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Throughout the U.S.-Israeli war on Iran, Washington has relished the display of its conventional military superiority. President Donald Trump's administration has boasted of its quantitative achievements: before the April 8 cease-fire, the United States alone flew more than 10,000 air sorties, hit over 130,000 targets, and intercepted 1,700 Iranian missiles and drones. According to U.S. Central Command, the campaign demolished more than 85 percent of the facilities that Tehran used to produce missiles and drones, sank the majority of Iran's naval vessels, and eliminated 70 percent of its missile launch infrastructure.

But degrading Iran's military capabilities was not the broad strategic goal Trump laid out in the early days of Operation Epic Fury. He variously promised to achieve the complete surrender of the

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regime, to protect the Iranian people from their leaders' brutality, to rid the region of Iran's malign influence entirely, and to wrest a better nuclear deal from Tehran than the one U.S. President Barack Obama reached in 2015. All these aims remain elusive. The regime in Tehran survived. And it has cleverly adapted toward an attrition strategy that has badly strained the U.S. arsenal, threatened civilian infrastructure across the Middle East, and added a new dimension of power projection by effectively closing the Strait of Hormuz and pressuring the global economy.

Although the U.S. military's approach to the region has delivered many operational successes, the Iran war has exposed its serious shortcomings and created new challenges. As it demonstrated an unmatched ability to rapidly deploy massive air and sea power, the Pentagon also deepened its relationships with Middle Eastern militaries, especially with the Israeli armed forces, with which it fought its first truly joint campaign since World War II. But Washington's tactical successes could not make up for its strategic missteps. Its failure to build a fighting coalition beforehand—or even to make the case on the global stage that Iran had become an imminent threat—left it struggling to build international consensus to confront Iran's asymmetric tactics and finalize a strong postwar deal. And the conflict dangerously ran down the U.S. arsenal. The United States simply cannot afford to fight another war like this one.

Most important of all, the war compromised the United States' status as the Middle East's main security guarantor. For decades, U.S. policy toward Iran focused on the three pillars of Iran's power projection: its nuclear program, its missile arsenal, and its network of proxy militias. Yet degrading each of these pillars was not enough to topple the Islamic Republic or force it to accept a deal that safeguarded either the United States or its partners. Fundamentally, the nature of Iran's threat has changed in ways Washington was not fully prepared to counter, and Epic Fury only accelerated Tehran's adaptation. Throughout Epic Fury, Middle Eastern militaries continued to rely on the United States for air defense support and intelligence. But Washington could not fully neutralize Iran before its retaliatory aggression shattered the Gulf's reputation as a calm, safe, business-friendly haven. Nor could it effectively curb the Islamic Republic once it decided to halt freedom of navigation through the region's most vital waterway.

In a bitter paradox, the Iran war revealed opportunities for U.S. Central Command to work much more effectively with regional militaries. But the trust deficit that has opened between the United States and its Gulf partners will make it far harder to take advantage of those opportunities. The Gulf states need clearer security commitments now more than ever. These countries, however, are losing faith that Washington is committed to ensuring their security, and both the American public and U.S. political leaders have lost what appetite they had for the costly, sustained work of countering Iran's threats.

The Middle East after Epic Fury is not safer, more stable, or more prosperous. And if the United States fails to achieve the grand goals Trump set out before the war, its ability to rally partners in other theaters will be undermined, and its adversaries will be emboldened. To properly learn the war's lessons, the United States has to change how it fights. The U.S. defense industrial base will need to innovate faster and pair with trusted partners in developing and coproducing an arsenal that can meet the demands of future wars. In the Middle East, the Pentagon will need to accelerate changes to its force posture and basing, and update the way it works with allies. Gulf countries are already looking for supplemental defense partners, and Washington must redouble its efforts to transition from being the region's sole security guarantor to its security integrator. If it fails to do so, it could entrench the idea that the United States will be an impediment, not an asset, to allies as they seek to ensure their security.

