Journal of Military and Strategic Studies

VOLUME 24, ISSUE 3

Journal of Military and Strategic Studies 2025 Award of Excellence[1]

Israel, Qatar, and the Hierarchy of Warning

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[1] Awarded first prize.

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ISSN : 1488-559X

Introduction

It is not normal for people in Qatar to wake up to sirens. The country has no history of interstate war, yet on 9 September 2025, Qatar was attacked by Israel. The offense targeted a residential area surrounded by schools, embassies, and homes. This represents an unprecedented escalation on Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) soil and between two U.S. allies that both fall under U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). Never before had an ally operationalized dozens of American-made jets to bomb another ally's capital that hosts the largest U.S. military base in the region. Had the strike occurred during a broader regional conflict, casualties could have reached catastrophic levels. Given Qatar's role hosting CENTCOM Forward Headquarters and the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Base (which oversees every aerial movement across the Middle East), [2] the failure of timely notification reveals something fundamental about institutional hierarchies within US regional security architecture.

The September 9 attack raises questions that have received limited analytical attention beyond official accounts and media coverage. A systematic examination reveals puzzles that demand explanation: Why did US surveillance systems detect Israeli jets and missiles targeting Doha yet fail to provide an actionable warning to Qatar? Given that SBIRS successfully warned American personnel about Iranian missiles in 2020 and was utilized in June 2025 against an Iranian attack at Al-Udeid Base, how could the same systems fail when Israel struck three months later?

Why did the warning route through a four-layer political chain (Military to Trump to Special Envoy to Qatar) rather than direct military channels? Was this standard crisis response procedure, or did it reflect differential treatment based on adversary identity? Qatar received notification ten minutes after impact, with officials confirming "the communication received from one of the US officials came during the sound of explosions."[3]

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[2] Chris Gordon, "Inside the Caoc," *Air & Space Forces Magazine*, 28 March 2024, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/inside-the-caoc/.

[3] Tal Shalev et al., "Israel Targets Hamas Leadership in Qatar Strike," *CNN*, 9 September 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-qatar-attack-09-09-25.

What explains the divergence between the Iranian and Israeli cases? When Iran attacked CENTCOM facilities in 2020 and 2025, operators described "just a simple phone call" that enabled personnel to shelter before impact.[4] When Israel attacked, the warning filtered through political nodes. Did technical limitations constrain notification, or did institutional priorities override partnership obligations?

What are the *lessons* of September 9? What does this event teach us about alliance hierarchies, warning dissemination protocols, and the operational meaning of partnership when American and Israeli interests diverge from those of other regional partners? The available evidence (open-source intelligence, official military statements, defence procurement documents, and statutory law) provides substantial material for systematic analysis. This study takes full advantage of unclassified materials, SBIRS operational descriptions from Space Force commanders, comparative timeline reconstruction across the 2020, June 2025, and September 2025 cases, and policy frameworks, including the Qualitative Military Edge statute and Leahy Law implementation procedures.

But the central premise of this study is that satisfactory answers to these questions will require more than additional information and forensic timeline reconstruction. Real improvement in our understanding depends on greater awareness of what we bring to the analysis. When answering "Why did the warning fail?" what we see and judge to be important depends not only on the evidence available but also on the conceptual lenses through which we look at that evidence. Dominant explanations attribute the failure to technical malfunction or bureaucratic inefficiency (frameworks that obscure more than they reveal). A primary purpose of this study is to explore the fundamental yet often unnoticed policy hierarchies that channel warning dissemination in US regional security partnerships.

[4] Nathan Strout, "Exclusive: How the Space Force Foiled an Iranian Missile Attack with a Critical Early Warning," *C4ISRNet*, 13 January 2021.

More rigorously, the argument can be summarized in three propositions:

1. Warning failures in alliance systems are typically explained through largely implicit models focused on either technical capability or bureaucratic complexity. In thinking about problems like September 9, analysts proceed by examining sensor performance, communication protocols, and organizational procedures. Yet careful examination reveals that these explanations share a common assumption: that partnership obligations apply uniformly and that warning failures result from capacity limitations rather than policy design.

2. Most analysts explain September 9 in terms of operational surprise or bureaucratic latency, assuming that detection systems were focused elsewhere or that complex command structures inherently delay notification. Lt. Gen. France's statement that systems were "focused on Iran" and the attack came "from a source we weren't expecting" exemplifies this approach.[5] The four-layer notification chain appears to validate bureaucratic complexity as an explanation.

3. An alternative model, focused on institutional hierarchy formalized through statutory requirements (particularly the Qualitative Military Edge doctrine), provides superior explanatory power for the pattern of detection without dissemination. According to this framework, September 9 exposed not random failure but policy design that privileges Israeli operational freedom over partnership notification obligations, operationalized through dissemination protocols that vary systematically by adversary identity.

To resolve this puzzle, the analysis proceeds in layers. The methodology section explains the study's investigative research design, combining process tracing, discourse analysis, and structured comparative analysis. Section 1 traces how GCC collective defense failures and CENTCOM's integration of Israeli and Arab forces created the institutional context of bilateral US dependencies, then details the IFF and SBIRS detection capabilities that enable theatre-wide surveillance. Section 2 reconstructs the September 9 timeline with forensic precision, comparing system performance against

[5] Thomas Newdick et al., "New Info on How U.s. Military Was Caught off Guard by Israeli Strike on Qatar," *The War Zone*. 24 September 2025. https://www.twz.com/air/new-info-on-how-u-s-military-was-caught-off-guard-by-israeli-strike-on-qatar.

Iran's 2020 and June 2025 attacks to test whether the failure reflects technical limitations or institutional choices. Section 3 analyzes Qualitative Military Edge (QME) policy mechanisms that translate statutory requirements for Israeli superiority into operational asymmetries, including F-35 sovereignty restrictions and Leahy Law selective enforcement. The conclusion addresses implications for GCC defence planning and partnership protocols.

The paper's central contention is straightforward: September 9 exposed not a technical malfunction but an institutional hierarchy embedded in US regional security architecture through decades of policy choices (formalized through QME doctrine, operationalized through CENTCOM command structures, and enforced through technology dependencies) that privilege one partner's freedom of action over another partner's sovereign security. Understanding why requires examining not just what the technology can do, but who controls when and whether that capability serves partnership obligations or defers to other priorities.

Methodology

Research Design and Logic of Inquiry

This study adopts a qualitative case study design centred on the 9 September 2025, Israeli airstrike on Qatar as a critical event: a moment where U.S. surveillance systems functioned technically but failed politically, thereby revealing structural hierarchies embedded within US security architecture. Following Maynard's (2022) investigative research design, the analysis employs a "causes-of-effects" approach to reconstruct how institutional mechanisms, rather than technical deficiencies, produced dissemination failure despite operational detection capabilities. [6] Methodologically, the research triangulates three complementary approaches: process tracing to establish causal sequences, discourse analysis to expose gaps between stated and delivered capabilities and structured comparison to demonstrate selective institutional responsiveness. The resulting narrative is forensic rather than experimental, reconstructing how and why functioning surveillance networks produced a political failure of protection.

[6] Jonathan Leader Maynard, *Ideology and Mass Killing*, Oxford University Press, 2022, p. 24.

Process Tracing: Reconstructing Institutional Pathways

Process tracing maps the detection-to-dissemination chain to identify where institutional delays emerged and to differentiate technical malfunction from bureaucratic filtration. The method proceeds through three analytical stages. Historical reconstruction traces how GCC defence dependency evolved from British withdrawal (1971) through GCC formation (1981) to contemporary bilateral US arrangements, establishing the institutional context within which 9 September occurred. Timeline analysis reconstructs the sequence of events: SBIRS infrared detection, CENTCOM awareness, White House notification, Special Envoy relay, and Qatari receipt (10 minutes post-impact). This granular sequencing enables precise identification of delay nodes. Mechanism identification documents the specific institutional pathway through which warning information travelled, revealing a four-hop political chain (CENTCOM to Trump to Witkoff to Qatar) rather than direct military-to-military notification protocols used in Iranian cases.

This analysis employs Bayesian process tracing to weigh competing explanations probabilistically. Rather than simply showing that the institutional hierarchy hypothesis fits the evidence, it tests how diagnostic each observation is for or against that hypothesis. Detection success functions as a hoop test (a necessary condition—systems must detect for the institutional explanation to remain viable). Comparative congruence across the Iran and Qatar cases provides inferential leverage, showing how similar technical systems produced divergent dissemination patterns in relation to political sensitivity.

Evidential logic: By establishing that detection occurred successfully but notification lagged catastrophically, process tracing rules out technical explanations and isolates institutional filtering as the operative mechanism.

Discourse Analysis: Capability Claims vs. Operational Performance

Discourse analysis examines how capabilities are represented in official statements, procurement documents, and policy frameworks, then systematically compares these representations against operational outcomes. This method reveals what I term the "rhetoric-reality gap" in US security partnerships.

Textual corpus: The analysis draws on U.S. military briefings (Space Force commanders, AFCENT leadership), defence contractor statements (Raytheon, Lockheed Martin procurement documents), statutory law (QME doctrine, Leahy Laws), and executive policy (29 September 2025, U.S.-Qatar security agreement).

Inductive coding identifies recurring themes: *exquisite systems*, *global persistent coverage*, *rapid warning*, *force protection*, and "the advantage of being comfortable that we will not have a surprise attack." These phrases establish normative expectations for system performance.

