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THE CHALLENGES OF AIR SUPERIORITY OVER THE MIDDLE EAST

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The current Air War over the Middle East (Israeli air campaigns in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria, reciprocal strikes between Iran and Israel, American and Israeli raids in Yemen) highlights that the advantage is once again to the sword rather than the shield, and that power cannot always lay on air and anti-aircraft assets, as it is composed by a less visible arsenal (cyber, space, communications, information warfare, clandestine actions) for an integrated global strategy. These confrontations show that the challenges of air superiority are certainly linked to the sophistication of equipment, but much more to the political will of the stakeholders involved to engage, or not, in confrontation. The accumulation of air power vectors only makes sense if there is a real intention to use them offensively, as deterrence has once again been more effective than protection. The Gulf monarchies currently have neither the political will nor the technical knowledge to make use of their offensive potential against Iran, even if they do have a complete array of weapons to defend critical installations. Iran on its own is no longer able to protect its territory by conventional means and relies on saturation ballistic strikes to deter its neighbours and opponents. Israel can strike and gain air superiority anywhere in the Middle East but needs the United States to sustain in the time its air campaign and to counter Teheran's asymmetric strategies. The United States can easily gain air superiority, but its willingness to engage in a major conflict in the region remains highly uncertain.

DR – Pierre Razoux

Since 2022, the Ukrainian war has reemphasized the need to conquer air superiority in high-intensity conflicts between technologically advanced armies. In the Middle East, the confrontation between Iran and Israel (ballistic missile salvos *vs.* air strikes) started in spring 2024 and has shown the importance of gaining air superiority, but also the existence of bypass strategies. This issue of air superiority had been somewhat overshadowed by three decades of military intervention against opponents unable to challenge the supremacy of the intervening armies, whether intervening armies were Western (Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq, Sahel) or Russian (Georgia, Syria, Libya). The last time Western nations really had to achieve air superiority was in 1991, during the war to recapture Kuwait from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army. This air campaign, with no real threat, successfully applied the concepts developed in the 1980s to combat the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. With the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of a unipolar world, Western air forces were forced to considerably reduce their size, abandon certain capabilities and adapt to new missions.

In the Middle East, the *Heyl Ha'Avir* (Israel's air and space force) has retained all its capabilities and developed new ones. This air force, unrivalled in the region, is nonetheless required to arbitrate between several dilemmas. The Gulf monarchs, for their part, have multiplied their air power in a “Potemkin village” logic designed to impress their neighbours as much as their own population, but do they really have the will and operational capacity to confront their rivals? How does Iran deter its neighbours and adversaries, even though it is no longer able to defend its airspace after Israeli strikes on its denial-of-access systems (April 19 and October 25, 2024)? Can the United States sustainably maintain its air supremacy in the region on its own? Are the Russians and Chinese in a position to influence air superiority in the Middle East, and if so, how? Can France continue to play a role in this area, and how?

What are we talking about?