TOUR DE FORCE

The United States had already begun to adjust its military posture in the Middle East years before Epic Fury. After the 1991 Gulf War, the U.S. military rotated forces through bases across eastern Gulf countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—and positioned equipment in preparation for another conventional war. This network of bases subsequently supported the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century; in the 2010s, the campaign to defeat the Islamic State, also known as ISIS, and efforts to counter Iranian influence sustained the existing basing structure. But as Washington became more aware of Iran's growing missile and drone arsenal and the threat it posed to U.S. bases in the Gulf, it began to plan a more agile basing network along the Red Sea and the Mediterranean. By

2020, the Pentagon was developing the Western Access Network, a system of bases intended to circumvent maritime chokepoints and Iran's short-range threats. It also started to move elements of its aboveground coordination hub from the al-Udeid base in Qatar to South Carolina.

Ahead of Epic Fury, the United States did not mass forces or materiel in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, or the UAE. Indeed, it anticipated that Iran would attack military facilities in those countries with short-range missiles and evacuated troops and military platforms in advance. Instead, Central Command leaders coordinated the war from within U.S. territory and launched operations from the western side of the Middle East, including from bases in Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as from offshore naval platforms. This allowed the United States to avoid major casualties and operational slowdowns after Iran attacked legacy U.S. bases.

U.S.-Israeli military coordination in Iran was unprecedented.

The Iran war also showed that the United States can effectively coordinate a multinational air defense throughout the Middle East. Central Command had spent years working to better integrate its Middle Eastern partners' radars, threat warning systems, and defenses, building on the political opening generated by the 2020 Abraham Accords between Bahrain, Israel, and the UAE. The investment paid off: to defend against Iran, during Epic Fury, U.S. partners in the region relied on U.S. and Israeli intelligence and equipment to successfully intercept the majority of attacks on their territories. In fact, Iran's efforts to drive a wedge between the United States and its Gulf allies had the opposite effect, strengthening military cooperation. Gulf countries were previously reluctant to be associated with offensive U.S. military operations against a state. During this war, some Gulf countries permitted Central Command to launch strikes from their territories, and reporting suggests that at least Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined the United States and Israel in striking Iran.

The war also stress-tested an unprecedented kind of military coordination between the United States and Israel. In the previous wars Washington fought in the Middle East, even when it led a coalition, U.S. strategists were firmly in charge: they designed the campaigns, built the logistics backbone, and provided most of the

troops. In this war, Israeli and U.S. strategists designed the military campaign together, divided the target sets, and shared risk equally. Israel took the lead initially by suppressing Iranian air defenses and conducting the decapitation strikes that killed nearly 40 top Iranian political and military leaders, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Only after Israel had achieved air supremacy did U.S. fighter jets start traversing Iranian airspace.

In preparation for the war, the United States stationed fighter jets and refueling aircraft within Israel. Israeli search-and-rescue teams supported Washington's recovery efforts after Iran downed a U.S. plane, and Israeli intelligence informed U.S. operations. This peak of military collaboration was the culmination of years of U.S. investments in a partner force that showed it had become a military peer, capable of sharing the burden in confronting Iran and addressing other emerging threats.

CALL TO ARMS

The critical assistance that U.S. equipment provided to Israel and the Gulf states during a crisis, and the massive investments they have already made into purchasing and training on U.S. systems, means that these militaries will almost certainly continue to buy American and train with Central Command. Epic Fury also showed that maintaining a static troop presence in legacy bases in the Middle East is no longer necessary, validating earlier efforts to update the U.S. military's regional posture. Moreover, the military ecosystem that supported counterterrorism missions in Syria and Iraq, which was for years based in Kuwait and Jordan, can evolve as those missions are reduced in scope. And the Pentagon is likely to accelerate its efforts to develop the Western Access Network by inking access agreements with Israel and positioning equipment and bases along the Red Sea and in Israel.

