JINSA
The Jewish Institute for National Security of America

ANALYSIS:

U.S Bases in the Middle East: Overcoming the Tyranny of Geography

Gen Frank McKenzie, USMC (ret.)
Hertog Distinguished Fellow, JINSA

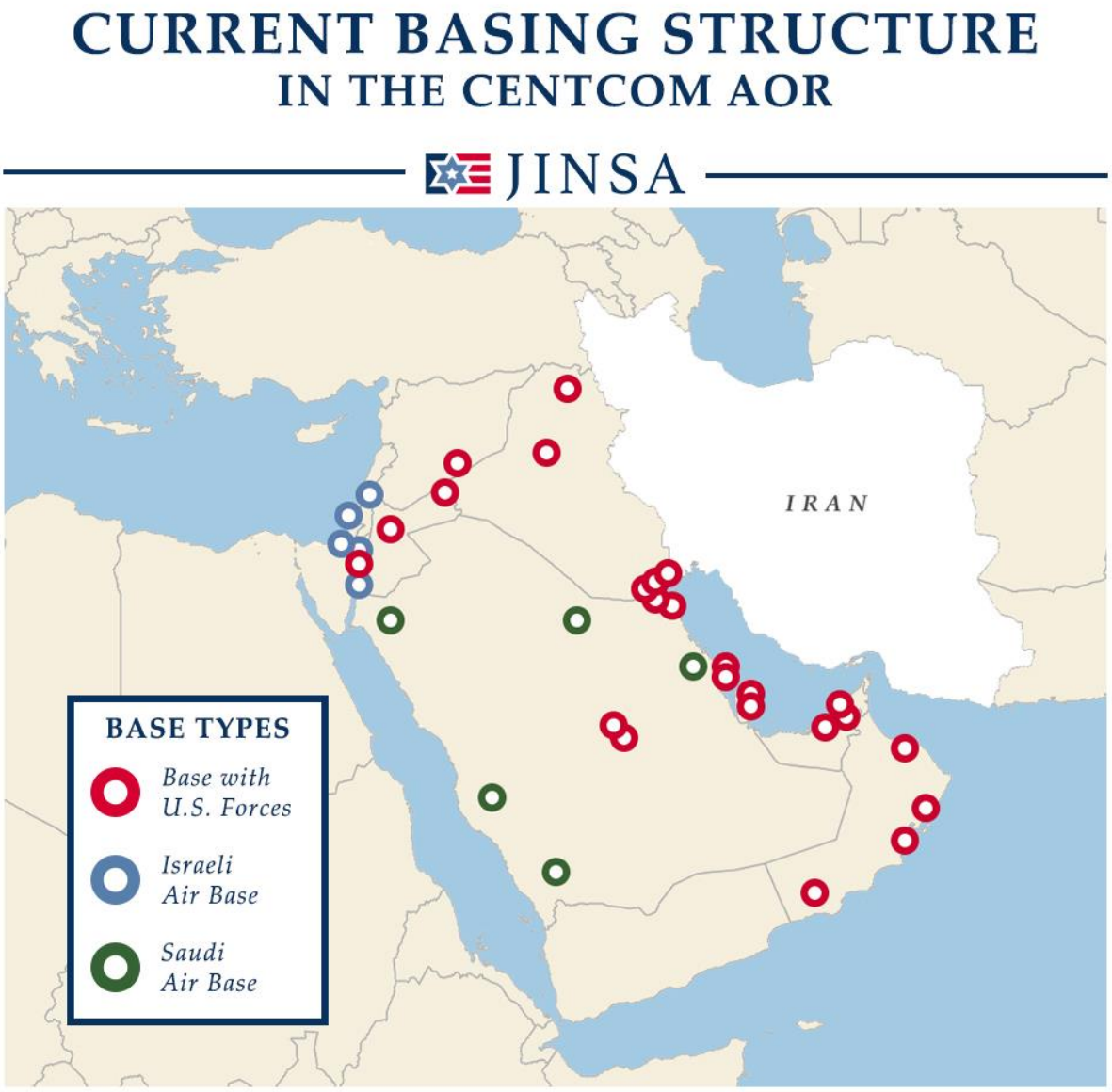
"Geography is destiny," according to a much-hackneyed quote, but when it comes to U.S. bases in the Middle East region, this doesn't have to be the case—and it shouldn't be. Our current basing structure, inherited from years of haphazard decision-making, and driven by divergent operational and political principles, has yielded installations that are not optimally situated for the most likely threats of today and the future in the region.