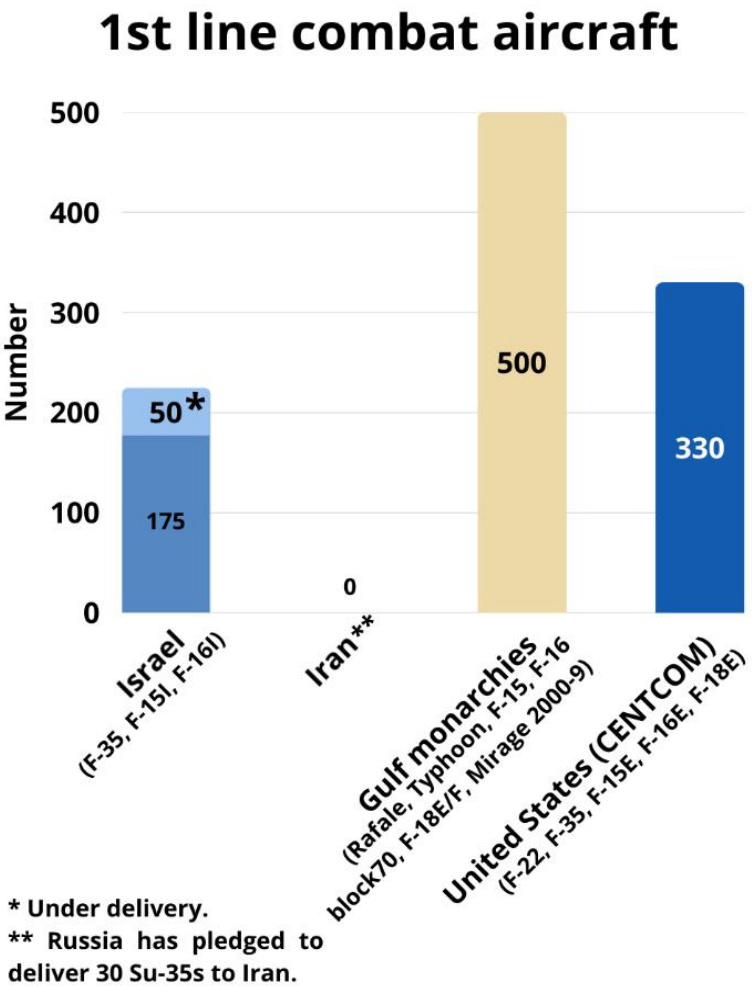
The following definition is largely based on the one proposed by IFRI in a recent study: “Air superiority defines the degree of air control in an armed conflict. It facilitates military victory, enables air efforts to be then concentrated on other strategic objectives, and protects other armies from unbearable attrition. It is mainly achieved through the offensive use of air power in a joint effort to neutralize opposing air power. It also requires the ability to stop opposing attacks with appropriate anti-missile and anti-aircraft means[1].” This wide-ranging definition fits in well with the challenges and dilemmas faced by states seeking to achieve air superiority in order to exert military pressure on their adversary, while at the same time having to defend their territory and its approaches to prevent that same adversary from exerting a military threat in return by air, whether through aircraft raids, drone and cruise missile attacks, or ballistic

[1] Adrien Gorremans, “L'avenir de la supériorité aérienne - Maîtriser le ciel en haute intensité”, IFRI Study No. 122, January 2025: The future of air superiority. High-intensity sky control | Ifri

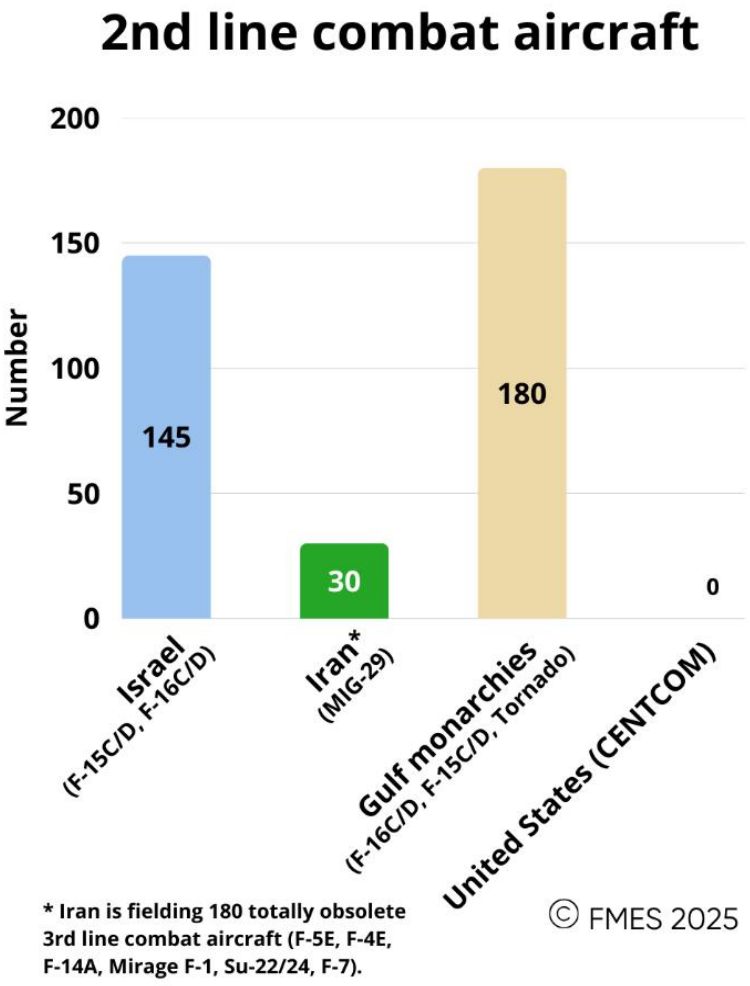
missile strikes. Air superiority can therefore be understood both offensively and defensively.

