Israel and most U.S. Arab partners alike, from the heart of the region in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to strategic chokepoints like the Persian Gulf and Yemen. In this light, the Abraham Accords both reflect rising regional cooperation against Iran and underscore the desire for even deeper collaboration going forward. They also show how the Palestinian issue, while still relevant to Israel's new Arab partners, has been eclipsed by Iran and Sunni extremism as a driving force in regional geopolitics. Recently Israel also has deepened its security ties with the Egyptian and Jordanian militaries to address common threats from Islamic State, Hamas, al-Qaeda, Muslim Brotherhood and others.

Indeed, Israel's growing relations with its Arab neighbors have gone hand in hand with its expanding role as the defender of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Even as the United States retrenches from the region, its stated interest in countering Tehran endures. This effectively leaves Israel filling the gap through its "campaign between the wars" to roll back Iran's regionwide military expansion – including in countries already in CENTCOM's AOR – and to deter or prepare for a major war with Iran and Hezbollah that could encompass large swathes of that same AOR.

Simultaneously, and compared to even a decade ago or less, including Israel under EUCOM provides diminishing strategic and operational returns for both Israel and EUCOM. As America's grand strategic emphasis returns to great power competition, EUCOM is pivoting back to its traditional NATO-centric role of countering Russia primarily on the European mainland – and away from missions where Israel naturally played a constructive role like counterterrorism and Mediterranean maritime security. Indeed, Israel has been making recent moves to bolster its defense ties with countries in EUCOM's AOR like Greece and Cyprus, but these are occurring independently of the United States (though with American blessing).

CENTCOM has taken initial steps to acknowledge and adjust to these changes. As recently as 2017, the Pentagon under then Defense Secretary James Mattis began deepening both EUCOM-CENTCOM coordination on Israeli issues and Israel's direct ties with CENTCOM. This included a memorandum of understanding (MoU) between EUCOM and CENTCOM on possible joint U.S.-Israeli operations against Iran and its proxies, reflecting in part the challenges of coordinating and deconflicting operations by Israel with U.S. forces in Syria, which fall under CENTCOM's AOR.<sup>11</sup>

In March 2018, CENTCOM's official posture statement for the first time listed Israel in its "active area" for theater security cooperation and partnership, due to rising regional threats from Iran and Islamic State.<sup>12</sup> That same month, the biannual EUCOM-Israel missile defense exercise Juniper Cobra included U.S. forces from CENTCOM to train against attacks from Iran and its proxies; the following month, Gen. Joseph Votel made the first ever official visit by a CENTCOM commander to Israel.<sup>13</sup> Gen. Votel's Congressional testimony in 2019 emphasized "we maintain a close relationship with Israel as we recognize many of their security threats reside within the military area in which I have responsibility."<sup>14</sup> Just this year, Israeli F-35s already have drilled three separate times with their U.A.E.-based American counterparts from CENTCOM. And an informal Israel-CENTCOM-EUCOM, or "ICE," forum that meets in Israel also was established to enhance trilateral coordination on related security issues.

# Benefits of Israel in CENTCOM

These steps strengthening Israel's links with CENTCOM certainly are welcome, yet they are too ad hoc and unwieldy to enable the United States, Israel and Arab partners to realize the full strategic and operational benefits of moving Israel to CENTCOM's AOR.

By affirming new Middle East realities on the ground embodied in the Abraham Accords, such a move would send a strong deterrent message of regional unity and continued U.S. commitment to regional leadership against Iran. By the same token, it would reflect Israel's increasingly outlier status in EUCOM as the latter resumes focusing on Russia while CENTCOM's core concerns remain countering Iranian hegemony and terrorism.

Putting Israel in CENTCOM's AOR also would enable closer, mutually beneficial regional cooperation under U.S. auspices on more concrete issues. For starters, it could smooth the way for the Pentagon to utilize that country more for regional operations – including by prepositioning precision-guided munitions (PGM) and other much-needed weaponry for U.S., Israeli and possibly partner Arab forces.<sup>15</sup> EUCOM maintains a forward-deployed arms depot in Israel, called WRSA-I, upon which Israel can draw in wartime. This is a key part of Israel's ability to deter or prevail in a conflict at acceptable cost to itself – known as its qualitative military edge (QME), which U.S. law requires the United States uphold.