There have been many U.S. bases in the region since the end of the second world war, but this report is principally concerned with those located in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait. These nations comprise the heart of the "Gulf States," the Arab monarchies that lie along the southern side of the Arabian Gulf (the geographic exception is Jordan). The United States considers the naval base at Manama, Bahrain, to be the "Main Operating Base" for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) in the Middle East. It is the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, the naval component (NAVCENT) of CENTCOM. There are airbases in Qatar, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Jordan. These bases are typically "dual use" facilities, and host nation aircraft operate from the same field.

U.S. bases in the region were originally designed to prevent Soviet encroachment into the oil-rich gulf during the late Cold War. After the fall of the Shah and the Iranian revolution in 1979, the bases were still considered key elements of a defense of the region against the Soviets, although Iranian support was factored out. This began to change in the 1980s. Increasingly, the bases were oriented against Iranian activities, with the "Tanker War" of the 1980s being largely supported by bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. It's important to understand that these operations were high intensity combat operations: this was not counterinsurgency.

The invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990 gradually diluted the orientation against Iran: first, our bases supported U.S. and coalition combat operations in the defense of Saudi Arabia and the subsequent operation to restore Kuwait's sovereignty. In the aftermath of the restoration of Kuwait in 1991, bases in the region supported overflight operations in Iraq, deterred Iraqi adventurism, and focused on contesting Iranian malign activities across the region. The network was well-situated to support the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, and the subsequent

2003 attack into Iraq. These were also initially high intensity combat operations, but they devolved over time to long-term support for the long-term campaigns in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. The graphic, below, displays the current basing structure in the CENTCOM AOR:



After the occupation of Iraq, and through the rest of the first decade of the new century, three themes drove U.S. basing priorities in the region:

- Support for long-term campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan;
- Deterrence of Iran;
- Assurance for partner states in the region.

These priorities remained, even after the Saudis effectively disinvited the U.S. from their bases in 2003, which closed the combined air operations center (CAOC) at Prince Sultan Airbase (PSAB). The small but almost infinitely wealthy state of Qatar, which walked a fine line between its Arab neighbors and Iran to the north, became an increasingly large player in U.S. basing strategy, making Al Udeid Airbase available for not only the CAOC, but in 2009, the CENTCOM forward headquarters. Qatar paid the vast majority of the bill for the creation of an elaborate bunkered headquarters at Al Udeid, as well as a continued series of improvements to the airfield's facilities, which surpassed capabilities of many airfields in the United States. This basing structure was well-positioned to support air operations against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Iraq and Syria, which grew into a potent force after the Obama administration's disastrous decision to withdraw precipitously from Iraq, which was completed in 2011. At the same time, counterinsurgency operations continued in Afghanistan.

Development of Iranian Drones

JINSA

Drone Name	Year Entering Service	Range (km)	Payload (kg)
Mohajer-2	1996	50	15
Mohajer-4	1997	150	15
Ababil 2	1999	200	40
Ababil 5	2008	480	*Unknown*
Ababil 3	2010	100	*Unknown*
Shahed-129	2012	1,800	150
Yasir	2013	200	*Unknown*
Karrar-1	2014	1,000	500
Mohajer-6	2017	200	40
Fotros	2020	2,000	*Unknown*
Ababil-T	*Unknown*	150	30
Arash	*Unknown*	2,000	*Unknown*
Arash-2	*Unknown*	2,000	*Unknown*
Farpad	*Unknown*	20	120
Kaman-12	*Unknown*	2,000	100
Kaman-22	*Unknown*	3,000	300
Meraj	*Unknown*	1,000	5
Mobin	*Unknown*	450	120
Oghab-1	*Unknown*	2,000	*Unknown*
Ra'ad-85	*Unknown*	100	*Unknown*
Shahed-123	*Unknown*	750	*Unknown*
Shahed-131	*Unknown*	900	15
Shahed-136	*Unknown*	2,200	40
Shahed-171	*Unknown*	1,500	*Unknown*
Shahed-191	*Unknown*	450	50