The balance of power

The following graphs show the actual balance of power, both offensive and defensive, between air and space forces of the main Middle Eastern states (excluding Turkey), as well as those of the US CENTCOM command responsible for this region (including the equivalent of 2 Carrier air groups). These data, mainly taken from the FMES's Strategic Atlas of the Mediterranean and Middle East[2], were updated in early 2025 to take account of the announcements made by the new Trump administration.



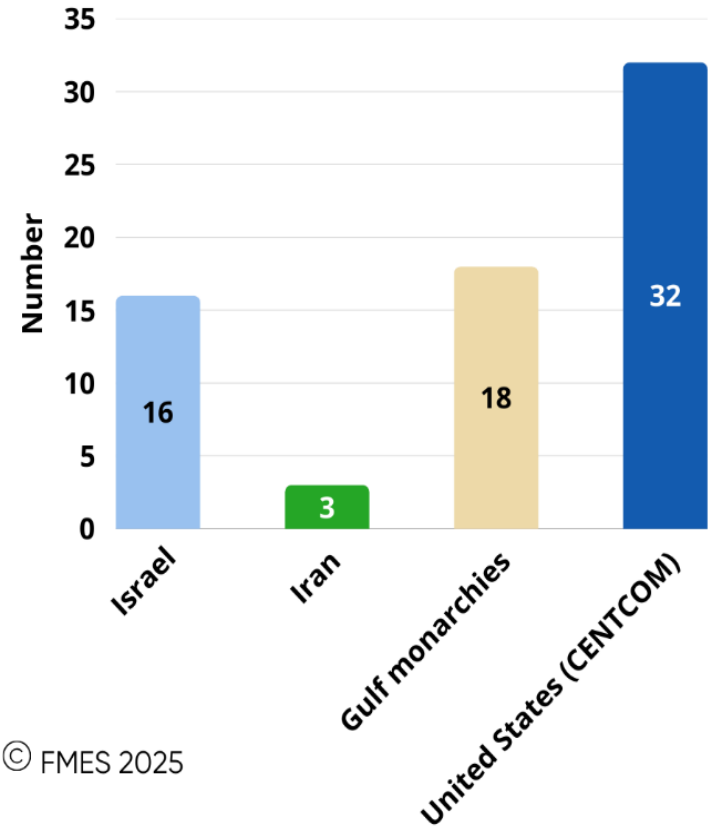
* Under delivery.
** Russia has pledged to deliver 30 Su-35s to Iran.



