

Base for Success: U.S. Basing Options in Israel





Cover image: U.S.-Israeli joint aerial exercises.

Authors

Lt Gen Thomas Bergeson, USAF (ret.)

Former Deputy Commander, U.S. Central Command

Lt Gen Joseph Guastella, USAF (ret.)

Former Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations, Headquarters U.S. Air Force

Maj Gen Charles Corcoran, USAF (ret.)

Former Assistant Deputy Chief of Staff, Operations, Headquarters U.S. Air Force

Jonathan Ruhe

JINSA Fellow for American Strategy

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I. Executive Summary

The 12-Day War in June reaffirmed Israel's central role in advancing U.S. national security interests, supporting our military freedom of action, and reducing burdens and risks to our forces. Israel upheld core U.S. redlines by eliminating much of Iran's military and nuclear scientific leadership and severely degrading its nuclear and long-range missile programs. And by taking out key Iranian air defenses, Israel also paved the way for decisive American intervention in Operation Midnight Hammer. The short but successful conflict showcased what our two countries can accomplish together, and it underscored former Secretary of State General Al Haig's description of Israel as "the largest American aircraft carrier in the world that cannot be sunk."

This metaphor must now become reality. Our basing options in the Gulf and other parts of the Arab world have been fundamental for deterrence and power projection. They proved invaluable in campaigns against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, the Islamic State, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda. Israel is not part of this network, even as questions arise about the ability of our current basing options to provide the access and defenses to support America's freedom of action in the region and beyond.

The time is ideal to explore basing options at Ovda in southern Israel. Built to U.S. specifications and shielded by Israel's world-class defenses, the airbase can readily support our evolving needs. Initial preparations preceded the 12-Day War—the latest in a growing list of once-unimaginable advances in the bilateral partnership. Further progress will bolster each country's freedom of action and deterrence by deepening defense cooperation with one of our most reliable and valuable partners. Israel offers unrestricted access, and it does not want permanent U.S. deployments or commitments. Ovda thus avoids constraints that hinder our power projection and endanger our forces at other sites. It also will reinforce U.S. leadership that empowers our partners to plan, train, and operate together effectively, and reduce burdens on us, ever since President Trump reassigned Israel to U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility in 2021.

A. America in the New Middle East

The 12-Day War highlights how Israel can manage many of America's security interests in the region. While the United States reduces its overall Middle East footprint, recent events show the ongoing imperative of projecting power there in unforeseen contingencies. Amid global great power competition, we also need to surge forces through the region to other theaters. This requires partners to provide reliable access for our forces to deploy and operate flexibly, and to offer training and logistics support. Accordingly, our basing posture focuses less on defending host nations, and more on enabling everyone to do more. Airpower is generally the readiest option, usually requiring just a forward base already "warmed" with an agreeable host nation, supporting infrastructure, and adequate defenses. The more our partners provide this access and support, the more assuredly U.S. power can be brought to bear when and where it is needed most.

Our current Middle East basing architecture does not reliably enjoy these enabling conditions. It embodies outdated priorities from the Cold War and Global War on Terrorism, concentrated in small numbers of large sites along the Arab side of the Gulf. Though well-built, these bases are poorly protected from Iran's mass precise salvos of short-range projectiles. Many host nations there restrict

U.S. overflights and operations, particularly against Iran and its threat network. Turkey and other countries in the region impose similar constraints. These concerns became clear in the regionwide conflict since October 7, 2023, particularly the 12-Day War. Rather than operate at existing bases, U.S. forces evacuated Qatar's Al Udeid airbase to avoid Iranian attack. Poor access magnified the cost and complexity of Midnight Hammer, which coordinated bombers, submarines, strike aircraft, and dozens of tankers over two oceans, three continents, five combatant commands, and many thousands of miles.

Initial changes are underway to address these issues. To bolster strategic depth, deterrence, and striking power, U.S. forces are dispersing to larger numbers of sites and moving beyond Iran's short-range threats. This includes the Saudi "Western Basing Network," possible new arrangements in Jordan or Egypt, and homeshoring command and control (C2) responsibilities for air operations. In tandem, U.S. deployments are becoming less routine and permanent, and more rotational and flexible. The Air Force's (USAF) Agile Combat Employment (ACE) model aims to move forces into, within, and out of the Middle East rapidly and—from our adversaries' perspectives—less predictably. At the same time, we can retain our ability to be a dependable strategic partner and regional leader.

B. Benefits of U.S. Basing Options in Israel

This evolving posture depends on host nations offering favorable locations, reliable access, and plug-and-play infrastructure. Israel checks all these boxes and more. Fundamentally, it does not want U.S. forces as a tripwire for its defense. Quite the opposite. Our interests align in leveraging Israeli basing options as a force multiplier that boosts each country's freedom of action.