Gap analysis When officials claim SBIRS can detect launches within seconds and enables commanders to *notify troops to get under barriers*, yet Qatar receives notification only after missiles detonate, the failure cannot be attributed to sensor limitations. The discourse-performance gap points to unequal norms of protection within US defense policy: an institutional hierarchy determining which allies receive timely early warning based on political calculus rather than technical capability.

Comparative Analysis: Isolating the Causal Variable

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Missile Warning Proformance

Case	Date	Adversary	Target	SBIRS Detection	Warning Delivery	Outcome
Iran to Al-Assad	Jan 8, 2020	Iran	U.S. forces (Iraq)	Successful	Approx. 6 min; direct military channels	Zero casualties; personnel sheltered
Iran to Al-Udeid	Jun 23, 2025	Iran	U.S. forces + Qatar	Successful	Advance notice; direct military channels	Zero casualties; successful intercept
Israel to Doha	**Sep 9, 2025**	**Israel**	**Qatar (U.S. ally)**	**Successful**	**10 minutes AFTER impact; four-hop political chain**	**Casualties; no intercept**

Structured comparison holds technical systems constant while varying the institutional context across three missile incidents: the same SBIRS constellation, operated by the same 2nd Space Warning Squadron, performed reliably when defending US assets from Iranian threats, yet failed to generate a timely warning when Israel struck a US ally. This pattern indicates the bottleneck was political and institutional rather than mechanical. The comparative method identifies institutional hierarchy as the primary causal variable: a hierarchy embedded in US security architecture, formalized through QME doctrine and operationalized through dissemination protocols that privilege Israeli operational freedom.

Data Sources and Triangulation

The study relies on open-source intelligence (OSINT) triangulated across multiple independent source categories: (a) Primary materials – official US government statements, defense procurement contracts, statutory law, executive orders, and press briefings; (b) Technical documentation – defense-contractor specifications and system capability descriptions that clarify operational architecture; (c) Secondary analysis – think-tank assessments (e.g., CSIS, Brookings, INSS), peer-reviewed scholarship, and investigative defense journalism (e.g., The War Zone, The Wall Street Journal, C4ISRNET, Reuters, Al Jazeera, Al-Monitor). Cross-verifying claims across these distinct reporting chains ensures source independence and mitigates the limitations inherent in OSINT-based research. Credibility was assessed by outlet reputation, traceable sourcing, and consistency with official data where available.

Causal Inference Strategy

The analysis proceeds inductively, coding texts for references to capability, dissemination protocols, and hierarchical arrangements to uncover mechanisms by which statutory design (QME doctrine) translates into operational asymmetry (selective warning dissemination). By demonstrating that (1) detection capabilities functioned as designed (process tracing), (2) official rhetoric promised comprehensive protection (discourse analysis), and (3) warning delivery varied systematically by adversary identity (comparative analysis), the study establishes that September 9th exposed not random failure but institutionally patterned hierarchy: a replicable framework for investigating selective responsiveness in alliance systems.

Section 1: Background: The Architecture of Dependency

Why does Qatar depend on American surveillance systems for early warning despite investing billions in sovereign capabilities? How did a region that once imagined collective defence against external threats come to rely so completely on a distant superpower's command-and-control infrastructure? The answer lies not in ancient sectarian hatred or cultural deficiencies (dominant narratives that obscure more than they reveal) but in decades of institutional choices that transformed Gulf security from collective defence into bilateral dependence on Washington. This dependency was not inevitable. It was constructed through specific historical moments when alternative pathways were foreclosed, when regional integration faltered, and when the United States positioned itself as the indispensable arbiter of Gulf security.

The story begins with abandonment. British withdrawal from *East of Suez* in 1971 shocked Gulf monarchies that had relied on British protection for over a century.[7] The sheikhdoms found themselves exposed precisely when regional threats intensified. The 1979 Iranian Revolution introduced a revolutionary regime explicitly hostile to monarchies. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that same year raised fears of ideological contagion spreading southward into the Gulf. For Gulf rulers, these twin crises revived alarming memories of the 1950s through 1970s, when Marxist-Leninist movements had directly threatened their rule. The Dhofar rebellion in Oman (1963-1976), backed by Soviet-aligned South Yemen and China, had explicitly aimed to liberate "all of the Gulf from British imperialism" and inspire communist uprisings throughout the peninsula.[8]

In Saudi Arabia itself, leftist and nationalist movements in the 1950s and 1960s had mobilized workers, intellectuals, and even members of the ruling family, threatening to transform the kingdom into a constitutional monarchy with popular participation.[9] The United States and Aramco intervened decisively in the daily management of everyday political, social, and cultural life in Arabia to crush these progressive movements, supporting Crown Prince Faisal's consolidation of an authoritarian, religiously conservative monarchy over his more politically ambivalent brother King Saud. As

[7] Roger Louis, 2003, *"The British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967-71,"* p. 87-89.

[8] Abdel Razzaq Takriti, *Monsoon Revolution: Republicans, Sultans, and Empires in Oman*, 1965-1976, Oxford Historical Monographs (Oxford, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 26 September. 2013).

[9] Rosie Bsheer, *"A Counter-Revolutionary State: Popular Movements And The Making Of Saudi Arabia,"* p. 266-268.

scholar Rosie Bsheer argues, "it is imperialism writ large, and the need to crush leftist radicalism and reinforce political Islam in the war against the Soviet Union, that better captures the US-Saudi relationship."[10] Though these secular leftist movements had been defeated by the mid-1970s, the spectre of Soviet-backed ideological contagion spreading from Afghanistan southward in 1979 prompted the creation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. A defensive alliance born from decades of monarchical anxiety about both external and internal revolutionary threats.

Iraq's invasion of Iran in September 1980 unleashed the devastating Iran-Iraq War, placing Gulf monarchies directly at risk of spillover conflict. The *Tanker War* exposed the fragility of the region's oil infrastructure, as tankers and shipping lanes came under repeated assault. It was in this climate of insecurity that the GCC was founded in Abu Dhabi in May 1981. For Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman, the GCC's creation was a bid to coordinate security and defence against Soviet expansion, Iranian revolution, and Iraqi adventurism. Among its immediate goals was the establishment of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), conceived as a NATO-like organization to enhance the monarchies' standing as a bloc in regional and international security. What could have become a genuine collective defence mechanism instead became a hollow symbol, revealing more about Gulf political dysfunction than about shared strategic purpose.

Why did PSF remain skeletal? The answer illuminates the structural weaknesses that would later make American dominance inevitable. Contributions remained voluntary and uneven; force levels and composition were left to each state's discretion. Basing and leadership questions proved politically sensitive, with Saudi Arabia's natural primacy generating persistent concerns among smaller members.[11] Until 2000, there was no comprehensive, public, written document fixing manpower and responsibilities; even after that, operationalizing jointness proved hard.[12] Most critically, the United States served as the credible guarantor, creating incentives to treat PSF as a backstop to American power rather than the backbone of Gulf defence. When crises erupted, the

[10] Bsheer, *"A Counter-Revolutionary State,"* p. 276-277.

[11] James Bowden, "*Keeping It Together: A Historical Approach to Resolving Stresses and Strains Within the Peninsula Shield Force*." p. 140.

[12] James Bowden, *"Keeping It Together,"* p. 141.

pattern repeated: PSF deployments during the 1990-1991 Kuwait crisis and 2003 Iraq war were minimal compared to US-led coalitions. The clearest activation came in Bahrain in 2011, when roughly a tenth of the force deployed to secure state infrastructure during unrest; Kuwait sent ships, Oman abstained, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE provided the bulk of ground units.[13] When members later chose to fight in Yemen, they did so through ad-hoc national coalitions rather than under the PSF flag. The Peninsula Shield story is not an anomaly; it reflects a structural pattern that would prove consequential.

Over the past three decades, Gulf states invested heavily in two layers of defence while neglecting the third. At Tier 1, individual militaries modernized platforms and doctrine. At Tier 3, defence agreements with the United States created frameworks for prepositioning, access, and combined exercises. But Tier 2 (regional partnership, the integrated GCC layer) remained persistently weak. When crises hit, members helped one another bilaterally or in ad-hoc coalitions rather than through a unified GCC mechanism. This hollow middle created a vacuum that only one actor could fill.

Then the Arab Spring shattered whatever remained of GCC cohesion. The divergent responses to the 2011 upheavals exposed fundamentally different threat perceptions that had been papered over but never resolved. Qatar embraced the political transformations sweeping the region, supporting movements aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood and viewing them as legitimate expressions of popular will. Saudi Arabia and the UAE, by contrast, emerged as a counter-revolutionary coalition, viewing these same movements as existential threats to monarchical stability.[14] This was not merely a policy disagreement; it represented irreconcilable visions of regional order.

These tensions culminated in the 2017 Qatar Crisis, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt imposed a comprehensive blockade on Qatar, demanding it sever ties with Turkey and Iran, shut down Al Jazeera, and fundamentally alter its foreign policy. The pressure campaign targeted Qatar's young Emir Sheikh Tamim within weeks of his accession, "a power play designed to force him into a geopolitical straitjacket that would end, once and for all, Qatar's autonomous approach to regional affairs." [15] The

[13] James Bowden, *"Keeping It Together,"* p. 140.

[14] Kristian Ulrichsen, "*Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience*," New York: Oxford University Press, 2020, p. 44.