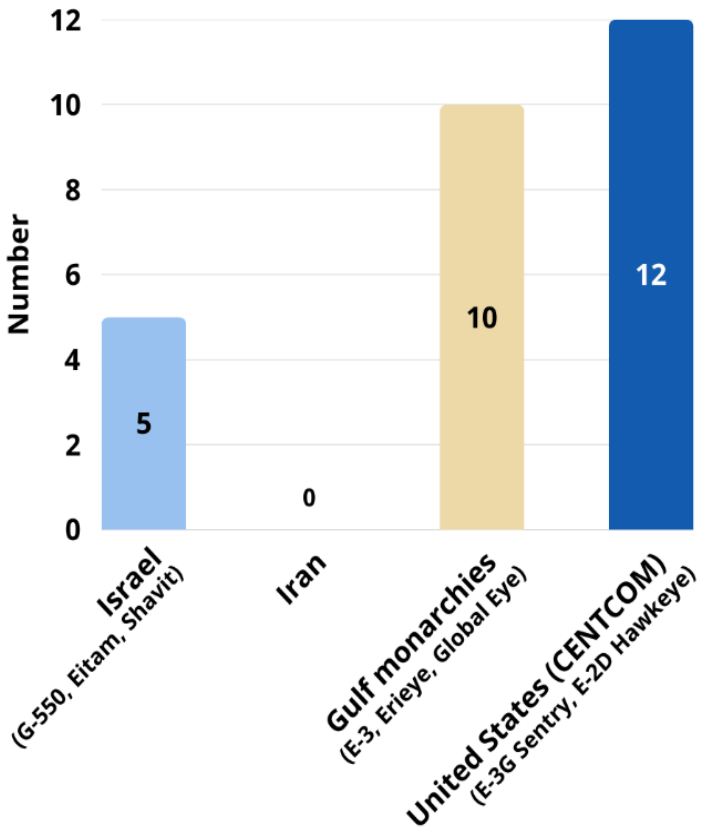
* Iran is fielding 180 totally obsolete 3rd line combat aircraft (F-5E, F-4E, F-14A, Mirage F-1, Su-22/24, F-7).