Israel's location is ideal for power projection in all directions. It is much closer to Iran than bases in the continental United States, Europe, or the Indian Ocean. Yet it also reduces risk and boosts resilience by being farther from Iran and giving greater warning time than our Gulf bases. From Israel, U.S. forces have direct access to Syria, and they can defend freedom of navigation and critical infrastructure in the Red Sea, Arabian Peninsula, and Eastern Mediterranean. They also can operate over the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, and other hotspots where local access and U.S. commitments often are uncertain. The potential for closer U.S. and Israeli defense ties with Saudi Arabia reinforces the strategic value of Israel's physical proximity to the kingdom. Since the Middle East is a crossroads for Europe, Asia, and Africa, Israel can support U.S. rapid global mobility by hosting tanker and transport aircraft. As one more basing option, it also would add flexibility and resilience to our regional force structure.

Israel's Air Force (IAF) maintains high training, maintenance, and logistics standards. Its airbases are the best-defended on earth, obviating the need to divert scarce U.S. resources. The IAF's aircraft and support infrastructure are highly interoperable with their American counterparts, and Israel is improving its ability to rotate squadrons through its airbases countrywide on short notice. These factors minimize any need for a large U.S. footprint or time-consuming and expensive investments. They also make Israel a safe choice to forward-deploy munitions and other materiel to enhance U.S. readiness. Israel-CENTCOM cooperation already has advanced to the point of U.S. air and missile defense deployments in Israel and, in the run-up to this summer's 12-Day War, contingency planning for temporary U.S. deployments to Israeli airbases.

Combined with rising Israeli-Arab cooperation under CENTCOM, these factors make Israel a viable platform for further defense integration via prepositioning, planning, training, and even operations.

Benefits of U.S. Basing Options at Israel's Ovda Airbase	
	○ No restrictions on U.S. freedom of action, no permanent deployments or commitments.
	○ Reinforces shared deterrence and U.S. defense diplomacy by signaling trust in Israel.
	○ Bolsters the flexibility and resilience of America's Middle East force structure.
	○ Provides strategic depth and robust defenses against Iran-led projectile threats.
	○ Ideal location for U.S. and combined power projection across the Middle East and beyond.
	○ Already "warm" base with plug-and-play infrastructure to support light U.S. footprint.
	○ Significant potential for on-site expansion to meet current and future U.S. requirements.

C. Ovda: A Warm Base

Israel's Ovda Airbase ("Base 10") already is a warm base. The base meets the de facto U.S. gold standard, having been built to American specifications in the early 1980s to implement the Camp David Accords. It has two main runways that can accommodate U.S. tanker and transport aircraft so vital to our power projection, plus two auxiliary runways. The most costly and crucial infrastructure already is on-site in abundance for American use, namely shelters, parking ramps, hardstands, fuel bunkers, ammunition dumps, storage facilities, housing, and a renovated terminal for U.S. special cargo. As a backup base for IAF tankers, these aircraft can support U.S. operations and reduce further the footprint and costs for American forces. The base has systems on-site from each layer of Israel's air and missile defense network. Air traffic control and emergency services are provided by Israel as the host nation. Israeli forces stationed there operate U.S. platforms, including F-15 and F-16 combat aircraft, and the base has extensive experience hosting over 100 aircraft at one time, from multiple partner nations, as part of the IAF's biennial Blue Flag exercises.

Ovda also has real capacity to scale up for potential future U.S. requirements. Its wide-open topography in Israel's far southern desert offers ample room and (literally) solid ground for expansion, including new U.S.-only facilities for USAF and/or other U.S. armed services, if desired. It enjoys clear sightlines in all directions and near-ideal weather for flying, with reliably favorable winds and visibility. Two highways give access north to central Israel and south to the nearby city, airport, and Red Sea port of Eilat with its bases for logistical and personnel support—including potentially U.S. ships. Near the very tip of Israel's southern cone, Ovda is close to Egypt and Jordan, with shared airspaces adjoining Israel for combined exercises and other missions.

For all these reasons, Ovda is ready today to help meet America's strategic, operational, and tactical needs for flexibility, resilience, and interoperability. It is a plug-and-play option that can rapidly and feasibly support U.S. and combined missions in the Middle East and beyond. By the same token, U.S. basing options at Ovda could help shift security burdens to our regional partners.

Rheostat Model for U.S. Basing Options at Ovda	
	1. Prepositioning munitions for U.S. and/or Israeli use.
	2. Shared storage of equipment and fuel for U.S. and/or Israeli use.
	3. Organizational (O-level) maintenance.
	4. Intermediate (I-level) maintenance.
	5. Movements of USAF airlift assets.
	6. Combined aviation exercises and/or USA/USMC exercises.
	7. ACE rotational deployments of USAF forces.
	8. GCU command center for air defense/regional UAS operations.
	9. CENTCOM “Center of Excellence.”

D. The Rheostat: A Ready Path Forward

The United States should develop a phased implementation plan that leverages Israel’s readiness to support our strategic freedom of action with unrestricted access and plug-and-play basing options. Ultimately, Ovda can grow as American and Israeli ambitions dictate, but the near-term priority should be tangible light-lift, and low-cost, steps to meet pressing needs. This “rheostat” model, where the United States and Israel take an already-warm base and then dial up cooperation as needed, could at least initially resemble U.S. experience at Oman’s Thumrait airbase, where contractors supported low-cost logistical activities as the opening wedge for deeper involvement.