There is a challenge in updating the U.S. force posture in the Middle East, however: local partners, already anxious about their security, may well perceive changes in the U.S. military presence as a diminished U.S. commitment. To reassure these partners, Washington will need to pursue new paradigms for basing and training. The Pentagon can signal its continuous investment in the region by permanently assigning a set level of forces to the Middle East, similar to the arrangement it has in the European and Asia-Pacific

theaters. This will send a reassuring signal, as well as help with U.S. defense planning and funding. These forces might rotate throughout the region to conduct exercises and training, sharing facilities with partners by establishing joint use, pooled maintenance, and cost-sharing agreements.

Epic Fury also put a stark spotlight on the immense material demands of modern warfare—and the United States' unreadiness to fight for a sustained period. That the economics of war is changing had already been illuminated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent protracted war. High-end air defense systems and cutting-edge munitions are financially and operationally unsustainable against low-cost, long-term drone attacks. The Pentagon's current inventories enabled it to overmatch Iran during Epic Fury. But it did so at a cost to other theaters and priorities. Washington expended an extraordinary amount of munitions striking targets within Iran itself: as the defense strategist Mackenzie Eaglen has pointed out, the U.S. military fired more than 1,000 Tomahawk cruise missiles in a few weeks—but it can produce only 90 to 100 per year. According to the Center for Strategic and International Studies, to counter Iranian missile fire, the United States expended at least 190 THAAD interceptors and 1,060 Patriot interceptors between February 28 and April 8 alone. Those figures represented around 53 percent and 46 percent of the United States' prewar inventories, respectively. At the rates that it can replenish these interceptors, the United States could not counter air threats in multiple theaters if it needed to.

To stay ahead of the innovation curve, the United States will need to both speed its acquisition processes and innovate more with other countries. It must lower the regulatory barriers that prevent technology transfer to and from its partners and tackle the industrial, contractual, and funding bottlenecks that stymie the development and production of cost-effective munitions. The United States could benefit much more from the innovations Ukrainian and Israeli militaries have made to modern warfare if policies are changed and bureaucratic hurdles are removed. Washington will also need to transform its frustratingly slow and inflexible foreign military sales processes. Arms and technology sales that take years to finalize risk becoming irrelevant. As the United States adjusts its regional basing arrangements and accelerates reforms to its acquisition processes, it should invite its Gulf partners to

join coproduction and codevelopment arrangements—a move that would ease its own funding and production challenges while adding valuable new dimensions to the partnerships.

A MOVING TARGET

In Epic Fury, Israel and the United States ran an expanded version of the playbook they used during last June's devastating strikes on Iran's nuclear and missile programs (the so-called 12-day war). But Iran had changed its own strategy, confounding the operation. After the 12-day war, Tehran absorbed key lessons. First, it determined that its overly centralized decision-making structure slowed its ability to respond effectively to U.S. and Israeli strikes, especially given that Israel and the United States targeted its top leaders and communications networks. Second, it saw that directing most of its retaliation toward missile attacks on Israel—alongside a single, performative assault on the United States' al-Udeid base in Qatar—would not deter Israel or the United States, weaken their resolve to return to military operations, or spook Qatar and other Gulf countries into imposing limits on how Washington uses their territory or airspace. Tehran also learned from how Russia has used drones in the war in Ukraine, especially drones' ability to hit civilian centers and energy infrastructure, drain interceptor stockpiles, and test radar coverage to set up more destructive strikes.

So between last year's war and this year's, Iran changed its playbook. Iran's leaders pre-delegated response authority downward and preauthorized target sets that could rapidly expand the scope of a countercampaign—what it calls a "mosaic defense." Despite U.S. and Israeli leaders' claims that the regime's command-and-control structures were fracturing, Iran's military responses remained coherent. Consider its swift and timely response to the March 18 Israeli strike against its offshore South Pars gas field. Within hours, the regime had escalated by attacking Gulf energy infrastructure, targeting the Qatari side of the same offshore gas field but also striking Saudi and Kuwaiti oil installations.