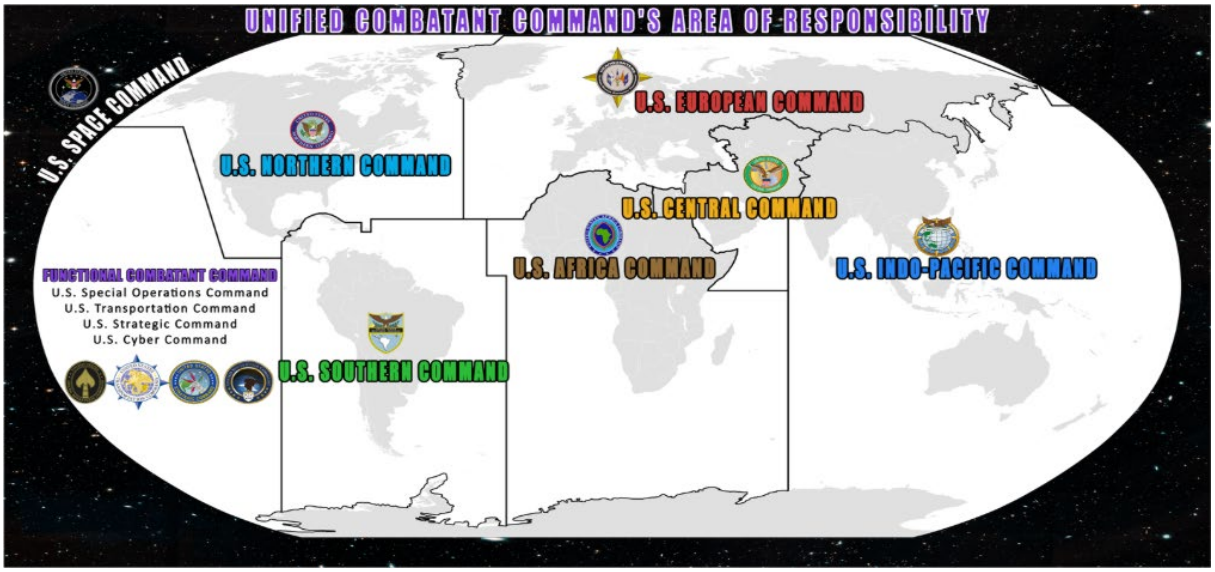
[15] Ulrichsen, "*Qatar and the Gulf Crisis,"*p. 45.

implications extended well beyond Doha. Kuwait and Oman were acutely aware that they, too, would inevitably undergo leadership successions when their aging rulers passed away.[16] Both states recognized that during these vulnerable transitions, they could face the same coercive pressure to submit and give up their autonomy. Gerald Feierstein, former deputy assistant secretary of state for Near East policy during the Obama administration, captured the existential stakes: "The bottom line for us is, we have to come out of all this with a consensus on combating terror finance and not blowing the GCC to smithereens." Warning against Saudi and Emirati attempts to force Qatar into their orbit, he noted that "everyone in the region is looking over their shoulder and thinking, 'This is potentially us.'"[17]

The crisis laid bare what the Peninsula Shield's history had already suggested: genuine collective defence required political consensus that no longer existed. Member states refused to operate under Saudi-UAE leadership, viewing it as hegemonic overreach. Threat assessments diverged fundamentally. What one state saw as stabilization, another viewed as aggression. Burden-sharing remained voluntary and therefore inconsistent, with contributions fluctuating based on narrow national interests rather than collective obligations. These failures produced a defence architecture with a critical vulnerability: strong national forces connected to robust American partnerships, but lacking the regional connective tissue to operate independently. American command-and-control systems became the de facto backbone of Gulf air and missile defence, not through strategic planning, but through regional inability to create alternatives. Without the political will for regional integration, bilateral dependence on Washington became the path of least resistance.

[16] Ulrichsen, :*Qatar and the Gulf Crisis,"* p. 55.
[17] Kristian Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis: A Study of Resilience*, pp. 88-89.

Figure 2: Unified Combatant Command's Area of Responsibility



Source: Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unified_combatant_command

How did this American-centric architecture take shape? While the political fractures described above unfolded over decades, the United States had already begun constructing the technical architecture that would make GCC dependency permanent. The transformation occurred in two phases. First, the establishment of coordination mechanisms positioned the United States as the central node in Gulf defence planning. Second, massive procurement deals that locked individual GCC states into American platforms, creating technological dependencies that reinforced political ones.

The United States organizes its global military responsibilities through a system of geographic combatant commands, each overseeing a specific region of the world. CENTCOM, established in 1983 following the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic Revolution in Iran, oversees the Middle East with headquarters at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.[18] Israel was deliberately excluded from CENTCOM's area of responsibility and remained under U.S. European Command (EUCOM). Pentagon planners determined that keeping Israel within EUCOM would be "more effective and

[18] John Morrissey, "*The Long War: CENTCOM, Grand Strategy, and Global Security,*" Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017, p. 1-2.

credible in dealing with other Arab and Muslim states."[19] A significant shift occurred in January 2021, when the Pentagon reassigned Israel from EUCOM to CENTCOM following the Abraham Accords.[20]

Previously kept under EUCOM to avoid friction with Arab states, Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM became politically feasible after the Abraham Accords normalized relations with several Gulf countries. The reassignment was presented as broadening the parameters of U.S., Gulf and Israel strategic cooperation and establishing mechanisms to constrain regional conflicts, much as NATO has managed tensions between Greece and Turkey. The reassignment streamlined US regional strategy, enabled closer Arab-Israeli military cooperation, and symbolized Israel's full integration into the Middle East's defence architecture under US leadership. Both Israel and Arab states (e.g. the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan) now operate under the same American-led regional command structure.

In November 2021, the first joint military exercises between the UAE, Bahrain, Israel, and the United States occurred under US Navy auspices in the Red Sea.[21] The Washington Post detailed the creation of what the US military describes as the "Regional Security Construct."[22] Proposals for integrated regional architectures, such as the Middle East Air Defense alliance (MEAD), have been floated at the highest government levels.[23] Col. Joe Buccino, a Central Command spokesman, said the command "maintains a firm commitment to increasing regional cooperation and developing an integrated air and missile defence architecture to protect our force and our regional partners."[24]

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[19] Assaf Orion, and Udi Dekel, "*Winds of Change: Israel Joins the US Central Command Area,"* Institute for National Security Studies, 2021, p. 2.

[20] Orion and Dekel, "*Winds of Change,"* p. 1.

[21] Reuters, "*UAE, Bahrain, Israel and U.S. Forces in First Joint Naval Drill*," 11 November 2021.

[22] David Kenner, "Arab States Expanded Cooperation with Israeli Military during Gaza War, Files Show," *The Washington Post*, 11 October 2025, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/10/11/us-israel-arab-military-leaked-documents/.

[23] Omar Rahman, "*Five Reasons Why the Abraham Accords Are Ceding Ground to Arab-Iranian De-escalation*" (Houston: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, 11 July 2023), https://doi.org/10.25613/7P0A-RC52.

[24] Michael R Gordon and David S Cloud, "Exclusive | U.S. Held Secret Meeting with Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat," *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2022, https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink.

Within this U.S.-centric Gulf defence framework, individual GCC states made substantial investments in integrated air and missile defence systems, often through contracts with major U.S. defence contractors. The Bush Administration established the Gulf Security Dialogue in May 2006 as the principal security coordination mechanism between the United States and the six GCC countries.[25] Qatar's procurement pattern exemplifies this trend and serves as a revealing case study. Despite the Gulf Security Dialogue's establishment in 2006, Qatar did not immediately acquire its own sovereign air defence capabilities. For years, Qatar relied on US-deployed Patriot batteries that primarily protected American forces at Al Udeid Air Base.[26] It was not until 2014 that Qatar committed to building an independent, integrated air defence architecture.

The timing of Qatar's belated investment in sovereign air defence capabilities is revealing. By 2014, the political tensions that would erupt into the 2017 blockade were already simmering. Qatar's decision to finally build an independent, integrated air defence architecture reflected growing awareness that American protection might not extend to intra-GCC conflicts. Doha might need to defend itself against threats from fellow Council members rather than external adversaries. Yet even this attempt at independence remained tethered to American contractors and American technology, a pattern that would prove consequential.

Beginning in 2014, Qatar embarked on a massive modernization of its air defence capabilities, announcing a major Armed Forces Modernization effort with the U.S. component valued at approximately $11 billion.[27] Raytheon Corporation received a $2.4 billion contract for Patriot Air and Missile Defense System fire units,[28] followed by a $75.6 million contract to design and build Qatar's Air and Missile Defense Operation Center (ADOC).[29] The ADOC was engineered to synthesize inputs from Patriot surface-to-air

[25] Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, *The Gulf Security Dialogue and Related Arms Sale Proposals*, Congressional Research Service Report RL34322, 9 May 2008, p. 2.
[26] John Pike, "Qatar Emiri Air Force (QEAF) Air and Missile Defense," *Globalsecurity.org*, accessed October 22, 2025, https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/gulf/qatar-air-force-bmd.htm.
[27] News Desk, "Raytheon Bags $2.4 Billion to Supply Qatar with Patriot Air Defense Systems - Defense Update," *Military Technology & Defense News*, 22 December 2014, https://defense-update.com/20141222_qatari_patriots.html.
[28] News Desk, "Raytheon Bags $2.4 Billion to Supply Qatar with Patriot Air Defense Systems."
[29] Raytheon Company, "Raytheon Awarded Contract to Provide the State of Qatar with Advanced Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) Command and Control System," *PR Newswire*, 1 December 2014.

missile batteries, long-range radars, and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, creating what Raytheon vice president Dave Gulla described as having "the latest command and control, cyber, and information assurance capability."[30] In 2021, Qatar added another $1.06 billion investment in advanced Early Warning Radar infrastructure (EWR), also contracted to Raytheon. Maj. Jared Eros emphasized that this radar system "will better protect Qatar's people, culture and infrastructure against current and future medium- and long-range ballistic missile threats."[31] Collectively, Qatar invested over $3.5 billion ($2.4B Patriot + $1.1B EWR) in what officials characterized as "state-of-the-art" air defence capabilities.[32]

These procurement deals created technological dependencies that reinforced political ones. Yet the systems themselves remained technically capable. Central to CENTCOM's surveillance architecture is the Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) system, an electronic protocol whose origins trace back to a tragic lesson from World War II. In September 1939, British anti-aircraft guns nearly shot down their own bombers returning from Hamburg because they could not distinguish friendly aircraft from enemy raiders.[33] After similar incidents cost dozens of Allied lives (including gliders shot down by their own forces during the Sicily invasion), the British and Americans developed IFF as a matter of survival. Today, IFF remains the backbone of coalition air operations, adopted by the US and NATO.