Realistically, within months of approval from each country, Ovda could serve as a joint facility with U.S. tenancy. Initial activities could include relatively simple prepositioning of U.S. munitions for shared use, storage and maintenance, movement of USAF airlift assets, and combined exercises. From there, USAF formations could start rotating through Ovda, beginning for instance with brief ACE deployments. More ambitious activities could entail new communications, storage, and other U.S.-only infrastructure on the base’s sizable undeveloped acreage and/or off-base. Both countries also should set their longer-term sights on turning Ovda into a CENTCOM “center of excellence” for multinational F-35 and air and missile defense planning, training, and operations.

II. America's Opportunities in a Changing Middle East

A. America in the New Middle East

In his recent speech in Egypt announcing the Gaza peace plan, President Trump depicted the Middle East first and foremost as a land of opportunity and shared promise, noting its “incredible destiny [as] a safe, prosperous and beautiful crossroads of culture and commerce.” Returning to this point, he declared it “will be the geographic center of the world.”¹

As his remarks indicate, it is the *Middle East* with good reason, just as our forces there are under U.S. *Central Command* (CENTCOM). It is central, literally, to the fastest and most economical overland and maritime links between Asia, Africa, and Europe for trade, energy, electricity, and communications. The transformational Abraham Accords spur cooperation that enables us and our partners to expand global supply chains and innovate new technologies, as well as improve energy security, information connectivity, and critical infrastructure development.²

These changes are pivotal for U.S. interests. More diversified and efficient energy flows and transit routes improve the U.S.-led global economy's resilience against disruptions and trade practices harmful to our interests. Undersea fiberoptic cables transiting the Middle East are vital to U.S. military communications, with faster and cheaper links than satellites.³ Capable and ambitious regional partners reduce our untenable reliance on China to mine and refine rare earth and other critical minerals.⁴ Through infrastructure and technology development, they also can undercut Beijing's dangerous control of telecommunications networks, integrate India with the West, and enhance America's edge more generally against China's predatory Belt and Road Initiative. The same steps strengthen Europe's energy and economic security at the direct expenses of Moscow and Beijing.⁵ In a virtuous cycle, success on these fronts can encourage more countries to join the Abraham Accords, sideline our strategic competitors, and promote yet greater growth and stability.

The Middle East's promise is not without peril. Despite recent setbacks, Iran is working to undo these achievements, prevent future progress, and resume imperiling the region and the United States. It remains committed to developing nuclear weapons, missiles to deliver them against our homeland, and other capabilities to attack U.S. interests worldwide.⁶ President Trump's decision to launch Midnight Hammer shows the seriousness of these threats, as do his warnings against Iran rebuilding.⁷ Iran's missiles, drones, and other weapons target some of the world's busiest shipping lanes, including the region's abundant oil and natural gas exports that affect U.S. energy security and prices.⁸ Iran and Hezbollah also project power into the Western Hemisphere, not least by aiding Venezuela's narcotics proliferation, arming its regime, and seeking to infiltrate our borders.⁹

As part of its efforts, Iran is deepening strategic ties with China, Russia, and North Korea. The more this “axis of adversaries” supports one another, for instance Beijing aiding Iran's missile programs or Tehran supplying Russia's drones, the more they will test our resolve and trigger crises in the Middle East and elsewhere—including our own backyard—while also weakening America's brand and undercutting our valuable defense relationships. At the same time, a less stable Middle East encourages terrorist groups to regrow and redouble their efforts to attack us at home and abroad.¹⁰

B. Securing U.S. Interests in the New Middle East

American leadership and power projection remain crucial for realizing these opportunities and countering these threats. Fortunately, remarkable changes are underway where Israel and other partners do more for collective defense, while still being able to support our freedom of action.

i. U.S. Defense Diplomacy Enables Everyone to Do More

For years now, Washington has urged allies to help meet the generational challenge of great power competition and pick up slack in the Middle East after decades of U.S. heavy lifting. The Trump administration's forthcoming national security strategy prioritizes such burden-sharing explicitly.¹¹ The Abraham Accords in 2020, and Israel's reassignment to CENTCOM's area of responsibility the following year, are helping realize these goals by enabling regional partners to plan, train, coordinate, and operate together under U.S. auspices.¹² Most notable has been the steady integration, through CENTCOM, of U.S., Israeli, and Arab air and missile defenses that enabled them to perform so effectively against three major Iranian projectile offensives since April 2024.¹³

Israel has been especially crucial in these larger efforts, and in advancing U.S. national security interests in the Middle East. Our defense cooperation enhances shared deterrence well beyond the capabilities each country brings to the table. With minimal hyperbole, Israel is America's superpower in the region.

The Israel Defense Forces' (IDF) freedom of action, operational proficiency, and tactical boldness make it the tip of the spear against Iran, its proxy "ring of fire," and other shared threats. Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM supercharges these roles. We gain valuable insights from Israel's extensive and innovative use of U.S.-made aircraft and munitions, including against Russian-made systems in Syria and Iran. It has more combat hours on the F-35 aircraft than anyone, including the platform's first combat use and first strikes with an external armament configuration that increases munitions payload appreciably.¹⁴ The United States also gains from Israel's intelligence sharing, combined exercises, and command and control (C2) and air and missile defense integration with U.S. forces.

