

Designing USCENTCOM's Post-U.S.-Iran War Environment: Partners, Posture, and Deterrence

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Key Points

- Iran's military has been severely degraded by the 2026 U.S.-Iran war, but the regime remains in power and retains the capacity to threaten U.S. forces, partners, and global commerce.
- A fragile U.S.-Iran MOU temporarily paused major combat operations without resolving underlying nuclear, missile, and proxy challenges, creating a narrow window for a sustainable deal.
- Overlapping "clocks" – U.S. domestic politics, Iranian internal pressures, conflict dynamics, global economic risks, and finite military capabilities – sharply constrain both sides' options.
- In a new post-war environment, USCENTCOM may need to redesign its partnerships, posture, and deterrence strategy under resource constraints and strategic competition.

1. Introduction

The 2026 U.S.-Iran war has severely degraded Iran's conventional and strategic military capabilities, including its leadership, ballistic missile, drone, and proxy forces, but it has not resulted in regime change.¹ Although negotiations continue following the signing of the U.S.-Iran memorandum of understanding (MOU), recent attacks have shown that the Islamic Republic of Iran retains enough residual capacity to threaten U.S. forces, regional partners, and commercial shipping.²

For years, Gulf partners with significant support from the U.S. hardened their own defenses and relied on the U.S. "deterrence umbrella." Although the "post-war" effects still need to be evaluated, the U.S. near-monopoly on security relationships can be questioned. Meanwhile, global demand for U.S. air, naval, and air and missile defense assets continues to grow, driven by the Pacific and European theaters, reinforcing longstanding pressures for U.S. retrenchment and burden-shifting in the Middle East.

This paper examines a post deal environment in the USCENTCOM AOR, how relationships with regional partners are configured, and how USCENTCOM may adapt its posture and activities under constrained resources to secure U.S. interests.

2. Context

Since the establishment of USCENTCOM in 1983, U.S. policy in the Middle East has centered on maintaining regional stability while containing Iran's influence, with USCENTCOM itself forged and adapted through recurrent episodes of conflict and crisis in the region.³ Over the following decades, the U.S. cultivated enduring partnerships with Gulf

Cooperation Council (GCC) states, which provided Access, Basing, and Overflight (ABO) rights in support of U.S. operations in exchange for security assurances. Concurrently, the U.S. strengthened Israel's strategic position through key policy decisions, including relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, incorporating Israel into the USCENTCOM area of responsibility, and facilitating regional normalization through the Abraham Accords.⁴

A major turning point came with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), agreed in 2015 as a multilateral effort to limit Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. The U.S. withdrew from the JCPOA in May 2018 and reimposed sanctions, a decision that intensified pressure on Iran and deepened regional tensions.

In the years that followed, U.S. "maximum pressure" efforts, Iranian nuclear advances beyond JCPOA limits, and expanding missile, drone, and proxy attacks produced a sustained cycle of escalation and counter-escalation. Attempts at limited de-escalation and back-channel diplomacy did not resolve this pattern, instead, they coexisted with periodic strikes, sabotage operations, and maritime incidents in and around the Strait of Hormuz (SoH), gradually eroding the credibility of U.S. deterrence and setting the conditions for a broader war. The U.S.-Iran war ultimately emerged from this deteriorating environment and reflected two central perceived threats: Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon and its large missile and drone arsenal.

The implementation of the MOU signed on June 17, 2026, effectively terminated major combat operations (MCO), however, the U.S. and Iran continue in limited kinetic exchanges while competing for control of the Strait of Hormuz.⁵

3. The U.S.-Iran MOU

The U.S.-Iran MOU was a broad framework designed to de-escalate the conflict and set the stage for a more comprehensive agreement (deal). Its main points included an immediate end to military hostilities, mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, and a commitment by Iran not to pursue nuclear weapons. The agreement also addressed practical issues such as the gradual lifting of sanctions, the reopening of maritime routes in the SoH, the release of frozen Iranian assets, and the creation of a mechanism to supervise implementation and compliance. The U.S. and Iran agreed to pursue a final deal within 60 days at most, with any extension requiring both sides' consent.⁶

4. Not in the MOU, Not in the Deal?

The MOU embodied a fragile and contentious compromise that many observers view as strategically unfavorable for the U.S. and its closest regional partners. Structured around a 60-day window, it potentially gave Iran time to delay substantive follow-on negotiations while beginning to rebuild elements of its military and asymmetric capabilities. Compared with the JCPOA, the MOU was a far less detailed and rigorous instrument.⁷ The MOU failed to codify meaningful reductions in Iran's missile arsenals, and left Iran's drone and proxy infrastructure largely intact. Iran also succeeded in de facto broadening the political scope of the arrangement by effectively folding Lebanon and Hezbollah into the framework. For Israel, these terms were deeply problematic and risked widening a strategic and political rift with the U.S., as Israeli leaders confront a deal that neither curbs core threats nor guarantees robust enforcement. At the same time, the MOU mandated the reopening of the SoH, which is critical for restoring global energy flows and easing pressure on the world economy, even as it reintroduces familiar maritime security risks.