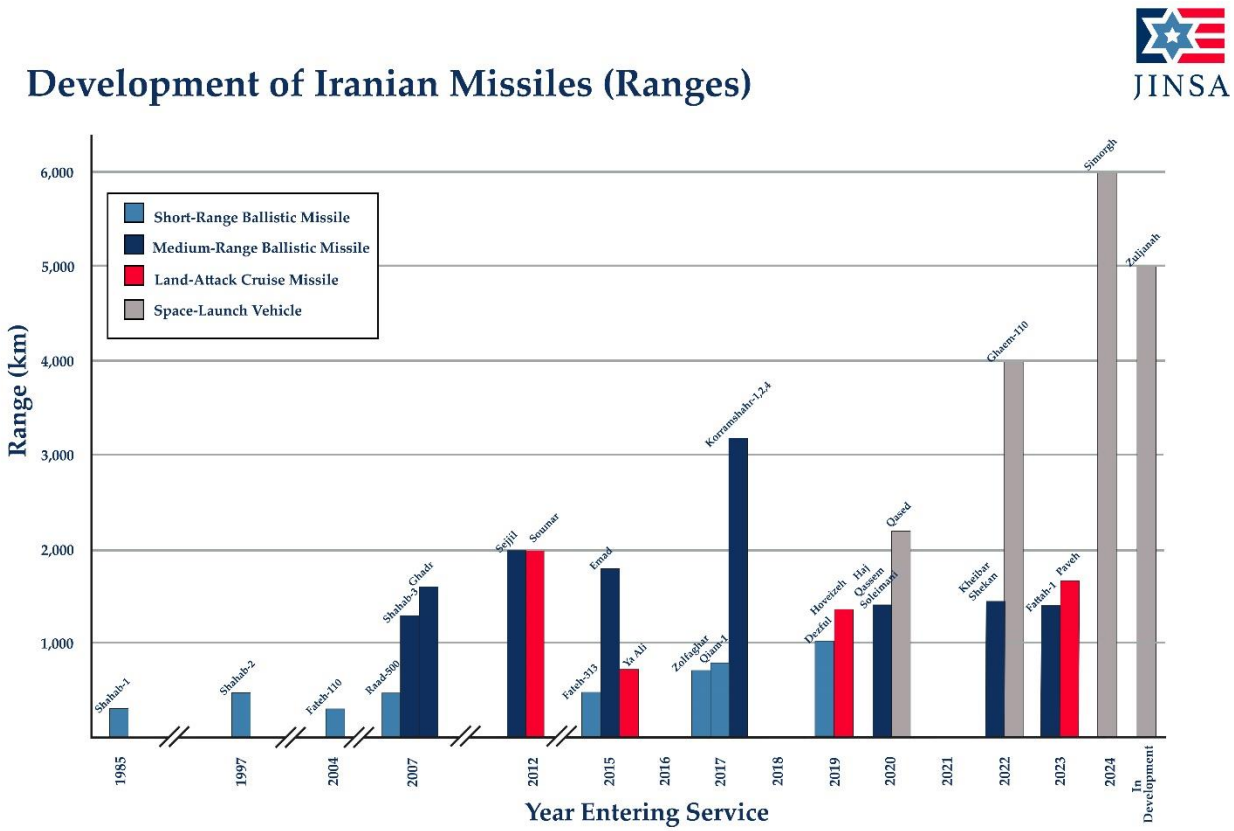
Under the leadership of then-commander General Jim Mattis, in 2010-2012 CENTCOM attempted to build upon the "assurance" component of the basing prioritization in the region by encouraging a collective approach to air and missile defense, oriented against Iran. His proposals found no takers in the region. Despite the fact that cooperative air and missile defense is the least intrusive form of cooperation and coordination between nations, the innate distrust that the Gulf States had for each other outweighed the growing threat from Iran. Moreover, during this time, Israel was a distant entity, both militarily and politically. This would gradually change in the years following the Mattis initiative, and it would be driven largely by two factors: sustained Iranian misbehavior and the increasing acceptance of Israel within the region.