The recent 12-Day War with Iran showcased these mutual benefits. Israel's Operation Rising Lion upheld longstanding American redlines by eliminating much of Iran's military and nuclear scientific leadership and severely degrading its nuclear and long-range missile programs. And the IAF paved the way for decisive U.S. intervention in Midnight Hammer by dismantling air defenses and establishing air superiority over western Iran. Using exclusively U.S.-made manned aircraft, Israel achieved these effects by sustaining high sortie rates against targets up to 1,000 miles away, without suffering battle damage or major mechanical failures aside from unmanned aircraft systems (UAS). These accomplishments reflected years of bilateral cooperation to train together, integrate planning cells, streamline command relationships, and most recently to discuss logistics and maintenance. Thus, the IDF and CENTCOM could maximize one another's strengths by ensuring overlapping air defense coverage, seamlessly incorporating U.S. strike capabilities into Israel's campaign plan, and effectively preparing and executing Midnight Hammer.¹⁵

The upsides for the United States of such a partnership are manifold. By enabling Israel to do more, it reduces the direct risks facing American forces without impinging our freedom of action. Decisive

U.S. operations against Iran, particularly in clear coordination with such a reliable and active partner, carries a salient deterrent message to our adversaries in the Middle East and farther afield. By the same token, it boosts the value and appeal for our Arab partners of American leadership and closer ties with Israel, and advertises the advantages of U.S.-made platforms and munitions. Israel's achievement of a "stand-in" operational capability over Iranian skies, from long range, and CENTCOM's orchestration of regional air and missile defense are relevant for potential future conflicts in the region, and for U.S. and partner forces in Ukraine, Taiwan, and elsewhere.

In these ways, Israel keeps expanding its invaluable role, famously articulated decades ago by then Secretary of State Al Haig, as "the largest American aircraft carrier in the world that cannot be sunk."¹⁶ As this task force observed routinely, the more the United States and Israel coordinate their unique capabilities, the whole of their combined efforts becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

ii. Partners Support U.S. Freedom of Action

America's defense diplomacy empowers Israel and others to ease burdens that once fell largely on our shoulders. Yet ultimately there is no substitute for U.S. power projection in resolving major crises and reassuring partners in the Middle East. Uncertainty on this front has, at times, led Gulf countries to hedge toward Beijing, Moscow, and even Tehran, in turn emboldening our adversaries in the region and beyond.¹⁷ Amid global strategic competition that stretches our force structure evermore thinly across multiple theaters, the Middle East becomes essential for projecting power into other theaters as well. In this strategic context, America's basing posture focuses less on defending partners and more on enhancing combined capabilities and freedom of action.

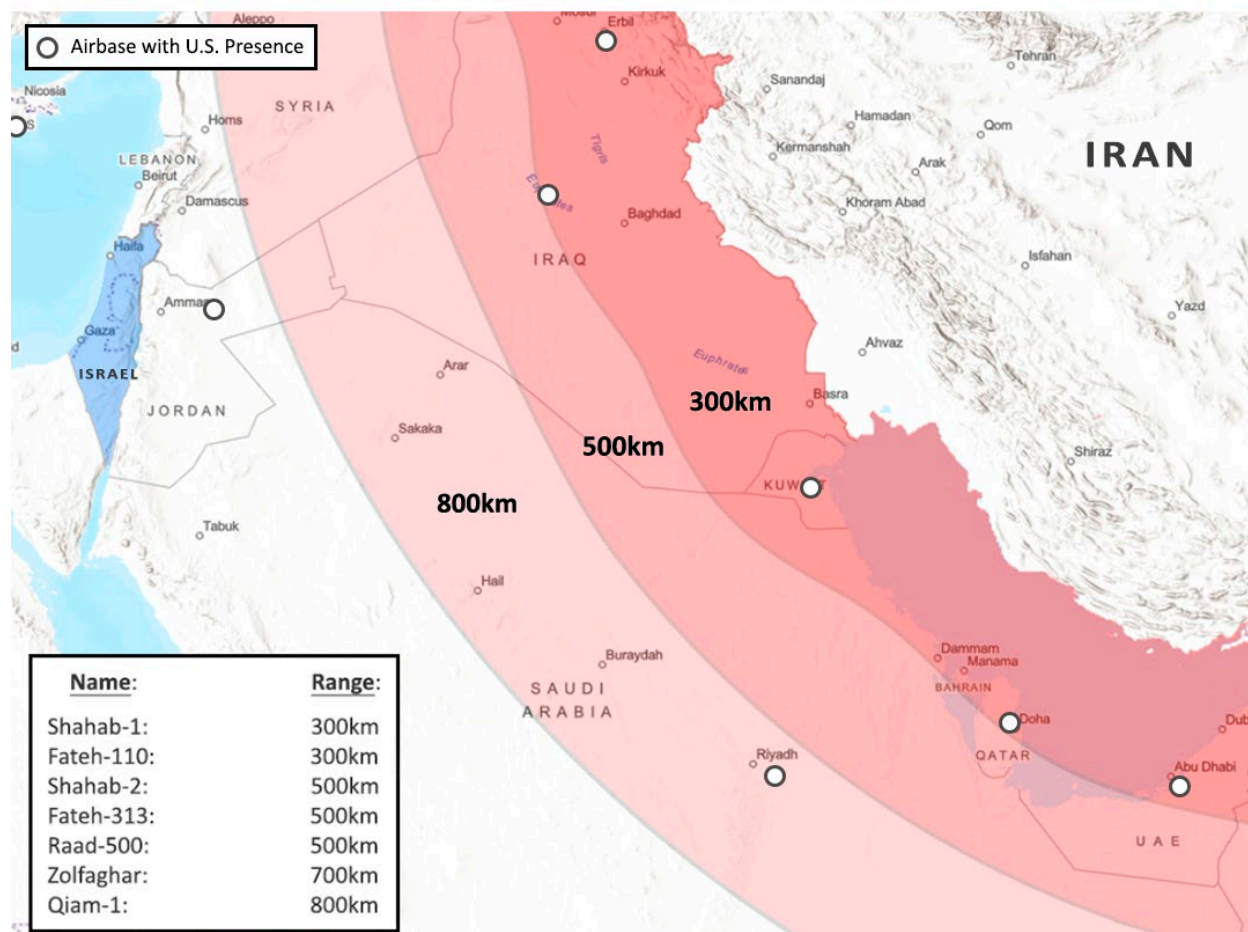
Therefore, we need partners to provide reliable access for U.S. forces to train, equip, and operate, especially in response to unforeseen events. Airpower is generally the most available option, needing just a "warm" base in an agreeable host nation with sufficient supplies, defenses, and support infrastructure at hand. The more partners ease these burdens, without prohibitive investments of U.S. time, money, and effort, the more assuredly American power can be brought to bear—particularly in wartime. We also need the flexibility and survivability that comes with a range of ready and secure basing options, rather than clustering in singular or small handfuls of sites.