Finally, seeking endorsement of the agreement through a United Nation Security Council (UNSC) resolution conferred additional international legal and political weight, but also introduced the risk that one or more permanent members

veto the resolution, blocking formal adoption. Such a veto could be used as leverage by external actors, delay implementation, and undermine perceptions of the deal's durability.

5. What a Potential Deal Could Look Like

It is inherently difficult to describe in advance what a deal would look like and what timeline goes with it. Despite recent developments, including an uptick in kinetic tit-for-tat action, the MOU could serve as a valid foundation. With any eventual deal translating its broad principles into specific, actionable commitments on nuclear limitations, security, sanctions relief, and implementation mechanisms.

Nuclear Limitations

On the nuclear issue, this could include a long-term International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring and verification regime with defined access provisions, reductions in centrifuge capacity consistent with civilian use, and limits on uranium enrichment at 3.67% in alignment with prior JCPOA benchmarks.⁸ A phased approach to down-blending enriched uranium would likely proceed through sequential steps, including inspector access, stockpile verification, material transfer, physical blending, and post-process validation.

Security

In the security domain, the framework could encompass formal cessation of hostilities, mechanisms to prevent escalation across theaters such as Lebanon through a structured, multi-party arrangement, and mutual commitments to non-interference, supported by the establishment of a military-to-military crisis communication channel. Adjustments to U.S. force posture in the region could include a calibrated reduction and redistribution of forces across the USCENTCOM area of responsibility.

Sanctions Relief

Sanctions relief would likely be phased and conditional, involving partial initial release of frozen assets, incremental disbursements tied to compliance milestones, and eventual lifting of remaining sanctions upon verified implementation of key nuclear steps, with stipulated use of funds for reconstruction and humanitarian purposes.

Implementation Mechanism

Implementation could be supported by a multi-track engagement structure, including technical-level committees, third-party mediation channels, and senior political communication, with the overall agreement formalized through endorsement by a binding UNSC resolution.

6. Ticking Clocks

Although the ongoing tit-for-tat strikes and confrontation around the SoH may suggest that both Washington and Tehran are operating on open ended timelines to achieve a deal, that perception is likely overstated. In practice, both sides may be constrained by overlapping "clocks" shaped by domestic politics, operational strain, global economic repercussions, and relative capabilities.

On the U.S. domestic clock, the war intersects with the summer driving season, when gasoline demand and prices typically rise, magnifying cost of living pressures and voter sensitivity to pump prices ahead of the 2026 midterm elections. With the Strategic Petroleum Reserve (SPR) already drawn down to multidecade lows, each additional disruption in Gulf supply chains has faster and more visible impact on U.S. households.⁹ In parallel, President Trump formally notified Congress that hostilities with Iran resumed on July 7, which his administration interprets as starting a new 60-day period to use military force without congressional approval.¹⁰

On Iran's domestic clock, prolonged sanctions, inflation, and wartime disruption compound social and economic stress, intensifying pressure on the leadership to manage regime legitimacy, elite cohesion, and public expectations in the face of mounting hardship.

On the conflict clock, every month of continued operations adds to attrition, miscalculation risks, and expanded targeting, increasing the probability that a localized confrontation hardens into a more systemic regional war that neither side can easily scale back.

The global economic clock continues to tick as disruptions and threats around the SoH amplify volatility in oil and freight markets, with limited U.S. SPR capacity to buffer shocks and Iran's own reliance on energy exports, together raising pressure from partners and markets on both Washington and Tehran to cap the confrontation.

Finally, on the capability clock, the U.S. must manage high cost, multi-theater demands with reduced strategic energy insurance and finite munitions and logistics, while Iran's asymmetric drones, missiles, and proxy networks remain relatively cheap but exhaustible and increasingly exposed to countermeasures.

Taken together, these overlapping clocks narrow the time and political space available for both sides to convert temporary leverage into a durable settlement, and they define the constraints within which any potential final deal will have to be structured.