Iran also changed course from imposing costs directly on Israel and the United States to attacking all U.S.-aligned countries in its neighborhood. And it used its drones not only to strike targets directly but to deplete its adversaries' interceptor stockpiles and probe their radar coverage. These attacks often caused little physical damage,

but they imposed operational burdens and forced the United States and its partners into a resource-intensive defensive posture. Tehran expanded the scope of its strikes to civilian infrastructure such as hotels, airports, desalination plants, ports, and oil terminals; psychological and economic warfare became an increasingly important element of its response. Civilians across the Middle East endured constant missile and drone warnings, a vital commercial shipping route was disrupted, and threats to regional energy flows proliferated, drawing military focus and political attention from Epic Fury's operational momentum.

Iran discovered its greatest advantage in the maritime domain. As it has with drone tactics, Tehran has demonstrated a capacity for creative innovation in maritime warfare. In 2019, in response to "maximum pressure" sanctions by the first Trump administration, it attacked oil tankers in the Gulf; in 2023, the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen shut down Red Sea transit to protest Israel's operations in Gaza. Tehran's 2026 closure of the Strait of Hormuz was the culminating demonstration of an ability that the regime had developed years in advance. This time, realizing that it could not contest U.S. naval superiority directly, Iran instead used small boats, drones, mines, and onshore firing units to create persistent navigational uncertainty in the strait. These tactics generated enough risk to disrupt transit in a waterway that handles 20 percent of the world's shipping, raised shippers' insurance costs, and put extraordinary pressure on global markets.

ADAPT OR DIE

The U.S. military demonstrated that, together with Israel, it was able to significantly degrade the capabilities of an adversary in a short time. But the recent war made it clear that Iran can project power in new ways—and even more important, that its ability to adapt in the midst of an ongoing conflict is much greater than the United States had planned for. So instead of diminishing the broader Iranian threat, the war generated new perils for the Gulf states and the global economy.

The greatest problem for the United States in the Middle East now is its inability to turn military achievements into strategic wins. Tehran's newfound willingness to directly threaten its Gulf neighbors, and its eagerness to use global economic coercion, means the United States must retain a military presence in the Middle East and keep backing

its longtime partners' efforts to defend themselves. But Americans are not sold on deepening these military partnerships. Over the past few years, polling has consistently shown that Americans want to fight fewer foreign wars and retrench from the Middle East specifically. A March Reuters/Ipsos survey showed that most Americans wanted a quick exit from Iran, even if a strategic victory had not been achieved. U.S. political leaders will likely balk at reinforcing security commitments in the Middle East precisely when the region will seek them.

America fired more than 1,000 Tomahawks but can produce only 90 to 100 per year.

Project Freedom, the United States' short-lived effort to reopen the Strait of Hormuz, illustrated that U.S. military partnerships are vulnerable not only to American political pressure but also to political pressure from Gulf countries. After the U.S. military successfully guided two commercial vessels out of the strait on May 4 to challenge Tehran's blockade, Iran struck a UAE oil terminal to signal its willingness to attack Gulf energy interests. It attacked a South Korean commercial vessel to threaten non-Arab commercial shipping. And it unsuccessfully targeted two U.S. Navy destroyers to test Trump's willingness to return to war. Yet the Trump administration insisted a cease-fire was still in place and did not respond to Iran's attacks beyond defending its naval vessels.

Unlike during the 12-day war, when an Iranian attack on Qatari territory did not disrupt the country's close relationship with the U.S. military, within 24 hours Kuwait and Saudi Arabia had closed their airspace to U.S. military aircraft and placed other restrictions on how the Pentagon used their bases. These Gulf states feared that Trump's lack of response to the attack on the UAE's oil terminal, in particular, would continue to embolden Tehran. Without military cooperation from geographically close countries, Project Freedom could not continue, and for the first time during the war, Iran forced open a temporary fissure between the United States and key Gulf partners.