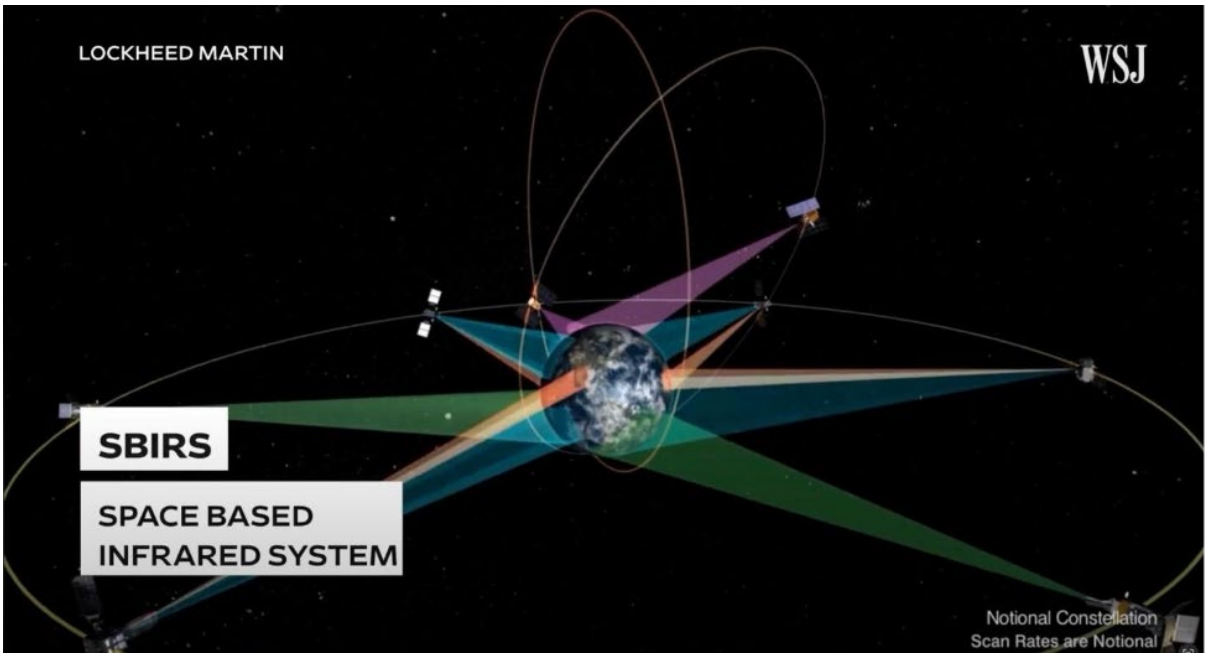
[30] Raytheon Company, "Raytheon Awarded Contract."

[31] Benjamin Newell, "Hanscom Awards $1 Billion for Qatar's New Radar," *Wright-Patterson AFB*, March 15, 2017, https://www.wpafb.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/1114608/hanscom-awards-1-billion-for-qatars-new-radar/.

[32] White House, *"Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Secures Historic $1.2 Trillion Economic Commitment in Qatar,"* Washington, DC: The White House, 14 May 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/05/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-secures-historic-1-2-trillion-economic-commitment-in-qatar/.

[33] Bowden, *"The Story of IFF (Identification Friend or Foe),"* p. 435.

Figure 3: Space based infrared system



Source: Wall Street Journal, "How U.S. Space Capablities Help Troops in the Middle East," Youtube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbcy5vekAH8. Image: Lockeed Martin.

In CENTCOM's AOR, IFF enables real-time identification of all aircraft operating in the theatre. When aircraft fly within the region, ground-based radars, AWACS aircraft, or naval vessels send encrypted interrogation signals.[34] Allied aircraft equipped with IFF transponders automatically respond with coded identification, confirming their identity, position, altitude, and flight status. These responses rely on daily-updated cryptographic codes: if the aircraft transmits the correct encrypted reply, CENTCOM systems mark it as "friendly"; if the code is absent, incorrect, or outdated, the aircraft is flagged as "unknown" or potentially hostile. For US-supplied F-35s, F-16s, or other advanced platforms operating in the Middle East, keeping IFF transponders active is not optional. It is the electronic passport that permits safe passage through monitored airspace and prevents interception by allied air defence systems.

[34] James Miller, "IFF and Mode 5: Past Present and Future," *Telinstrument.com*, accessed October 24, 2025, https://www.telinstrument.com/avionics-news/industry-articles/101-iff-and-mode-5-past-present-and-future.html.

Beyond aircraft tracking, the US Space Force's Space-Based Infrared System (SBIRS) provides an independent detection layer. This constellation of satellites maintains continuous surveillance over CENTCOM's area of responsibility through sensors in both geosynchronous and highly elliptical orbits,[35] detecting ballistic missile launches globally by monitoring infrared signatures.[36] SBIRS serves four discrete missions within CENTCOM operations: strategic missile warning to national command authorities, cueing missile defence assets to incoming threats, technical intelligence collection on foreign missile capabilities, and battlespace awareness for force protection.[37] Colonel Dan Walter, senior materiel leader for Strategic Missile Warning, described this fourth mission as allowing combatant commanders to "notify their troops to get under barriers and other things in order to protect themselves" when missiles are inbound.[38]

The system's operational effectiveness has been demonstrated repeatedly in theater. In January 2020, Iran launched ballistic missiles at Al-Assad Air Base in Iraq. Colonel Walter confirmed that "because SBIRS picked it up and was able to notify the combatant commander, our troops were able to get into bunkers and protect themselves. As a result, U.S. service members and our allies were able to make it home to their families."[39] Masao Dahlgren, fellow at the missile defense project at CSIS, emphasized that SBIRS "can provide an estimation of where the missiles might land, which can be hugely valuable for mitigating casualties."[40] The constellation that protected American personnel from Iranian missiles in 2020 remained operational and monitoring CENTCOM's theatre in 2025.

This architecture (GCC dependency on American systems, CENTCOM integration of Israeli and Arab forces, IFF and SBIRS providing theatre-wide surveillance) created the

[35] Shelby Holliday , "The U.S. Is Racing to Multiply Its Missile Warning Satellites as China and Russia Threats Grow | WSJ," *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 January 2024), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hbcy5vekAH8.
[36] Nathan Strout, "Exclusive: How the Space Force Foiled an Iranian Missile Attack with a Critical Early Warning," *C4ISRNET*, 22 January 2021, https://www.c4isrnet.com/battlefield-tech/space/2021/01/07/exclusive-how-the-space-force-foiled-an-iranian-missile-attack-with-a-critical-early-warning/.
[37] Space Systems Command, "SSC's SBIRS Constellation Provides the Space Sensing and Missile Warning Capabilities Needed NOW," *YouTube*, 28 September 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-xt8dwW4cgY.
[38] Space Systems Command, "SSC's SBIRS Constellation Provides the Space Sensing and Missile Warning."
[39] Spcae Systems Command, "SSC's SBIRS Constellation Provides the Space Sensing and Missile Warning."
[40] Holliday, "The U.S. Is Racing to Multiply Its Missile Warning Satellites."