7. A Post-Deal Environment

Although a negotiated U.S.-Iran deal could offer significant strategic benefits, any post-deal environment would still be shaped by a long history of mutual mistrust, with both Washington and Tehran viewing the other's commitments through a skeptical lens. That caution is reinforced by the JCPOA experience, in which Iran did not fully comply with all nuclear obligations over time, while the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 further convinced Iranian leaders that U.S. guarantees may not endure across administrations.

At the same time, Israel's posture will remain a critical variable, as Israeli leaders may continue to view Iran's nuclear and regional activities as an existential threat, potentially acting unilaterally or pressing Washington for a harder line in ways that could complicate deal implementation and stability.

As a result, a deal does not eliminate the underlying fragility of the regional order or transform the Middle East into a peaceful environment. It opens a limited window in which mistrust between Washington and Tehran continues to constrain the longevity of any arrangement.

Iran's behavior under the JCPOA illustrates that formal agreements can coexist with partial compliance and continued risk-taking, underscoring that a future, post-war Middle East will be a new reality in which USCENTCOM operates with degraded capabilities, constrained budgets, and growing pressure to prioritize the Pacific. A post-deal

environment would have significant implications for U.S. partner relations, ABO, USCENTCOM's deter-Iran efforts, and its approach to strategic competition.

U.S. Allies and Partner Relations

A U.S.-Iran deal would likely reinforce an ongoing shift toward a diplomacy-driven Middle East characterized by multiple centers of influence, in which states increasingly hedge among major powers rather than align exclusively with a single patron. While regional actors would continue to cooperate with the U.S. on security matters, many would simultaneously reduce reliance on Washington as their sole security guarantor, expanding partnerships and cautiously engaging Iran to mitigate tensions. This emerging order reflects a transition from rigid alliance structures to more flexible, temporary interest-based alignments.¹¹

Within this framework, U.S. partners can be differentiated by the degree of alignment and strategic autonomy they exhibit. First, a set of trusted partners such as Kuwait and Bahrain would likely maintain strong security alignment and continued reliance on U.S. protection, while Jordan would remain a critical, albeit pragmatic, partner, particularly in the security domain. Second, a group of more diversified partners, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia would sustain strategic cooperation with Washington while deepening hedging behavior. Qatar would balance its role as a close U.S. partner with its independent mediation agenda and Pakistan would emphasize strategic autonomy, leveraging ties with alternative partners such as China while maintaining selective cooperation with the U.S.

Third, a set of neutral balancers or intermediaries. Oman would continue to play a quiet but pivotal role in mediating between the U.S. and Iran, while Iraq and Lebanon would remain constrained by internal political dynamics and significant Iranian influence, limiting their ability to fully align with U.S. objectives despite continued engagement. Meanwhile, Syria would represent a shifting and contested space, with a potential trajectory toward greater Western influence but outcomes that remain fluid and uncertain.

Across the Gulf, states would broadly prioritize stability and the security of maritime transit, particularly through the SoH, while adopting differentiated strategies to achieve these ends. Some would reinforce existing U.S.-led security frameworks, whereas others would emphasize diplomatic balancing and engagement with multiple actors, including Iran. In the Levant, countries such as Jordan and Lebanon would support de-escalation efforts but remain constrained by persistent security risks and domestic pressures.¹²

This evolving pattern of partnership raises a critical question regarding the material expression of alignment: to what extent does being a reliable U.S. partner translate into a sustained or expanded U.S. military presence and basing footprint within that state?

Access Basing Overflight (ABO)

For decades, the U.S. has relied on an extensive network of forward bases across the Middle East to project power, assure partners, and deter Iran. Recent conflicts, however, have exposed important limitations in this posture, as Iran has demonstrated both the capability and willingness to target these installations directly with missile and drone attacks. Many bases, originally designed for permissive or low-intensity conflict environments, have proven insufficiently hardened against sustained precision strikes, complicating their effectiveness as instruments of deterrence.¹³ At the same time, U.S. efforts to develop and integrate regional air and missile defense architectures have yielded growing successes, improving early warning, interoperability, and high interception rates against Iranian attacks.¹⁴ While these advancements have mitigated some vulnerabilities, they have not eliminated the underlying exposure of fixed infrastructure. Taken together, these developments suggest that the traditional model of

concentrated, forward basing requires adaptation. As U.S. strategic priorities increasingly shift, a more distributed, resilient, and networked posture may be necessary to sustain deterrence and operational effectiveness.