Development of Iranian Missiles

JINSA

Missile Name	Year Entering Service	Range (km)	Payload (kg)
Shahab-1	1985	300	1,000
Shahab-2	1997	500	700
Fateh-110	2004	300	450
Shahab-3	2007	1,300	*Unknown*
Ghadr	2007	1,600	1,000
Raad-500	2007	500	*Unknown*
Soumar	2012	3,000	750
Sejjil	2012	2,000	*Unknown*
Ya Ali	2015	700	350
Emad	2015	1,800	750
Fateh-313	2015	500	*Unknown*
Khorramshahr-1,2,4	2017	3,000	650
Qiam-1	2017	800	600
Zolfaghar	2017	700	1,500
Hoveizeh	2019	1,350	600
Dezful	2019	1,000	*Unknown*
Haj Qassem Soleimani	2020	1,400	500
Qased	2020	2200	1000
Kheibar Shekan	2022	1,450	600
Ghaem-100	2022	4000	1000
Paveh	2023	1,650	450
Fattah-1	2023	1,400	200
Simorgh	2024	6000	750
Zuljanah	*In Development*	5000	1000

Over the past 20 years, Iran has steadily and quietly expanded both the capabilities and capacity of its ballistic missile, drone, and land attack cruise missile arsenal. Their numbers now are in the thousands, and Iranian missileers and drone operators have gained valuable experience through their relationship with Russia and the war in Ukraine. This has probably included the importation of technologies from Russia and other nations such as China and North Korea to improve the accuracy of these systems.