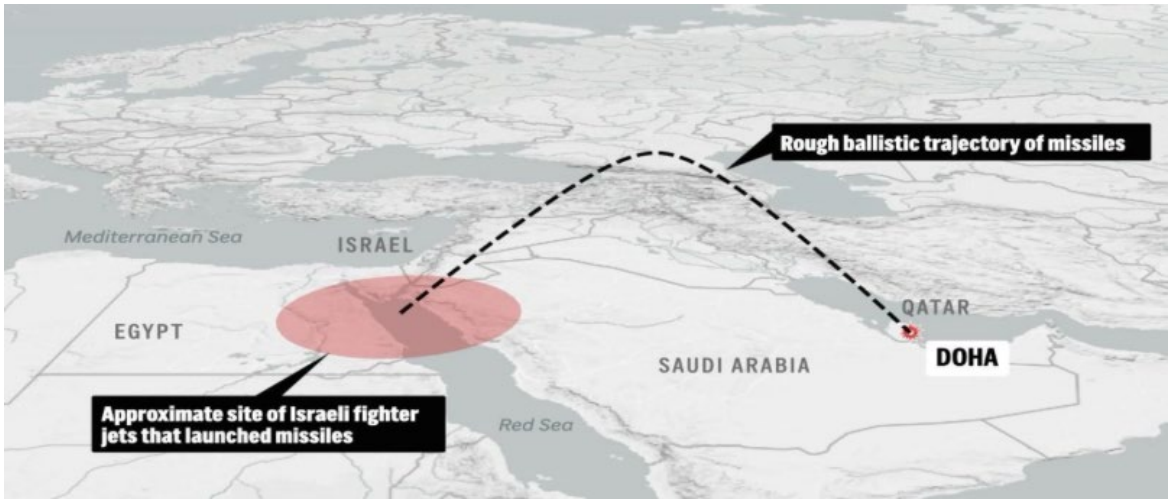
institutional context within which September 9th unfolded. The question becomes: when these same systems confronted an Israeli strike on Qatar, why did detection occur but warning fail? The answer lies not in technical malfunction but in institutional hierarchy, in policy choices embedded decades earlier, in a security architecture explicitly designed to privilege certain partners over others. Understanding September 9th requires examining not just what the technology can do, but who controls when and whether that capability serves partnership obligations or defers to other priorities.

Section 2: September 9th Timeline

Detection Without Dissemination

Why did US surveillance systems detect Israeli jets and missiles targeting Doha yet fail to deliver a timely warning to Qatar? How can the same SBIRS constellation that protected American personnel from Iranian missiles in 2020 fail to generate actionable alerts for a key ally in 2025? The answer lies not in sensor malfunction or geographic blind spots but in institutional priorities embedded within CENTCOM's command structure. Understanding September 9th requires reconstructing the timeline with forensic precision, then comparing it against cases where the same systems performed as designed.

Figure 4: Israeli ballistic missile trajectory.



Source: Associated Press. "Diagarm showing Israeli ballistic missile trajectory in attack on Doha, Qatar, September 9, 2025." September 2025. https://apnews.com/article/israel-ballistic-missiles-red-sea-qatar-hamas-f630735dd4647ff722c6f90d0d5a83a7

Open-source and US official reporting indicate eight F-15s and four F-35s flew to the Red Sea, on the opposite side of the Arabian Peninsula from Qatar. From there, some of the planes fired the air-launched ballistic missiles into space over Saudi Arabia at Doha.[41] The ballistic attack was launched "over the horizon,"[42] a tactic that allowed Israel to conduct the strike from outside Qatar's airspace and keep the projectiles beyond the coverage of Gulf air defense systems.[43] The attack trajectory, from West to East, "wasn't something that we expected… our surveillance – and all our attention – was not put on something [like] that," stated Lt. Gen. Derek France.[44] Another senior US defense official, called the operation "absolutely unimaginable."[45] This geometry plausibly contributed to non-interception by Patriot or THAAD. Yet it does not address the separate question of timely early warning to a host nation that co-locates the CAOC and US forward headquarters. The failure to warn reveals something more fundamental than tactical surprise.

Space-Based Detection and the Contradiction

Space-based infrared sensors monitor for heat signatures associated with missile launches. The system is designed to detect, classify, and characterize trajectories independent of analyst expectations. Public remarks after the attack reveal a critical distinction between detection capability and operational response. Lt. Gen. Derek France, commander of AFCENT, acknowledged that US systems detected the attack but characterized this as reactive rather than anticipatory. "Our systems were the first indication that we had," France stated, clarifying that "our surveillance and all our attention was not put on [it]. It wasn't something that we expected."[46] France explained

[41] Shelby Holliday et al., "Exclusive: How Israel Used Ballistic Missiles from the Red Sea to Carry out Its Audacious Qatar Attack," *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 September 2025, https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/how-israels-audacious-qatar-strike-left-trump-little-time-to-object-c2369608.

[42] launching the ballistic missile into space before re-entry.

[43] Kaif Shaikh, "How Israel's Missile Strike on Qatar Bypassed US and Gulf Defenses," *Interesting Engineering*, 18 September 2025, https://interestingengineering.com/military/israeli-jets-red-sea-ballistic-missiles.

[44] Jared Szuba, "Pentagon Had No Warning Israel Planned to Strike Qatar, US General Says," *AL-Monitor,* September 25, 2025, https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/09/pentagon-had-no-warning-israel-planned-strike-qatar-us-general-says.

[45] Holliday et al., "Exclusive: How Israel Used Ballistic Missiles from the Red Sea."

[46] Nedwick et al., "New Info on How U.S. Military Was Caught off Guard."

that "while we have exquisite systems and things that can detect a lot of different things, those things are typically focused on Iran and other things where we expect an attack to come from." The attack arrived "from a source and a direction that we weren't expecting," France noted, adding that "the sensing capability is there. It's not so much a direction kind of thing. It's what we were overall expecting to happen."[47]

This characterization merits careful analysis. France's statements acknowledge comprehensive detection capability while attributing a delayed response to operational prioritization. Yet this explanation contradicts the architecture of the systems themselves. IFF operates through continuous interrogation protocols independent of directional focusing. SBIRS maintains persistent infrared surveillance through automated constellation monitoring. These systems generate tracking data regardless of whether analysts expect activity from particular sources. Colonel Walter emphasized that SBIRS enables commanders to notify troops of inbound missiles, citing the system's successful performance during Iran's 2020 strike on Al-Assad Air Base.[48] Dr. Patrick Binning described SBIRS as providing "the advantage of being comfortable that we will not have a surprise attack."[49] These sensors collect and classify based on infrared signatures and kinematics, not analyst expectation; prioritization enters after machine detection. The satellites detect infrared signatures according to physical phenomena, not analyst predictions.

The available evidence suggests that detection occurred through automated systems as designed, but the intelligence was not processed or disseminated as an actionable warning. Lt. Gen. France's acknowledgment that "our systems were the first indication" confirms that technical collection succeeded. The failure appears to have occurred at the analysis and dissemination stages, where raw detection data must be interpreted, prioritized, and transmitted to partner nations. This is where institutional hierarchy enters the chain.

The communication chain that followed detection illuminates institutional rather than technical failure. According to official accounts, CENTCOM systems detected the

[47] Newdick t al., “New Info on How U.S. Military Was Caught off Guard.”
[48] Space Systems Command, “SSC’s SBIRS Constellation Provides the Space Sensing and Missile Warning.”
[49] Holliday, “The U.S. Is Racing to Multiply Its Missile Warning Satellites.”

attack and notified US military leadership. The military then informed President Trump. Trump directed Special Envoy Steve Witkoff to notify Qatari authorities.[50] Witkoff relayed the warning to the Emir of Qatar. This multi-stage bureaucratic process, characterized by officials as addressing an urgent threat to a key ally, resulted in Qatar receiving notification only after missiles had already struck Doha. Qatar's Foreign Ministry spokesman confirmed that "the communication received from one of the U.S. officials came during the sound of explosions."[51] A warning requiring four sequential notifications before reaching its intended recipient suggests either systemic inefficiency in crisis response protocols or deliberate hierarchical filtering that routed time-sensitive warnings through political nodes before partner notification. The question demands comparison: does this four-hop political chain represent standard procedure, or does it reveal differential treatment?

IFF and the Pre-Launch Air Picture

Identification Friend or Foe (IFF) interrogation operates continuously across the theatre. A formation of Israeli aircraft staging in the Red Sea would either return valid encrypted replies or present as non-cooperative tracks. Either condition would provide early situational awareness cues to airspace control authorities and the CAOC. IFF is not a substitute for missile-launch detection, but it establishes the pre-launch air picture that should raise priority when an unusual formation appears within range of multiple allied capitals and U.S. installations. During the Israeli jets' flight, ground-based radars, AWACS aircraft, and naval vessels operating under US Naval Forces Central Command should have interrogated their transponders according to IFF protocols with daily cryptographic authentication.[52]

The 5th Fleet, which maintains operational presence in the Red Sea and routinely monitors airspace to defend against Houthi missile threats, operates IFF interrogation as

[50] Joseph Stepansky, "Qatar Denies White House Claim Trump Sent Warning before Israel's Attack," Al Jazeera, 9 September 2025, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2025/9/9/white-house-says-trump-notified-qatar-ahead-of-israeli-strike-on-hamas.

[51] Tal Shalev et al., "Israel Targets Hamas Leadership in Qatar Strike," CNN, 9 September 2025.

[52] U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, official website, accessed 24 October 2025, **https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/About-Us.**

standard protocol for all aircraft transiting its area of responsibility.[53] Given that Israeli aircraft positioned themselves within the 5th Fleet's operational zone, standard IFF procedures would have applied to this formation. If the transponders remained active, CENTCOM received encrypted responses confirming Israeli identity and position. If transponders were deactivated, the formation appeared as non-cooperative tracks, flagged to airspace control authorities as anomalous. Either outcome constitutes an advance warning. The unusual positioning of Israeli strike aircraft in the Red Sea, proximate to Egyptian territorial boundaries, within range of Saudi Arabia, and launching ballistic missiles toward Qatar (where CENTCOM maintains its regional headquarters) should have triggered immediate notification protocols within CENTCOM's command structure. The question persists: why did not?

The Iranian Comparison: When the System Worked

The 9 September timeline becomes analytically meaningful only when compared against established patterns of CENTCOM missile warning performance. The January 2020 Iranian ballistic missile attack on Al-Assad Air Base in Iraq provides such a comparison, a case where the same SBIRS constellation, operated by the same Space Force squadron, detected missiles targeting American personnel under CENTCOM's watch. The contrast reveals whether September 9th's detection-without-timely-warning pattern reflects technical limitations or institutional choices about which threats trigger partnership notification protocols.