However for multiple reasons, including EUCOM's focus on great power competition with Russia in Europe and strains on America's PGM inventory during the campaigns against Islamic State, al-Qaeda and the Taliban, this stockpile contains mostly obsolete weaponry instead of the PGMs that Israel needs in abundance to deter or prevail at acceptable cost in a looming major war with Iran and its proxies. By creating a new paradigm for WRSA-I as a key node in America's counter-Iran posture in the Middle East, compared to its current status in a secondary EUCOM theater, moving Israel to CENTCOM would sharpen U.S. incentives to upgrade the depot with critical PGMs and boost interoperability with partner forces. By supporting Israel's QME, this upgrade would bolster the IDF's ability to not only defend itself but also support U.S. and moderate Arab interests by rolling back the military footprint of Iran and its proxies and by preparing for a looming major war against those forces.<sup>16</sup>

Reassigning Israel to CENTCOM also could facilitate WRSA-I's expansion into a regional hub providing for Israeli emergency needs and CENTCOM's projected wartime requirements, in contrast to EUCOM's bilateral concept for the stockpile. Reflecting new possibilities for cooperation embodied in the Abraham Accords as well as Israel's security cooperation with Egypt and Jordan, a regionalized stockpile could support contingency operations by Arab partner countries as well. To help avoid recurrent PGM shortages, the United States should consider relocating some existing CENTCOM stocks to Israel, which provides a more secure prepositioning location than other U.S. depots in the region. This would not initially involve new U.S. financial outlays.<sup>17</sup>

By eliminating the current stovepiping between EUCOM and CENTCOM, re-designating Israel within CENTCOM's AOR also could enable the United States and Israel to extend their impressive operational and technical achievements on missile defense into an effective theater-wide, multi-layered air network against growing regionwide threats from Iran's and Hezbollah's rocket, missile and drone proliferation. Currently Israel's world-class missile

defenses – including those systems co-developed with the United States – all exercise, plan and integrate with U.S. forces from EUCOM, while our Arab partners' advanced U.S.-made defense systems coordinate with and through CENTCOM. With all of America's Middle East allies, in particular Israel's advanced capabilities, under one COCOM, CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center could become a regional hub for much more comprehensive shared early warning, as well as more effective and redundant defenses against air and missile attack. This would improve cueing for multiple interceptors needed to defeat large salvos – like those Iran has launched against U.S. airbases in Iraq and against Saudi energy facilities since last September – as well as reducing the required number of interceptors through better discrimination between missile warheads and engines in flight. Tighter integration would improve Israeli interception of Iranian missiles overflying neighbors' territories as well. Putting Israel in CENTCOM could create greater strategic depth for both the United States and Israel by incorporating key allies like Jordan and Egypt, and American troops in those countries, more directly into Israel's missile defense architecture. Such regionwide coordination, however, should not be misconstrued as implying any lessening of the IDF's full authority over all Israeli air and missile defense systems on its territory.

Another value-added of reassigning Israel to CENTCOM would be more formalized and regular combined training exercises among the United States, Israel and coalition Arab countries. Multinational military exercises directly enhance participants' shared deterrence and overall combat effectiveness, including readiness and interoperability. This would be crucial for developing an effective theater air and missile defense network and more effective regional coordination on other key capabilities and missions critical for countering threats from Iran and others – including cyber, counterterrorism, special operations, freedom of navigation, maritime security, air mobility, intelligence operations (ISR), critical infrastructure protection and information operations. In many of these areas U.S. forces in the Middle East and Arab partner militaries would have the chance to learn more directly the hard-earned lessons from Israel's recent and extensive operational experience.