For all its success, the 12-Day War shows real limits in our existing Middle East basing architecture. Key facilities in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, and Iraq were designed for containing Soviet encroachment and supporting counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Though well-built, this now means they are poorly-sited for countering Iran, within easy reach of the regime's formidable short-range missile and drone arsenals.¹⁸ And while U.S. forces successfully evacuated Qatar's Al Udeid airbase in advance of Tehran's telegraphed missile attack in June, these sites lack adequate air and missile defenses against precise mass salvos.¹⁹

These partners also restrict their facilities and airspaces from being used for offensive combat operations against Iran's threat network.²⁰ The same is true of other countries hosting U.S. and allied forces. Turkey regularly constrains U.S. operations from its soil, despite massive American investments at Incirlik airbase and other facilities. Cyprus allows only U.S. reconnaissance flights from British military installations on the island.²¹ It is possible that Mauritius, which is aligned with China and recently signed a deal to regain sovereignty over the U.S.-British airbase at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean, could prohibit future Iran-related operations.²² Among other concerns, poor

regional access magnified the cost and complexity of Midnight Hammer, which consequently entailed synching bombers, submarines, strike aircraft, and dozens of aerial refueling tankers over two oceans, three continents, five combatant commands, and many thousands of miles.²³

Ranges of Iranian Short-Range Ballistic Missiles



Even before the 12-Day War, force planners and strategists sought to address these vulnerabilities by moving to more distributed basing, with larger numbers of smaller sites dispersed more widely across the region. This is designed to bolster our strategic depth, resilience, and striking power by minimizing high-value targets for Iran and other adversaries, and by moving targets out of range of their most potent capabilities. To this end, the United States set up a “Western Basing Network” of logistical facilities near the Red Sea in Saudi Arabia, explored new options in Jordan or Egypt, and relocated certain C2 responsibilities for air operations to the continental United States (CONUS).²⁴ In tandem, the U.S. Air Force (USAF) is shifting from permanent deployments at large airbases like Qatar’s Al Udeid, to more rotational and flexible deployments with lighter footprints at multiple sites. Premised on plug-and-play infrastructure, this Agile Combat Employment (ACE) model is conceived to enable U.S. forces to project power into, operate in, and surge through and out of the Middle East more rapidly and—from our adversaries’ perspectives—less predictably. At the same time, we can retain the regional access necessary to be a reliable strategic partner and leader.

III. U.S. Basing Options in Israel

America's defense diplomacy with Israel, combined with uncertain regional access, prompted initial planning for U.S. deployments to Israeli airbases prior to the 12-Day War. This followed U.S. air and missile defense deployments that helped defeat Iran's mass projectile barrages. Perhaps unthinkable not long ago, U.S. basing options in Israel are now squarely in the realm of the possible.