Following the US assassination of Iranian General Qasem Soleimani on January 3, 2020, retaliation was certain. The 2nd Space Warning Squadron at Buckley Air Force Base, Colorado (responsible for operating SBIRS) immediately coordinated with intelligence agencies to position satellite sensors for optimal coverage of potential Iranian launch sites. [54] As mission management operator First Lieutenant Christianna Castaneda described, the team developed "a strategy to collect on whatever the potential retaliation could have been."[55]

[53] U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, official website.
[54] Strout, “Exclusive,” 2021.
[55] Strout, “Exclusive,” 2021.

On 7 January 2020, Iran launched its response. Mission Commander First Lieutenant Mariano Long described detection from Colorado as *fairly mundane*. SBIRS sensors registered infrared signatures, and operators immediately identified the threat class and trajectory. "We knew immediately that this was the threat that we were potentially waiting for," Long stated.[56] The scale became apparent quickly: "It was a lot of missiles quickly, and we could see where they were trying to impact." Iran had launched over a dozen ballistic missiles at Al-Assad Air Base and Erbil."[57]

The squadron prioritized speed over procedural completeness. "Our goal is always to try to be as correct as possible," Long explained, "but most importantly, getting that message out fast."[58] The warning was delivered "within half of the required time," according to Lieutenant Colonel Davenport.[59] Vice Chief of Space Operations David Thompson has publicly claimed the missiles were only in the air for six minutes. That's all the time the 2nd Space Warning Squadron had to warn fellow service members of the imminent attack.[60]

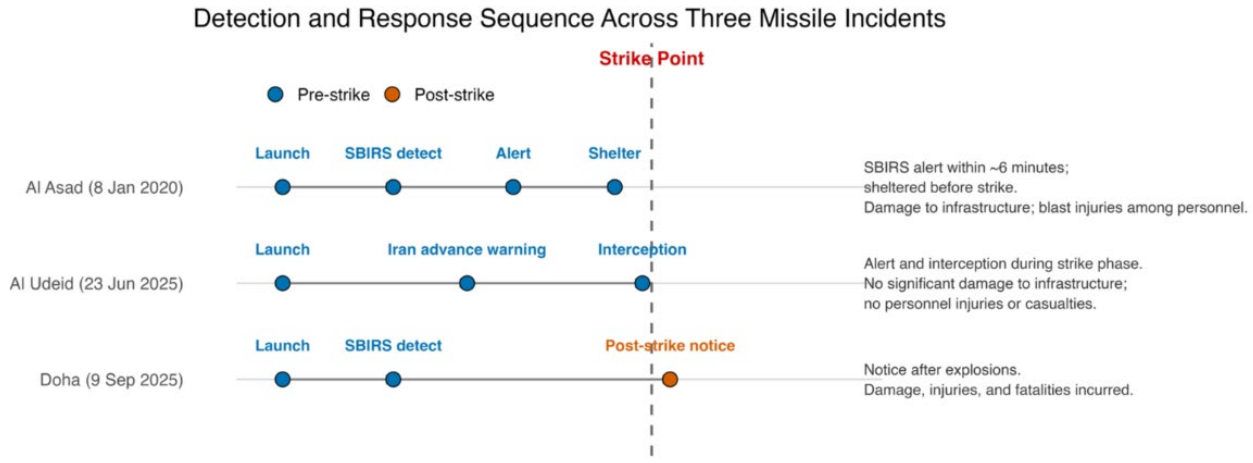
The warning followed protocols refined over thirty years. After the Gulf War demonstrated the value of space-based missile detection, the military "built out a series of architectures" connecting Colorado operators through Cheyenne Mountain and CENTCOM to theatre bases.[61] Major General Deanna Burt described the evolution: CENTCOM learned "how to distribute that information to their bases in order for the folks to get the most duck and cover time when those missiles are inbound."[62] Commander First Lieutenant Mariano Long characterized the actual mechanism simply: "It's just a simple phone call. There's a human on the other line." That night, the urgency led operators to abandon standard verbiage: "We weren't even saying every single thing that we typically do. We were just passing the most strategic and important information."[63] The direct military communication enabled personnel to shelter before

[56] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[57] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[58] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[59] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[60] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[61] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[62] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.
[63] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.

eleven missiles struck Al-Assad. Despite massive structural damage, zero fatalities occurred. Colonel Walter confirmed: "Because SBIRS picked it up and was able to notify the combatant commander, our troops were able to get into bunkers and protect themselves."[64]

Five years later, Iran again attacked a CENTCOM facility, this time Al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, on 23 June 2025. Iran provided advance diplomatic notification. Qatar evacuated the base beforehand, prepared air defences, and successfully intercepted incoming missiles. President Trump publicly thanked Iran for "giving us early notice, which made it possible for no lives to be lost." Zero casualties resulted. Two Iranian attacks on CENTCOM facilities, separated by five years and occurring at different bases, demonstrate consistent warning system performance: rapid detection, direct military notification, sufficient time for protective action, and minimal casualties. When Iran launches ballistic missiles, the SBIRS-to-CENTCOM-to-base architecture functions as designed.

Figure 5. Comparison of early-warning response timelines in three strike events: (1) Al Asad (2020), where U.S. personnel sheltered before impact; (2) Al Udeid (2025), where interception prevented damage; and (3) Doha (2025), where no warning was disseminated before impact. Arrows indicate detection-to-reponse progression, and the dashed lines mark the strike point.



[64] Strout, “Exclusive,” 2021.

The Pattern Revealed

Yet three months after successfully warning Qatar about Iranian missiles targeting Al-Udeid, the same CENTCOM infrastructure failed to provide a timely warning when Israeli missiles struck Doha. The SBIRS constellation, the 2nd Space Warning Squadron's protocols, and CENTCOM's command structure at Al-Udeid (all remained operational). What changed was the adversary and the notification pathway. Where Iranian threats triggered the *simple phone call* and *open dialogue* that operators described (direct military channels prioritizing speed), the Israeli operation routed through a four-hop political chain (CENTCOM to Trump to Witkoff to Qatar) that delivered notification ten minutes after impact.

Lieutenant General France's claim that systems were "focused on Iran and other things where we expect an attack to come from" cannot explain this differential performance. The Iran-focused systems successfully warned Qatar in June 2025. Those same systems detected Israeli missiles in September but failed to trigger the rapid military notification protocols that had functioned three months earlier. Technical limitations cannot account for this pattern. SBIRS detects infrared signatures regardless of whether missiles launch from Iranian soil or Israeli aircraft. The variable is institutional.

Consider the technical capabilities involved. The attacks on Israel by the Houthis should have repositioned SBIRS to ensure optimal Red Sea coverage. The Israeli missiles went over the horizon, penetrating the upper atmosphere closer to space. SBIRS sensors picked up the infrared flare of the Iranian missiles just as they would for a space launch; operators can see what threat class of missile they are dealing with and where it's heading.[65] If SBIRS sensors can pick up plumes closer to Earth's surface, they certainly detect infrared flares close to space. Additionally, the Space Force protects its orbital systems from space debris and adversary activity.[66] Detecting a ballistic missile approaching orbital altitude should have alarmed Space Force operators. The Israeli

[65] Strout, "Exclusive," 2021.

[66] Rachel Cohen, "For Missile Warning in Iraq, Thank the Space Force | Air & Space Forces Magazine," Air & Space Forces Magazine, 27 February 2020, https://www.airandspaceforces.com/for-missile-warning-in-iraq-thank-the-space-force/.

missiles launched from the Red Sea ascended to space, crossed Saudi Arabia from west to east, and then descended to Qatar. Surely the trajectory exceeded the six-minute window that Vice Chief Thompson cited for the Iranian case. Yet where Mission Commander Long emphasized in 2020 that "most importantly [we're] getting that message out fast," America failed to warn its ally that its capital was under attack in a timely manner, despite operating under a less constrained timeframe.

The January 2020 and June 2025 Iranian attacks establish what the warning system can achieve under operational conditions. 9 September reveals what happens when institutional priorities override technical capabilities. Across the Iranian cases, the same detection architecture (SBIRS plus CAOC) and partner air defences produced warning, posture adjustments, and casualty mitigation. On 9 September the sensors again detected, but the warning did not reach the partner in time. The variable is not physics or sensor coverage; it is notification routing and prioritization. This pattern demands explanation: why did identical detection systems produce radically different dissemination outcomes based solely on the adversary's identity? The answer lies in policy hierarchies formalized through statutory requirements and operationalized through command structures that privilege certain partners over others.

Section 3: Most-Favoured-Nation Dynamics in Military Partnerships

Codifying Strategic Hierarchy

Why did identical surveillance systems detect Israeli missiles yet fail to generate a timely warning for Qatar? The answer lies beyond technical architecture in statutory hierarchy, in policy frameworks that explicitly privilege certain partners over others. Understanding September 9th requires examining how legal doctrine translates into operational asymmetry, how statutory requirements shape dissemination protocols, and whether partnership obligations apply uniformly or selectively.