Deter-Iran

A post-deal environment will not obviate the need for a robust USCENTCOM deter-Iran strategy. It will instead change the terms under which deterrence must be maintained. In the wake of the war, Iran's conventional and strategic capabilities are degraded but not destroyed, and Tehran is likely to lean even more heavily on asymmetric tools (missiles, drones, and proxies) to test U.S. resolve and exploit perceived gaps. Under constrained resources and growing pressure to prioritize, USCENTCOM may have to recalibrate deterrence away from large, fixed footprints toward more distributed, survivable, and networked forces, backed by credible response options and tighter integration with regional air and missile defenses.

At the same time, deterrence messaging will need to distinguish clearly between the diplomatic track and the military track, signaling that while the U.S. is prepared to sustain and even deepen a negotiated arrangement, it remains willing and able to impose significant costs if Iran resumes nuclear escalation, attacks U.S. forces, or coerces partners. This approach implies a process of force reorganization, alliance management, and risk-balancing in which USCENTCOM's deter-Iran strategy becomes lighter in presence but more lethal in its ability to respond.

Strategic Competition

Strategic competition will continue to shape USCENTCOM's operating environment. While deterrence and crisis stability with Tehran remain central, U.S. posture in the Middle East will increasingly be judged in the context of broader great-power rivalry, particularly as Russia and China seek to strengthen ties with Iran and expand their regional influence. Recent reporting suggests that Moscow and Beijing may be providing Tehran with varying forms of intelligence, technological support, and diplomatic cover, underscoring that competition in the CENTCOM AOR now extends beyond conventional military balancing to include information, cyber, energy, and industrial capacity.¹⁵ In an environment of constrained U.S. resources and sustained attention to the Indo-Pacific, regional states will continue hedging by diversifying security partnerships and extracting leverage from multiple external patrons.

8. Conclusion

The U.S.-Iran war and the fragile post-deal landscape leave USCENTCOM operating in a fundamentally altered security environment, in which Iran remains a persistent and adaptive challenger and traditional deterrence concepts have only partially constrained its risk-acceptant behavior. Deterrence in this context requires continuous adaptation under conditions shaped by constrained U.S. resources, shifting global priorities, and partners who continuously re-evaluate the reliability and longevity of U.S. security guarantees.

The central task is to define the minimum effective posture required to reassure partners, deter-Iran, and preserve freedom of action. This leads to a set of decision-forcing questions.

First, should the U.S. maintain a persistent, physical headquarters presence in both Qatar and Bahrain in its current form? These command nodes provide continuity, access, and reassurance, while also concentrating risk in fixed locations exposed to missile and, more routinely, drone attacks, and reinforcing political dependencies on host nations. A more distributed command architecture, enabled by reach back to CONUS and supported by mobile and redundant command elements, offers a path toward greater resilience while shaping how presence is perceived by regional partners.

Second, what level and distribution of forward air basing is required? The legacy network of airfields across Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, and other partners has long underpinned U.S. power projection. Recent conflict experience highlights the growing exposure of these installations, particularly to low-cost, widely available drone threats capable of sustained disruption. At the same time, long-range strike, carrier aviation, and rotational deployments provide alternative means of generating combat power. The key decision centers on whether a broad basing network meaningfully enhances resilience, or whether a smaller number of hardened hubs, combined with dispersal concepts and flexible access agreements, can meet operational requirements while reducing cost and vulnerability.

Third, what role should large, forward-stationed land forces play in a campaign defined primarily by naval and air power? The war demonstrated that effects against Iran derive largely from maritime and air capabilities, with land forces contributing enabling, defensive, and partner-capacity functions. This dynamic supports a transition toward rotational presence, prepositioned stocks, and rapid reinforcement models, while raising considerations about response timelines and the signaling value of persistent ground forces.

Across all these choices, integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) remains central to restoring credible deterrence. The scale, affordability, and proliferation of drone systems make them a more frequent and operationally taxing threat than ballistic missiles, even as both remain relevant. USCENTCOM's comparative advantage lies in enabling a regional, networked defense architecture through sustained train, advice, and assist efforts, improving interoperability, early warning, and layered defenses among partners. This approach distributes the burden of defense, strengthens resilience, and reinforces deterrence by denial across the theater. These decisions align with three broad posture options. (See ANNEX A)

One option sustains a modified version of the current posture, preserving key headquarters in Qatar and Bahrain, maintaining a wide air basing network, and retaining a continuous land presence, while expanding base defense and deepening IAMD integration with partners. This approach reinforces reassurance and continuity, while accepting higher costs and persistent exposure.