A. Reliable Access, Greater Capability, Less Risk

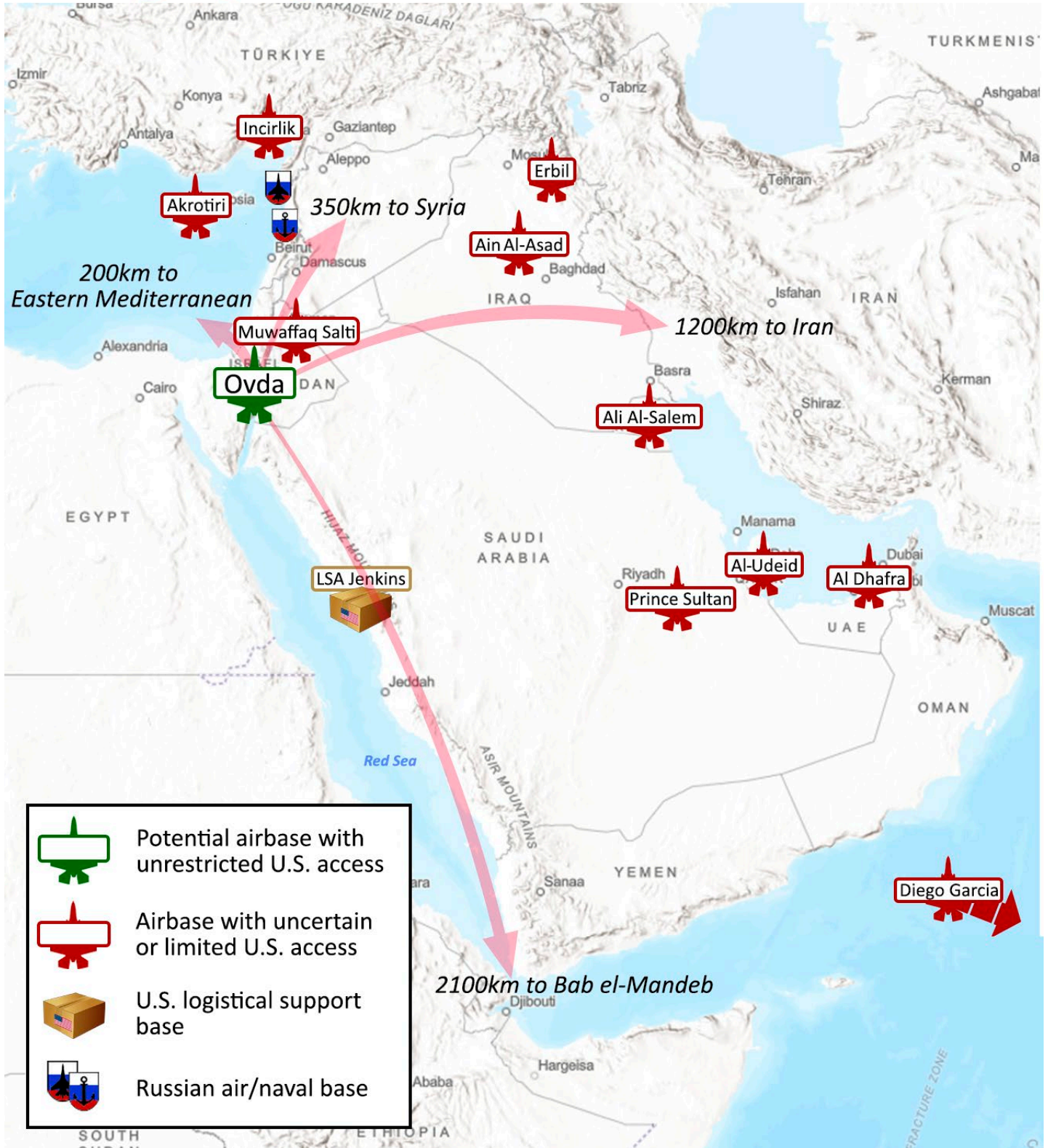
Israel checks all the requisite boxes for U.S. basing. It offers favorable geography, reliable access, and support unlike anywhere else in the region. Fundamentally, it does not want U.S. deployments for its defense, nor would America provide this tripwire. Rather, Israel seeks to provide a readymade platform for the United States to rotate assets in and out of the country without restrictions, projecting power and conducting operations as we see fit. By signaling America's trust in Israel as an anchor of stability, U.S. basing will enhance shared deterrence, Israel's freedom of action, and CENTCOM-led integration to everyone's benefit. As an additional basing option in the region, it also will make our Middle East force structure more flexible and resilient.

Israel's geostrategic position is well-suited as a hub for U.S. and combined power projection in all directions. Without requiring a large or permanent footprint, U.S. basing thus could reassure friends and remind adversaries that America remains committed to stability in the Middle East and beyond. Israel is closer to Iran than basing options in the Mediterranean, Europe, Indian Ocean, or CONUS. At the same time, it offers strategic depth compared to existing Gulf bases, situated beyond the reach of Iran's sophisticated short-range projectiles, and with consequently greater early warning for inbound threats. Israel also offers direct access for counterterrorism missions and checking Russian forces in and around Syria.