In international trade, the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) principle enshrines equality: WTO members must extend the same trade terms to all partners, preventing discrimination and promoting fairness in global commerce. The principle's purpose is straightforward: ensuring that no trading partner receives systematically worse

treatment than others, creating a level playing field where market access and tariffs apply uniformly.[67]

American military partnerships operate on precisely the opposite logic. Rather than preventing discrimination, US security architecture institutionalizes it. What might be termed *Most-Favoured-Nation dynamics* in the military sphere describes a deliberate hierarchy among allies, where strategic value determines access to technology, operational autonomy, and the very enforcement of laws governing arms transfers. Unlike economic MFN, which prohibits preferential treatment, military MFN creates it, systematically advantaging certain partners while constraining others, not as an exception to policy but as policy itself.

This hierarchy manifests across multiple dimensions of security cooperation: technology transfer restrictions that bind some allies while relaxing for others, maintenance sovereignty that remains centralized for most partners but decentralized for the favoured few, and accountability mechanisms rigorously applied to certain recipients while functionally suspended for others. The result is not a network of equivalent partnerships but a stratified system where some allies purchase weapons under terms that guarantee dependency, while others acquire the same platforms with rights that ensure autonomy. The clearest expression of this dynamic lies in US policy toward Israel versus the Gulf monarchies, two sets of partners operating under the same CENTCOM umbrella, purchasing from the same defence contractors, yet subject to fundamentally different rules.

The Qualitative Military Edge: Statutory Hierarchy as Policy Doctrine

What institutional mechanism formalizes this hierarchy? The Qualitative Military Edge (QME) doctrine, codified in US law since 2008 and consistently reaffirmed across administrations, provides the statutory framework.[68] The Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008 mandates that the President must ensure Israel maintains a "qualitative military edge" over all potential regional adversaries, defined as "the ability to counter and defeat

[67]World Trade Organization, "Principles of the Trading System," accessed 24 October 2025, https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/whatis_e/tif_e/fact2_e.htm.

[68] Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008, Public Law 110-429, 110th Congress (2008), https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-110publ429/html/PLAW-110publ429.htm.

any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors, while sustaining minimal damages and casualties, through the use of superior military means, possessed in sufficient quantity, including weapons, command, control, communication, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that in their technical characteristics are superior in capability to those of such other individual or possible coalition of states or non-state actors."[69]

This is not merely a policy preference; it is a statutory requirement that constrains every arms sale to Middle Eastern partners, transforming what appears to be a regional security architecture into an explicitly hierarchical structure with Israel at its apex. Evaluating QME incorporates military, political, and social factors through a multi-agency process involving the State Department, Defense Department, intelligence services, and military commands.[70] Each year during joint U.S.-Israel political-military consultations, Israel presents a list of weapons systems it views as potential threats to its qualitative edge. This gives Israel effective veto power over American arms sales to Arab states.[71] The mechanism ensures that even when Gulf states purchase American weapons, those purchases must not compromise Israeli superiority, creating an embedded restraint on Arab military modernization that operates independently of Arab actions or intentions.

The F-35 Exception: Israel's Unmatched Customization Rights

How does statutory language translate into operational practice? The F-35 case study reveals the mechanism. The US commitment to maintaining strict control over F-35 technology represents a fundamental principle of American arms export policy. Every purchaser of advanced American military hardware must comply with comprehensive restrictions that prohibit modifications, additions, or deletions to the system

[69] Naval Vessel Transfer Act of 2008, Pub. L. No. p.110-429.

[70] William Wunderle and Andre Briere, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge," *The Washington Institute*, January 2008, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/sites/default/files/pdf/PolicyFocus80Final.pdf, page 2

[71] Ron Kampeas, "Bipartisan Bill Proposed to Give Israel Veto on US Arms Sales to Middle East," *Times of Israel*, 3 October 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/bipartisan-bill-proposed-to-give-israel-veto-on-us-arms-sales-to-middle-east/.

architecture.[72] These non-negotiable requirements extend to maintenance protocols, with only US-authorized facilities permitted to service the aircraft.

Israel, however, occupies a unique position within this framework. Since receiving its first F-35 deliveries in December 2016, Israel has remained the sole ally permitted to integrate customized software and indigenous weapons systems into the platform.[73] Specifically, Israel has authorization to install its proprietary command-and-control architecture and domestically-produced missile systems, while establishing independent maintenance capabilities at Nevatim Air Base.[74] While the United Kingdom, Italy, the Netherlands, Australia, Norway, and Denmark have spent years negotiating minimal modification rights with limited success, Israel has secured permission for substantial alterations.[75] This differentiated treatment illuminates the deeper architecture of American security policy: restrictions that ensure dependency for most allies become flexible when applied to Israel, whose technological sovereignty is deemed essential to regional strategy rather than threatening to it.

The contrast with the UAE's F-35 pursuit exposes the hierarchy's operational logic. Following the Abraham Accords, the UAE was designated a *super ally* (a status previously granted only to India) and pursued the acquisition of 50 F-35 fighter jets, 18 MQ-9 Reaper drones, and nearly $10 billion in advanced munitions.[76] On 7 December 2020, Israeli Ambassador Ron Dermer explained that Israel was "very comfortable" with selling the F-35 to the UAE since the latter is an anti-Iranian ally.[77] The leading Israel lobby AIPAC

[72] Eric Adams, "Why Only Israel Can Customize America's F-35 (at Least for Now)," *WIRED*, 10 May 2016, https://www.wired.com/2016/05/israel-can-customize-americas-f-35-least-now/.
[73] Adams, "Why Only Israel Can Customize America's F-35."
[74] Adams, "Why Only Israel Can Customize America's F-35."
[75] William Wunderle and Andre Briere, "U.S. Foreign Policy and Israel's Qualitative Military Edge," p. 2.
[76] Ben Samuels, "Two Years after Abraham Accords, Why the UAE F-35 Deal Remains Grounded," *Haaretz*, 13 September 2022, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2022-09-13/ty-article/.premium/two-years-after-abraham-accords-why-the-uae-f-35-deal-remains-grounded/00000183-3743-d070-abef-f7d755450000.
[77] Jacob Magid, "Envoy: Israel 'Comfortable' with US Arms Deal to UAE, Keeps Military Edge," *Times of Israel*, 7 December 2020, https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-very-comfortable-with-us-sale-of-f-35s-to-uae-ambassador-dermer-says/.

declared they did not oppose the sale, confident that Israeli air defence could employ US technology to detect Emirati F-35s, eliminating the possibility of a stealth attack.[78]

Yet the deal encountered obstacles that Israeli purchases never faced. The Biden administration demanded guarantees that the UAE would not transfer any material to China, would guarantee Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, and would pledge that weapons would not be used in ongoing wars in Yemen and Libya.[79] US officials raised concerns about the UAE's relationship with China, particularly Huawei 5G technology near F-35 bases. The precedent was clear: in July 2019, the US removed Turkey from the F-35 program following its procurement of Russia's S-400 air defence system. The White House stated, "The F-35 cannot coexist with a Russian intelligence collection platform."[80] While the UAE responded that it had a proven record of protecting U.S. military technology, American officials insisted the UAE needed to demonstrate understanding of the necessary obligations. A month later, the UAE suspended talks, citing "technical requirements, sovereign operational restrictions and cost/benefit analysis."[81] Despite President Trump's visit to the UAE in April 2025, American intransigence persisted. The message was unmistakable: technological sovereignty granted to Israel remains denied to Arab allies, even those designated "super allies."

Leahy Laws: Selective Enforcement as Strategic Signal

The Most-Favoured-Nation hierarchy extends beyond technology transfers to the very enforcement of laws governing arms sales. The Leahy laws prohibit US assistance (training or equipment) to a unit of a foreign armed force if the Secretaries of State and Defense have credible information that this unit committed gross violations of human rights, such as extrajudicial killings, rape, torture, or prolonged detention without charge

[78] Ron Kampeas, "AIPAC Does Not Oppose F-35 Sales to the United Arab Emirates | the Jerusalem Post," *The Jerusalem Post*, 9 December 2020, https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/aipac-does-not-oppose-f-35-sales-to-the-united-arab-emirates-651558.

[79] Samuels, "T*wo Years after Abraham Accords*."

[80] The White House, "Statement by the Press Secretary," 17 July 2019, archived at https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-64/.

[81] Samuels, "*Two Years after Abraham Accords*."

or trial.[82] The statutes appear facially neutral; on paper, the law applies uniformly and equally to all recipients. However, when the curtain is pulled back and oversight is done, implementation reveals that not all countries are treated equally.

Senator Patrick Leahy himself led bipartisan opposition to Gulf arms sales, introducing 22 joint resolutions in 2019 to block $8.1 billion in transfers to Saudi Arabia and the UAE.[83] Senator Murphy argued that "selling more bombs to the Saudis simply means that the famine and cholera outbreak in Yemen will get worse."[84] Senator Young stated, “In light of the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Yemen, we have an obligation to ensure the adequate guardrails are in place and that weapons transfers to Saudi Arabia & the United Arab Emirates do not exacerbate the conflict.”[85] The Leahy Law framework was invoked repeatedly as justification to restrict weapons flowing to GCC states based on documented civilian casualties and possible war crimes in Yemen. Congress deployed its authority to scrutinize, delay, and condition sales based on human rights concerns precisely as the statute intended.