A second option adopts a distributed and reduced posture, streamlining headquarters functions, consolidating air basing into fewer hardened locations, transitioning ground forces to rotational models, and relying more heavily on partner-enabled IAMD networks. This approach balances deterrence with efficiency and survivability, while increasing reliance on partner capacity and coordination.

A third option moves toward a lean, over-the-horizon posture, minimizing permanent presence, emphasizing naval and long-range airpower, and maintaining access through flexible ABO arrangements, while focusing U.S. efforts on security cooperation and partner capacity building. This approach aligns with global prioritization and resource constraints, while shaping perceptions of U.S. commitment and responsiveness.

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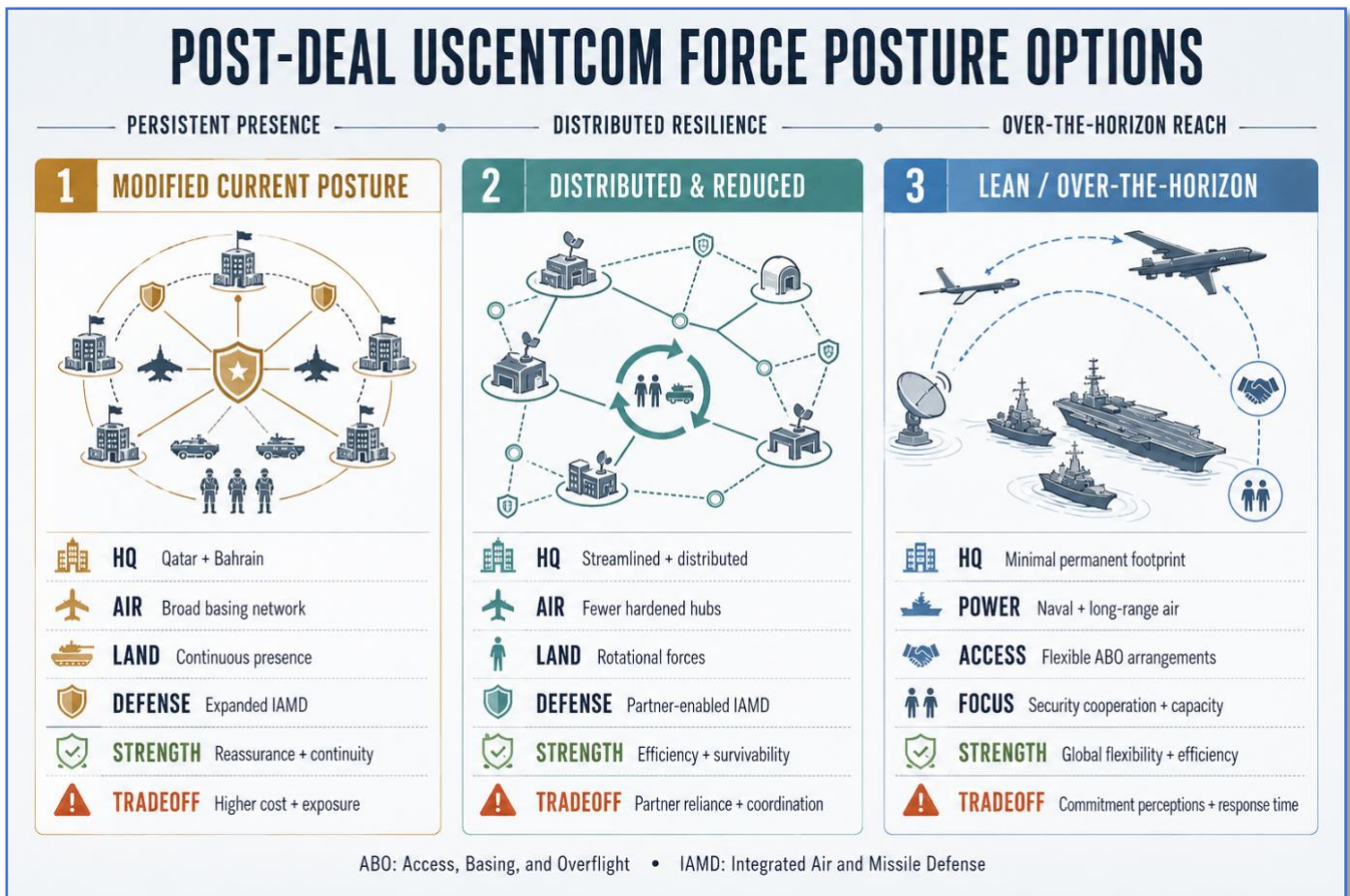
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ANNEX A: Force Posture Options



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