Basing options in Israel can support other critical U.S. interests and missions, too. The broader Middle East's potential as a global economic and energy hub cannot be realized absent reliable U.S.-led cooperation to secure the region's vital shipping chokepoints and other trade routes. Even without refueling, the operational radius of U.S.-made fighter aircraft at Israeli bases encompasses shipping lanes that account for roughly one-sixth of trade and one-third of container traffic worldwide, worth more than \$1 trillion annually.²⁵ The same is true for one-quarter of global internet connectivity—a figure that is projected to grow significantly in coming years.²⁶ These totals do not include the Strait of Hormuz, through which one of every five barrels of oil consumed around the world passes daily.²⁷

Israel is a ready supplement to existing basing options, some of which like Turkey and Qatar have restricted U.S. access, for projecting power into these critical areas. It is a logical base to cooperate with Greece, Egypt, and others on defending critical shipping lanes and infrastructure in the Eastern Mediterranean, and to support NATO maritime security missions there. Israel also provides a straight shot down the Red Sea to uphold freedom of navigation. The same applies to the Arabian Peninsula, Horn of Africa, Sahel, and other hotspots where local access often can be uncertain. The potential for closer U.S. and Israeli defense ties with Saudi Arabia reinforces the strategic importance of Israel's physical proximity to the kingdom. Israel's location between multiple Arab partners also

Israel's Strategic Geography



creates opportunities for combined exercises and operations via CENTCOM. Since the region is a crossroads for Europe, Asia, and Africa, basing options in Israel can support U.S. rapid global mobility by hosting tanker and transport aircraft. As one more basing option, Israel also would add flexibility and resilience to our overall Middle East force structure.

Benefits of U.S. Basing Options at Ovda Airbase in Israel
○ No restrictions on U.S. freedom of action, no permanent deployments or commitments. ○ Reinforces shared deterrence and U.S. defense diplomacy by signaling trust in Israel. ○ Bolsters the flexibility and resilience of America’s Middle East force structure. ○ Provides strategic depth and robust defenses against Iran-led projectile threats. ○ Ideal location for U.S. and combined power projection across the Middle East and beyond. ○ Already “warm” base with plug-and-play infrastructure to support light U.S. footprint. ○ Significant potential for on-site expansion to meet current and future U.S. requirements.

Israel’s basing infrastructure is warmed to support a light U.S. footprint, ensure readiness, and minimize deployment costs and risks to our forces. The IAF maintains high standards for its own U.S.-made aircraft and supporting activities at its facilities—training, maintenance, and logistics—which means that much of this infrastructure already comports with many USAF requirements. The bilateral Air Senior National Representatives (ASNR) forum expands bilateral cooperation on interoperability, integration, training, maintenance, and operations, among other areas.²⁸

The IAF is improving plug-and-play infrastructure so that its squadrons can rotate through bases countrywide to address multifront threats after October 7, 2023. In line with the needs of our own ACE deployments, these steps also can facilitate U.S. forces surging in and out. The United States would not have to bring its own defenses with it, no small consideration when such precious assets are stretched ever thinner worldwide. Israel’s battle-tested, multi-layered architecture gives it the best-defended airbases anywhere on earth, and makes it a safe choice for forward-deploying munitions and other materiel to enhance U.S. and Israeli readiness. America and Israel also can expand on their unsurpassed experience integrating air and missile defenses in recent years.

Building on other accomplishments attending Israel’s move to CENTCOM, U.S. basing options in Israel can become a regional hub for U.S., Israeli, Arab, and other partners for prepositioning, combined exercises, planning, and even operations. Strengthening our partners’ operational capabilities can, in turn, enable them to assume added responsibilities for collective defense.

B. Ovda: A Warm Base

Israel’s Ovda Airbase (“Base 10”) already is well-suited for American purposes, with ready plug-and-play infrastructure and flexibility to expand—all while minimizing any need for a large U.S. footprint. This task force visited Ovda as part of its fact-finding mission to Israel this summer.

The base meets the de facto U.S. gold standard for such facilities, having been built to American specifications in the early 1980s to implement the Camp David Accords. As part of the contingency planning preceding the 12-Day War, certain additional features were added to the base to meet

potential U.S. requirements. The most costly and crucial infrastructure already is on-site in abundance, including runways, shelters, parking ramps, hardstands, fuel bunkers, ammunition dumps, storage facilities, housing, and even a dedicated terminal for U.S. use.

It features two main 3,000-meter runways capable of accommodating the largest U.S. tanker and transport aircraft that are so vital to power projection, as well as two shorter auxiliary crossing runways. The two main runways each have fighter-capable arresting cables and nets on both ends. The base has 10 aircraft shelters, eight of which are hardened, and each of which can hold as many as seven F-15, F-16, F-18E, F-22, or F-35 aircraft. Extra layers of hardening can be added to the shelters if needed. Only half of these total spots are earmarked for an IAF squadron to be deployed permanently on base, and ample space exists for constructing additional shelters if needed. Outside these shelters, an apron has 40-80 parking spots to accommodate USAF needs, including for large transport aircraft like the C-5 and C-17. There also is a line for 3-6 helicopters.