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia quickly restored the U.S. military's access. But such episodes of distrust and rupture are likely to recur. And even before the war, Middle Eastern leaders were looking for more diversity in their military acquisitions and defense partnerships. This search is now accelerating. At the height of Iran's retaliation, the UAE requested that Israel deploy troops and additional air defense systems

to its territory. Ukraine sent teams of counterdrone experts across the Middle East and, in late March, signed long-term security agreements for counterdrone training, technology transfers, and joint defense production with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. NATO countries that had prewar defense relationships in the Middle East fulfilled their commitments and supplemented U.S. defensive support during the war. The United Kingdom provided defense support to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other states in the region and flew missions within the effort coordinated by Central Command. France also deployed fighter jets to intercept Iranian drones and missiles targeting the UAE and sent its sole aircraft carrier group to the Red Sea to prepare to help reestablish freedom of navigation in the region. And in late April, France and the United Kingdom convened a maritime security summit, attended by more than 30 countries, to initiate military planning for a multinational maritime mission to support unfettered transit in the Strait of Hormuz.

This diversification trend will continue. Other countries are ready to fill gaps the United States leaves open. (South Korea, for instance, recently revised its defense export policy to accelerate equipment sales, particularly to the Middle East.) Washington needs to embrace its partners' desire for a broader variety of defense partnerships by leaning into a coordinating role, looking to its own history for inspiration. Previous U.S. administrations have sought to multilateralize the region's security cooperation through formal structures such as the 2015 Camp David summit, which strengthened U.S.-Gulf security cooperation after a nuclear agreement with Iran was struck; the first Trump administration's proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance initiative, which aimed to create a new structure for Gulf countries to collaborate along with the United States; and the Biden administration's 2022 Jeddah Security and Development Summit, which accelerated Middle Eastern regional air and defense cooperation.

These efforts all worked from the same premise—that multinational security commitments could better support a collective defense against Iran. In the aftermath of Epic Fury, Washington should work with Asian and NATO allies, and especially military innovators such as Ukraine, to formalize multilateral security cooperation. The goal should be to assemble a new security construct that integrates the operations of different military systems from various national defense industries, protects participating countries' classified information,

and initiates theater-wide planning for future air defense equipment purchases and operations. The United States needs to convene actors interested in defending against Iran's threats before Chinese and Russian engagements tip the balance of influence to the United States' disadvantage.

Over time, such arrangements could help the United States become the Middle East's security coordinator within a more balanced system of burden sharing. Gulf states also want more agency in their security arrangements. Back in 2000, the Gulf Cooperation Council countries signed a joint defense agreement that stipulated that an attack on one was an attack on all. Although they did not activate this provision during the Iran war, regional leaders show renewed interest in creating an Islamic or Middle Eastern NATO and aligning with other nearby states such as Egypt and Pakistan. By midwifing the 2020 Abraham Accords, Washington has shown that it can help facilitate new strategic frameworks in the region.

The 2023 Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement between Bahrain and the United States is another valuable model. It expands the definition of security beyond defense to include economic and technology cooperation and contains a NATO-like provision that requires parties to work together to confront "external aggression against the territorial integrity" of any signatory. The agreement was left open for other countries to join. The United Kingdom joined in 2025, and the agreement's three signatories should not let this moment pass without encouraging other interested parties within and outside the region to join.

During Epic Fury, the U.S. military proved its operational value to Middle Eastern partners and confirmed its unique conventional capabilities. Shared wartime experience ought to give the United States a good foundation from which to rebuild and expand its partnerships. But the discordance between the strong relationships the United States continues to enjoy with regional militaries and its increasingly tense political relationships is growing. The Trump administration must leverage Central Command's accomplishments to deliver an agreement that blunts Iran's threat. And it must make systemic changes to how Washington works with regional partners. If it falls short on either front, Epic Fury will stand as the defining contradiction of U.S. power—a display of unequaled military might that ushered in a post-American Middle East.