In terms of actual military operations, placing Israel under CENTCOM also would enable better coordination and occasionally deconfliction between the IDF – which operate against Iran and its proxies in Syria and Iraq in CENTCOM's AOR – and U.S. forces under CENTCOM in these same countries. Reassigning Israel also could mitigate command conflicts for the U.S. military in the case of a major Iran-Israel war in the Middle East, which currently would have to be coordinated across the seam between EUCOM and CENTCOM AORs. This is a highly relevant consideration for realigning COCOM boundaries, as the Unified Command Plan explicitly requires the Joint Chiefs of Staff to consider whether the existing EUCOM-CENTCOM boundary could create command conflicts during a major conflict in the Middle East.<sup>18</sup>

Additionally, reassigning Israel to CENTCOM would enable the Jewish state to work more closely and effectively with U.S. forces in the Middle East and Arab partner militaries, under U.S. auspices, on regional military aspects of strategic planning, command and control, logistical support, intelligence sharing and even procurement.

To be sure, there are potential complications and trade-offs with reassigning Israel to CENTCOM, but none are unprecedented or sufficiently costly to outweigh the expected benefits. Given Israel's currently robust missile defense ties with EUCOM, any move to place it in CENTCOM's AOR would require the United States to prioritize continued strong bilateral cooperation on this score.<sup>19</sup> American planners also would have to ensure no lapse

in readiness should U.S. defense assets need to rapidly deploy to Israel via air and sea in a military emergency, since such forces could be arriving from the Persian Gulf region rather than from Europe.

Separately, several U.S. partners in CENTCOM still do not recognize Israel, but historically Israel has spent decades assigned to COCOMs alongside many countries that did not recognize its existence. From 1952-83, when EUCOM included much of the Middle East and Africa, at least 25 countries in that AOR did not recognize Israel. At that point, when CENTCOM was created in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, for more than twenty years afterward Syria and Lebanon remained in EUCOM's AOR despite neither country having anything more formal, or less hostile, than a decades-old armistice governing their relations with Israel. In 2007, when Africa Command (AFRICOM) was created from part of EUCOM's AOR, at least 10 countries in Africa still did not recognize Israel's existence. By comparison, the same number of countries in CENTCOM's AOR currently do not recognize Israel, and that figure certainly could decrease in the foreseeable future.

Furthermore, and as this history suggests, reassigning a country would follow a long trend of aligning COCOM boundaries to changing strategic landscapes and U.S. operational requirements. To reflect the Middle East's growing centrality to U.S. grand strategy in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iranian Revolution, the Pentagon ultimately transferred responsibility for the Middle East from EUCOM to the newly-created CENTCOM in 1983. Following the Soviet Union's breakup in 1991, the five emerging Central Asian republics were similarly folded into CENTCOM's AOR. Likewise AFRICOM was cleaved from EUCOM's AOR in 2007 because, in the words of then Defense Secretary Robert Gates, "dividing Africa between Central Command and European Command [was] an outdated arrangement left over from the Cold War."<sup>20</sup> The following year the Horn of Africa was shifted from CENTCOM to AFRICOM, and COCOM AOR boundaries were streamlined in the Arctic Ocean in 2011 to reflect the region's rising geostrategic importance.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Israel already is assigned to the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs with much of the rest of the Middle East, meaning its prospective inclusion in CENTCOM would reduce dissonance between how the two departments divide up the region.

Crucially, reassigning Israel to CENTCOM would not prevent its continued security cooperation with countries in EUCOM's AOR. Israel has been a NATO partner (as opposed to an official member) since 1994, and even recently opened an official liaison office at NATO headquarters. Much of Israel's interaction with Europe and the United States on counterterrorism, maritime interdiction and critical infrastructure protection occurs through NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue, which includes six non-EUCOM countries (among them Egypt and Jordan, in CENTCOM's AOR). As is currently the case with U.S. allies like Australia and Jordan, inclusion under EUCOM would not be necessary for deeper NATO-Israel ties, for instance through the transatlantic alliance's Partnership Interoperability Initiative. This could facilitate NATO cooperation with Israel in many areas currently under EUCOM auspices such as intelligence sharing, operational planning and exercises.

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