Israel faces no comparable scrutiny. While officials in the State Department insist that Israel does not get special treatment, the US has created procedures (the Israel Leahy Vetting Forum, or ILVF) that systematically favour Israel. Charles Blaha, former Director of the State Department's Office of Security and Human Rights, stated: "When I was working in the State Department, we vetted over 200,000 requests for assistance annually and prohibited assistance to thousands of units from countries all over the world, even from NATO ally Turkey. The only exception: Israel."[86] Under the Leahy law, "decisions

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[82] “Tackling Settler Violence and Israel’s Settlement Policy,” Stemming Israeli Settler Violence at Its Root, *International Crisis Group,* 2024, p. 34

[83] U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Senators Announce 22 Joint Resolutions to Block Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE," press release, 12 June 2019, https://www.foreign.senate.gov/press/dem/release/menendez-graham-murphy-paul-leahy-young-reed-announce-22-joint-resolutions-to-block-weapons-sales-to-saudi-arabia-and-uae-without-congressional-approval.

[84] U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Senators Announce 22 Joint Resolutions to Block Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE," press release, 12 June 2019.

[85] U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, "Senators Announce 22 Joint Resolutions to Block Weapons Sales to Saudi Arabia and UAE," press release, 12 June 2019.

[86] Charles O Blaha, “Except for Israel: US Military Aid Forbidden to Human Rights Violators by the Leahy Law,” *Informed Comment*, 19 April 2025, https://www.juancole.com/2025/04/military-forbidden-violators.html.

to prohibit assistance are made by action officer experts versed in the law, the facts of the cases, and the foreign security forces in question. But not for Israel. For Israel, such decisions are made at the political level, either by the Deputy Secretary of State or the Secretary. And in the only reported instance where an ILVF recommendation for prohibition of Israeli units that participated in torture, rape, and extrajudicial killings in the West Bank managed to reach the Secretary, he refused to act."[87]

A 2024 lawsuit captured the institutional pattern: "US violating law to fund Israel despite alleged human rights abuses," with claims that the State Department was "deliberately bypassing the Leahy Law by failing to sanction Israeli units accused of widespread atrocities in Palestinian territories."[88] The Leahy Laws remain operational, evidenced by their consistent application to NATO allies, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE, but functionally suspended for Israel through procedural modifications that convert statutory requirements into political discretion.

The Architecture of Inequality

These cases (F-35 customization rights, maintenance sovereignty, and Leahy Law enforcement) are not isolated anomalies but manifestations of a coherent system. Most-Favoured-Nation dynamics in US military partnerships mean that Israel operates under fundamentally different rules than Arab allies: technological autonomy where others face dependence, modification rights where others confront standardization mandates, and accountability exemptions where others face rigorous scrutiny. The Qualitative Military Edge doctrine provides the statutory framework, but the pattern extends beyond weapons characteristics to encompass every dimension of security cooperation, from intelligence sharing protocols to the warning dissemination failures exposed on 9 September.

Understanding Qatar's defence failure requires recognizing that it occurred within this deliberately hierarchical structure. American systems detected Israeli aircraft and missiles as designed. American policy priorities determined that detection would not

[87] Blaha, "Except for Israel."

[88] Joseph Gedeon and Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "US Violating Law to Fund Israel despite Alleged Human Rights Abuses, Lawsuit Says," *The Guardian*, 17 December 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/17/palestine-israel-leahy-lawsuit.

translate into timely partner notification. The question is not why technology failed, but why institutional arrangements privileged Israeli operational freedom over Qatari security. The answer lies in decades of policy choices, formalized through QME doctrine, operationalized through CENTCOM command structures, and enforced through technology dependencies, that privilege one partner's freedom of action over another partner's sovereign security. 9 September exposed not a technical malfunction, but an institutional hierarchy embedded in US regional security architecture, one that determines whose warnings get prioritized and whose security gets deferred.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study has traced a pattern of detection without dissemination, revealing not technical malfunction but institutional hierarchy embedded within US. regional security architecture. 9 September 2025, exposed a fundamental asymmetry: American surveillance systems detected Israeli aircraft and missiles targeting Doha, yet Qatar received no actionable warning. The same SBIRS constellation that protected American personnel from Iranian missiles in 2020 and successfully warned Qatar about Iranian threats in June 2025 failed to generate timely alerts when Israel struck three months later. The variable was not sensor capability or geographic coverage but institutional priority, a policy framework that determines whose security warnings get expedited and whose get deferred.

This pattern extends beyond a single incident. The 9 September attack on Qatar joins a growing catalogue of defensive failures that raise questions about the operational meaning of American security guarantees. In 2019, Iranian-backed drones struck Saudi Aramco facilities, temporarily crippling half the kingdom's oil production despite billions invested in American air defences. In 2022, Houthi drones penetrated the UAE's THAAD and Patriot PAC-3 systems to strike ADNOC fuel facilities and Abu Dhabi airport. In June 2025, Iranian missiles targeted Al-Udeid, with Tehran providing advance warning that enabled defensive preparations, a courtesy Israel declined to extend before bombing Qatar. Each incident reveals a consistent dynamic: sophisticated American weapons, astronomical investments, yet selective protection when crises emerge.

The 9 September attack also exposes the hollowness of the frameworks ostensibly designed to prevent precisely such incidents. Israel's reassignment from EUCOM to CENTCOM in January 2021 was presented as broadening the parameters of U.S., Gulf, and Israeli strategic cooperation, establishing mechanisms to constrain regional conflicts much as NATO has managed tensions between Greece and Turkey. Joint military exercises between the UAE, Bahrain, Israel, and the United States followed in November 2021. Proposals for integrated regional architectures, such as the Middle East Air Defense alliance (MEAD), promised coordinated defence under American oversight. Yet 9 September revealed how thin these assurances proved when tested. Far from constraining conflict, CENTCOM integration provided the very architecture through which Israeli strike aircraft staged, launched, and struck a fellow member of the regional security construct. Rather than triggering coordination protocols that would protect all partners, the integration enabled operational freedom for one partner at another's expense. Regional cooperation now appears more fractured than ever, with Israel's military adventurism intensifying even as its diplomatic isolation deepens. The Abraham Accords promised a new era of partnership; September 9th demonstrated that integration under American command does not guarantee equal protection, only differential treatment formalized through institutional hierarchy.

This study has focused on U.S. CENTCOM's institutional role given its forward headquarters at Al-Udeid. Yet the September 9th attack occurred while Qatar also hosted Turkish military bases, raising questions this analysis has not addressed. Why did Turkish forces not defend Qatari airspace against Israeli strike aircraft, or were they never activated at all? Both scenarios would be equally revealing. Future research examining Turkey's role (or lack thereof) would further illuminate the broader pattern of differential treatment that this study has traced through US institutional structures.

What explains this pattern? The Qualitative Military Edge doctrine provides the statutory framework. Codified in US law since 2008, QME mandates that the President ensure Israel maintains military superiority over all regional adversaries. This requirement constrains every arms sale, every technology transfer, every intelligence sharing protocol. The doctrine operates not as an occasional exception but as a systematic policy. Where Israel receives F-35 customization rights and independent maintenance capabilities, the UAE faces restrictive end-use monitoring and US-managed sustainment

that places mission data outside Emirati sovereignty. Where the Leahy Laws scrutinize, delay, and condition arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE based on human rights concerns, Israel's cases route through the Israel Leahy Vetting Forum (ILVF), where decisions are made at the political level rather than by action officers, functionally suspending statutory requirements through procedural modifications.

Nine September demonstrated how this statutory hierarchy translates into operational asymmetry. Detection occurred; dissemination was filtered. The warning routed through a four-hop political chain (CENTCOM to Trump to Witkoff to Qatar) rather than direct military channels, arriving ten minutes after impact. Meanwhile, Iranian threats to the same base three months earlier triggered the "simple phone call" that operators described, enabling successful defence. The pattern strongly suggests design, not accident.

The 29 September 2025, executive order "Assuring the Security of the State of Qatar" underscores the institutional failure. Section 2(c) mandates that "The Secretary of War, in coordination with the Secretary of State and the Director of National Intelligence, shall maintain joint contingency planning with the State of Qatar to ensure a rapid and coordinated response to any foreign aggression against the State of Qatar." This language, appearing twenty days after Qatar was attacked, acknowledges precisely the coordination and rapid response failures this study has documented. The executive order represents a tacit admission that existing protocols proved inadequate when tested.

What path forward exists? GCC capitals face a choice: continue purchasing a security architecture designed to ensure their subordination, or build sovereign capabilities that insulate life-saving alerts from external political triage. The solution lies not in abandoning partnerships (given how deeply entangled dependencies are, there is no easy exit) but in reducing single-point dependence. This requires direct sensor-to-national-warning-node links, delegated authority for first notification to the earliest watch floor confirming inbound threats, and sovereign mirrors for early-warning data with independent visualization.

Just as Ukraine was forced to rethink its security arrangement after the failure of United States and the United Kingdom to uphold their pledges to protect Ukraine’s

sovereignty in exchange for its nuclear disarmament as agreed in the Budapest Memorandum in 1994. The GCC cannot wait until the next aggression arrives. When Russia annexed Crimea and invaded eastern Ukraine, the Budapest Memorandum guarantees proved worthless, exposing security assurances as mere paper promises when confronted by determined aggression.[89] The question is not whether to seek better weapons or stronger guarantees, but whether to accept that partnership obligations apply selectively, and to plan accordingly. With institutional hierarchies formalized through statute and operationalized through command structures, 9 September was not an aberration. It was the system functioning as designed.

[89]Mariana Budjeryn, "The Breach: Ukraine's Territorial Integrity and the Budapest Memorandum," *Wilson Center*, 30 September 2014, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/publication/Issue%20Brief%20No%203--The%20Breach--Final4.pdf.

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