Infrastructure already is in place to meet complex USAF fuel requirements and processes. Two supply stations with six interchangeable underground tanks provide redundant and secure sources for fueling aircraft inside the shelters by pumping directly into the shelter walls. The base also offers three fueling stations for tanker aircraft, obviating the need for fuel trucks, and it is possible to add mobile fuel farm bladders. Ovda serves as a backup base for IAF tankers, and Israel is ready and willing to have these aircraft support U.S. operations and minimize our own footprint and costs.

Ovda has plentiful storage capacity, most notably 2,700 tons of total flight line munitions storage that can accommodate U.S.-made munitions, including assembling Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM). It has on-site systems from each layer of Israel's air and missile defenses, namely Arrow, David's Sling, and Iron Dome, with room to accommodate U.S. systems. As the host nation, Israel provides emergency services and air traffic control. An unoccupied formerly dual-use terminal, recently renovated by Israel, offers 43,000 square feet of floor space and a dedicated gate for a U.S.-only aerial port of debarkation (APOD) for special cargo and/or other needs. Terminal parking can handle up to five C-130J transport aircraft, with nearby room for additional such aircraft.

Israeli forces at Ovda operate U.S.-made F-15 and F-16 aircraft, and the base has deep experience hosting over 100 aircraft at one time, from multiple partner nations, for the IAF's biennial Blue Flag exercises. During Rising Lion, Ovda generated more than 250 IAF sorties in several hours. The IAF is considering Ovda for use in the future by its F-15IA variant of America's F-15EX multirole fighter.

The wide-open, sparse topography of Israel's far southern desert around Ovda offers essentially unlimited room for expansion. It also recalls the environs of Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada that hosts the Red Flag exercises after which Israel's Blue Flag is modeled. Ovda has clear lines of sight, favorable winds, visibility, and weather conditions for flying—"Ceiling And Visibility OK," CAVOK—plus ample room and (literally) solid ground for building U.S.-only facilities for USAF and/or other U.S. armed services. North-south highways on either side of the base lead to central Israel in one direction, and in the other a 30-minute drive to Eilat with its urban center, civilian airport, and port on the Red Sea for logistical and personnel support—including serving U.S. Navy ships if desired. Daily shuttles create a direct airbridge to Tel Aviv, which can be increased to meet any U.S. needs. Near the tip of Israel's southern cone, Ovda is close to Egypt and Jordan, which share their adjoining airspaces for training, including supersonic flight over southern Israel and southern Jordan.

For all these reasons, Ovda is ready today to help meet America’s needs for flexibility, resilience, and interoperability. It is a plug-and-play option that can rapidly and feasibly support U.S. and combined missions in the Middle East and beyond. By the same token, U.S. basing options at Ovda could help shift the burdens of regional security into the hands of Israel and other regional partners.

IV. The Rheostat: A Ready Path Forward

The United States should develop a phased implementation plan that leverages Israel’s readiness to support our strategic freedom of action with unrestricted access and plug-and-play basing options. Ultimately, Ovda can grow as much as American-Israeli ambitions dictate, but the near-term priority should be tangible light-lift, low-cost steps to meet pressing needs. This “rheostat” model, where the United States and Israel take an already-warm base and then dial up cooperation as needed, could at least initially resemble U.S. experience at Oman’s Thumrait airbase, where contractors supported low-cost logistical activities as the opening wedge for deeper involvement.

Rheostat Model for U.S. Basing Options at Ovda	
	1. Prepositioning munitions for U.S. and/or Israeli use.
	2. Shared storage of equipment and fuel for U.S. and/or Israeli use.
	3. Organizational (O-level) maintenance.
	4. Intermediate (I-level) maintenance.
	5. Movements of USAF airlift assets.
	6. Combined aviation exercises and/or USA/USMC exercises.
	7. ACE rotational deployments of USAF forces.
	8. GCU command center for air defense/regional UAS operations.
	9. CENTCOM “Center of Excellence.”

Realistically, within months of each country’s approval, Ovda could serve as a joint facility with U.S. tenancy. Initial activities could include relatively straightforward prepositioning of U.S. munitions for shared use, maintenance and other logistics, and combined exercises. Ovda also can support USAF airlift between Europe and other parts of the Middle East and/or Indo-Pacific. Eventually, small USAF formations could rotate through Ovda, for instance a brief ACE deployment detaching forces from Muwaffaq Salti Air Base (MSAB) in Jordan, before moving on to combat deployments. Ovda’s wide-open topography, including its extensive spaces for U.S.-only activities, could host U.S. Army (USA) and Marine Corps (USMC) units for live-fire combined-arms exercises.

The more ambitious the activities, the more likely they will entail new communications, storage, security, and other U.S.-only infrastructure on the base’s sizable undeveloped acreage and/or off-base. Eventually the two countries could consider transforming Ovda’s Ground Control Unit (GCU) into a U.S.-Israeli command center for UAS operations across the Middle East—a step which, among other benefits, would increase resilience and reduce latency for America’s regional UAS operations. They also should set their longer-term sights on making Ovda a CENTCOM “center of excellence” for multinational F-35 and air and missile defense planning, training, and operations. This would leverage Israel’s expertise to enable our partners to do even more together, further strengthening America’s freedom of action in the Middle East and beyond.

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