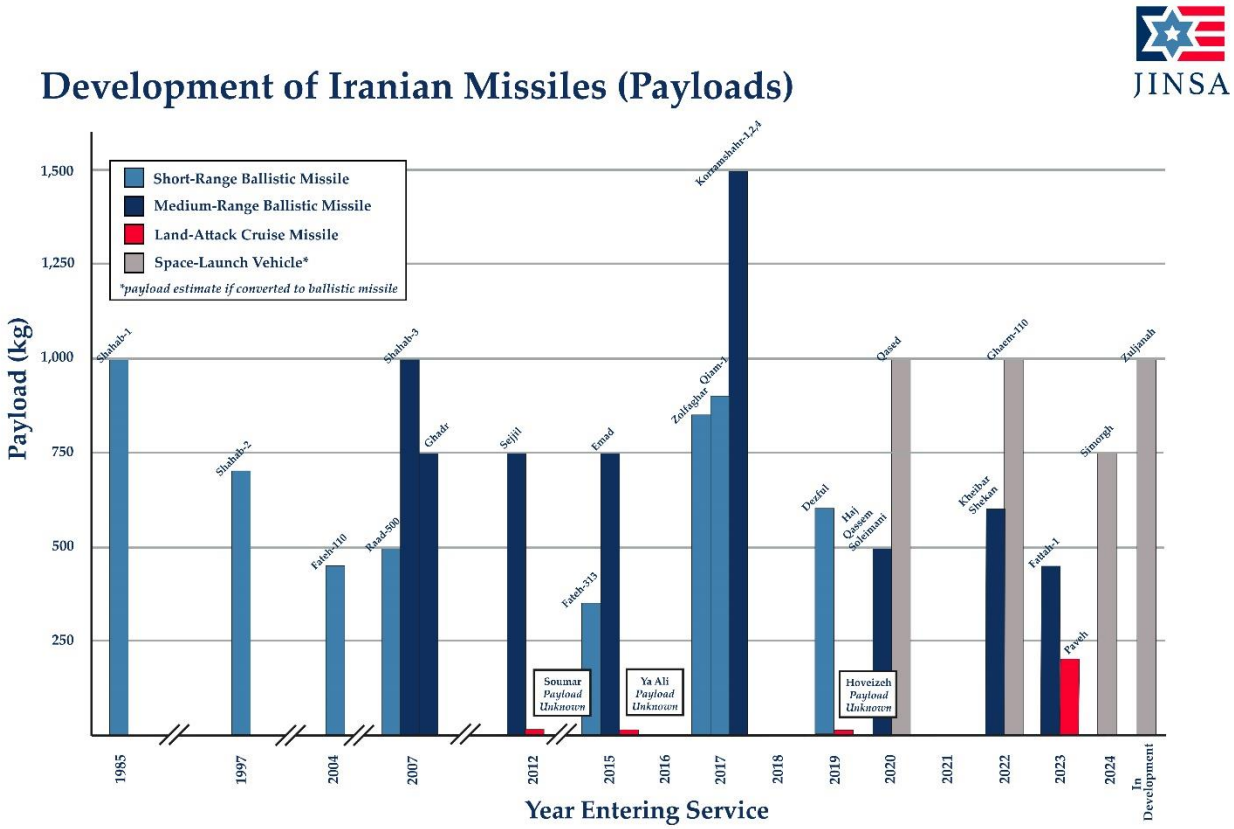


Despite their inability to achieve a collective response in the 2011-2012 period, nations in the region have come to recognize this expanding threat from Iran. In many ways, they have been faster to perceive the growing danger than the United States, which has continued to focus on the Iranian nuclear program as the most compelling threat to emanate from Iran. For nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the missile and drone threat is existential. Iranian capabilities are powerful, real, and very close.

This is not to discount the extremely dangerous potential threat of Iranian nuclearization—only to note that a nuclear Iran is a future threat, measured temporally in months or even years, while the "triad" of weapons just described is available to the Iranians this afternoon.

A theater level war with Iran would be a war of missiles and drones. The Iranians have no army that can be deployed as an invading force. They have a small and ineffective navy, and in practical terms, no air force. Their missile and drone force, though, is capable of gaining overmatch against many of its neighbors. Overmatch is a term that means that they can deploy more attacking missiles and drones than can be defended against. There are recent examples of how the Iranians might choose to conduct such a war.

In September 2019, Iranian cruise missiles and drones carried out a highly successful attack, launched from Iran, on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq, in northeast Saudi Arabia. The Iranians gained complete tactical surprise, and their strikes were very accurate, and very effective. They routed their drones and cruise missiles after a careful study of Saudi and Kuwaiti radar patterns, and then found gaps that were not fully covered. They then exploited these deficiencies with remarkable precision.



On January 8, 2020, the Iranians attacked Al Asad airbase in western Iraq from Iran, as a response to the strike on Islamic Republican Guards Corps Qods force leader Qasem Soleimani. The Iranian missiles were highly accurate, landing within tens of meters of their target. It was a limited strike of less than 20 missiles, but their intent was clear: they wanted to kill U.S. servicemembers. That they did not was a testimony to the alertness of commanders on the ground, who were able to redeploy forces shortly before the attack. Nonetheless, from an operational point of view, the attack demonstrated a significant new capability.

The most comprehensive demonstration of Iranian operational design was the April 13, 2024 attack against Israel. Their intent was to use drones and cruise missiles to destroy Israeli radars, which would then make it difficult for Iron Dome or Patriot to engage the ballistic missiles that followed. Despite the failure of this attack, it will probably remain the basic template for large-scale Iranian attacks, and it is, at least conceptually, a sound one. If the attacker is able to take out air defense radars with swarms of drones, then it will be very hard to conduct a successful ballistic missile defense. There are lessons for all to learn from this episode, and we should not draw sanguine conclusions about future Iranian ineffectiveness from this single episode.

In a war with Iran, the central calculus will be the measurement of how long the Iranians could sustain a drone and missile bombardment of neighboring countries, in the face of our efforts to strike their launching systems and command and control facilities. It's important to be very clear that there is only one air force in the world that is capable of a sustained campaign against Iranian missile and drone forces—the U.S. Air Force (along with the U.S. Navy). To operate over Iran and to seek and find their missiles and drone launchers means having the ability to gather intelligence, to suppress air defenses, to deploy low-visibility loitering platforms, and the ability to command and control the operation in real time. Israel possesses some of the capabilities, but not the *capacity* for extended operations. This is an important distinction, because these operations could last for weeks. No Arab state has these capabilities.

Such a war then would come down to how long Arab states in the region would be willing to accept countervalue ("city-busting") attacks that would stress their populations and erode support for national leadership, against how quickly the Iranian capability to prosecute these attacks can be reduced. Iranian attacks could be very broad–ranging, from attacks on airfields and bases to strikes on population centers. Of course, a counterattack against Iran under these circumstances would not need to be restricted to operations solely against their fielded offensive forces. Strikes could also be undertaken against key oil, power, and other infrastructure. All of this would be designed to increase the pressure on Iranian decision makers. Under extreme conditions, strikes against Iranian national leadership could be considered, since the ultimate goal of Iranian policy is to ensure the survival of the clerical regime. Under the most extreme conditions, it is likely that enough pressure against this target would have good effect.

Given the scenario just described, it is obvious that for the defenders of the Gulf, it will be a war of strike aircraft, tankers, and air and missile defense. And here is the problem. Today, these aircraft are largely based at locations along the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf—the bases that are an artifact of planning against Russian incursions in the 1970s, and the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns of the early decades of this century. They are close to Iran, which means they have a short trip to the fight … but that is also their great vulnerability. They are so close to Iran that it takes but five minutes or less for missiles launched from Iran to reach their bases.

Moreover, the thousands of short-range missiles that Iran possesses are a factor here. There is no strategic depth. An F-35 is very hard to hit in the air. On the ground it is nothing more than a very expensive and vulnerable chunk of metal sitting in the sun. The refueling and rearming facilities on these bases are also vulnerable, and they cannot be moved. These bases are all defended by Patriot and other defensive systems. Unfortunately, at such close range to Iran, the ability of the attacker to mass fires and overwhelm the defense is very real.

It's important to note that there is one significant U.S. aviation capability that is not impacted by this threat, and that is our carrier-based aviation. This strategically mobile and powerful platform will be hard for the Iranians to track and strike, and it can deliver powerful offensive blows while defending itself. Unfortunately, there aren't enough carriers, and therefore naval aviation will probably not be the central weapon in a fires war with Iran.

In a war with Iran, it is hard to escape the conclusion that our current basing structure is poorly postured for the most likely fight that will emerge. The United States will not be able to maintain these bases in a full-throated conflict, because they will be rendered unusable by sustained Iranian attack. It is the simple tyranny of geography. The Iranians can see this problem just as clearly as we do, and that is one of the reasons why they have created their large and highly capable missile and drone force. Most importantly, the current basing array detracts from our ability to deter Iran and fight them effectively in a high-intensity scenario.

There is a solution to this problem. It has several components, and they are all within our reach: diplomatically, logistically, and operationally. Most importantly, the United States need to re-examine where U.S. military assets are based in the region, both on a day-to-day basis and on a contingency basis. Our current bases are shared with host countries. These nations do not have the option of relocating in the event of war with Iran. Our presence at these bases thus provides an important assurance mission, and a sense of shared risk, which is very important in the Arabian Gulf. For that reason, it is unlikely that U.S. military will permanently leave bases like Al Dhafra in the UAE and Al Udeid in Qatar. The United States should, however, work with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, and Egypt to identify bases as far to the west as possible where it can deploy aircraft, maintenance capabilities, refueling capabilities, and weapons. We have done some of this work already with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Known as the "Western Basing Network," it was a joint US-Saudi decision to evaluate bases near the Red Sea that would be used for potential U.S. basing in time of war. The Saudis bore the cost of some of the upgrades associated with the evaluation, because ultimately, of course, it improved Saudi capabilities. Not as far advanced, but still under consideration, were concepts for basing that included Oman, Egypt, and Jordan. The CAOC at Al Udeid has also shifted some of its responsibilities to locations in the United States, significantly reducing air command and control vulnerabilities.

How does this approach work? Based on warning and indications of war, land-based air defenses would relocate to the western bases from their locations along the Arabian Gulf. The number of Iranian weapons that could reach them would then be significantly reduced, warning times would be increased, and the Iranians would have a targeting problem in ascertaining from which bases U.S. aircraft operated. In the event of hostilities, these aircraft would launch from the distant bases, be refueled enroute, and conduct combat operations over Iran. Depending on how the fight was going, they could land and refuel/rearm at the existing forward bases on the Arabian Gulf, minimizing their time on the ground, and increasing their "cycle rate." Regardless, they would return to the western bases to "bed down." The U.S. Air Force has done some significant work on this concept, and it is known as "Agile Combat Employment," or ACE. It has obvious applicability for not only CENTCOM, but also for INDOPACOM.

It's important, however, not to assume that access would be granted automatically to these installations. The facilities themselves range from "bare bones" bases to those that are fully equipped. Basing shifts as described above would be a large political decision for many countries in the region, and they do not necessarily move quickly in reaching these decisions. Nonetheless, this is something that is squarely in the best interest of all concerned.

There is a second component to the basing construct, and it is the opportunity made possible by the entry of Israel into the Central Command Area of Responsibility (AOR). The significance of this movement can't be overstated. As CENTCOM looked at western basing in 2020, Israel wasn't an option, because it was still a European Command country. After January 2021, it became possible to consider basing in Israel in the event of a war with Iran. It has the same geographic advantages as basing in western Saudi Arabia or other Arab states, and Israel has a powerful, proven air and missile defense capability. The fact that Israel is now in CENTCOM also facilitates training, interoperability, and even maintenance. As we continue to examine basing alternatives, Israel should certainly be at the forefront.

The third component to the basing solution also involves Israel, and it is the growing normalization of ties with Arab states. This was made diplomatically possible by the signing of the Abraham Accords in 2020. It was made operationally feasible by the entry of Israel into the CENTCOM AOR. It was further underwritten by Iranian malign behavior which has finally convinced the Gulf States that a collective approach to air and missile defense is necessary and practicable, and achievable without sacrificing sovereignty. In 2021 and 2022, I convened Chiefs of Defense meetings that included key Arab military leaders, as well as the Israeli Chief of Staff. At these meetings, it became clear that the threat of Iranian missiles and drones were existential to the Gulf State, as well as Israel. Cooperation in the domain of air and missile defense is easier than ground or naval cooperation, because no forces have to be stationed abroad (or accepted into one's own country). It is largely a matter of sharing tactics, techniques and procedures, and agreeing what sensor information to share, and how to share it. The United States still acts as the honest broker in this arrangement. It remains the indispensable nation.

There is already a clear-cut example of this concept at work. As previously noted, the Iranians launched a large, complex attack against Nevatim Airfield in Israel, on April 13, 2024. This was a template for how the Iranians want to employ their forces. Cruise missiles and drones were to take out radars, thus limiting Israeli defensive capabilities. Theater ballistic missiles would then have faced no threat of interception as they delivered the killing blows. The attack failed, because of Israeli competence, U.S. and allied assistance, and the cooperation and assistance of Arab neighbors. Information was shared. Airspace was shared. In every measurable way, this was a remarkable success story. A secondary lesson of this successful operation was the importance of strategic depth—the Iranians had to go a long way to get to Israel, and there were many opportunities for early warning and interception. This is, of course, precisely the animating factor behind western basing. The corollary, of course, and not so positive, is that bases along the southern coast of the Arabian Gulf enjoy none of this geographic advantage.

The nature of the threat in the Middle East has changed significantly since U.S. bases were first placed, many decades ago. The core threat—now more than ever—is Iran. If we were to restate the concept for basing in the region today, it should be prioritized in the order listed:

- Deter Iran;
- Assure nations in the region;
- Support operations against Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs).

Deterrence is only obtained by a credible demonstration of will and the capability to fight and win if needed. Deterrence must be continuous; in the Middle East, it can have a very short half-life unless it is refreshed systematically. The events of the past two months clearly show that Iran can be deterred from undertaking irresponsible and deadly attacks in the region, but this requires resources, carefully messaging, and the demonstrated ability to fight and win if necessary.

A large part of this has been the significant strides CENTCOM has made in an integrated air and missile defense architecture in the region—but we need to do more. The United States now needs to move aggressively to develop basing alternatives that demonstrate that it is prepared to fight and prevail in a sustained high-intensity war with Iran. Geography is destiny for some, but not for all. If the United States has the foresight to envision how a future war in the region might be conducted, and if we can anticipate its contours, we have the opportunity to overcome unfavorable basing geography. Being ready to rebase rapidly and frequently exercising the capability will increase the chances of peace in the region because Iran will be watching.