[2] Atlas - Fondation Méditerranéenne d'Études Stratégiques

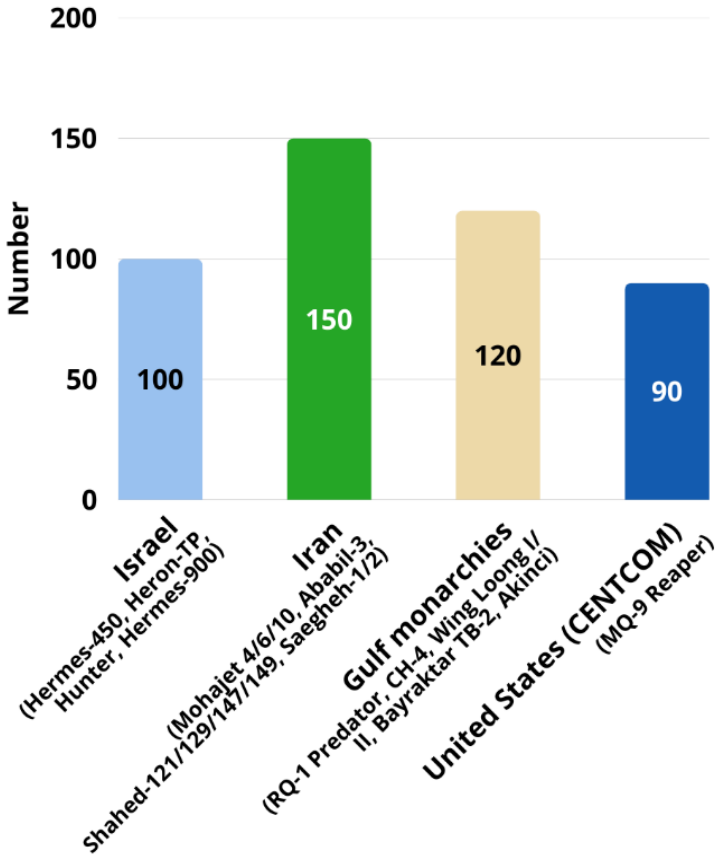
Air-to-air refueling aircraft



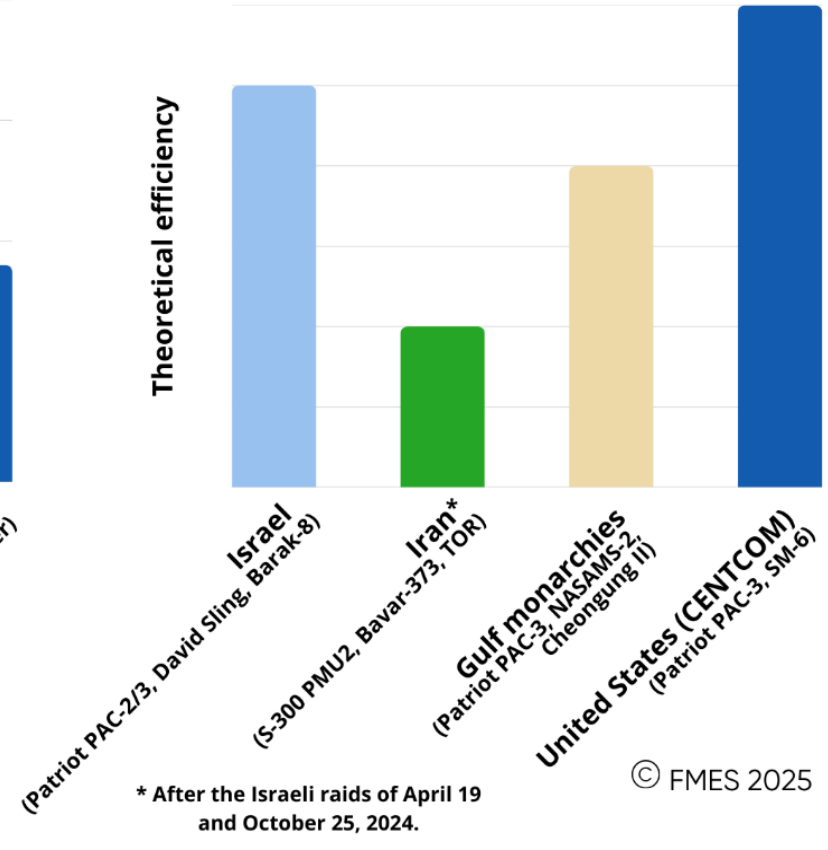
Airborne warning and control systems



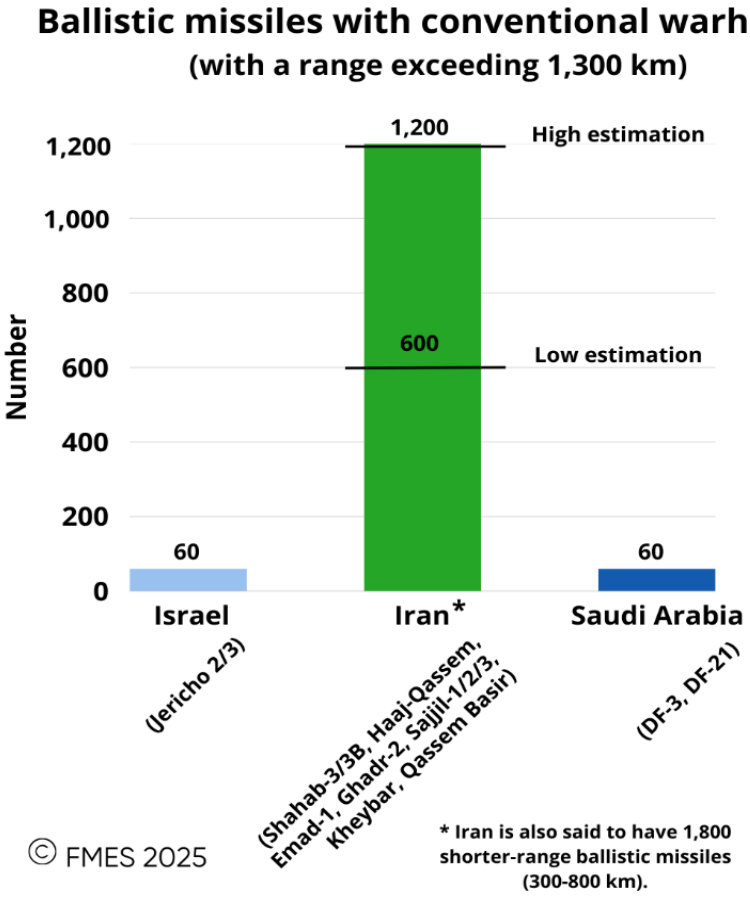
Armed MALE UAVs

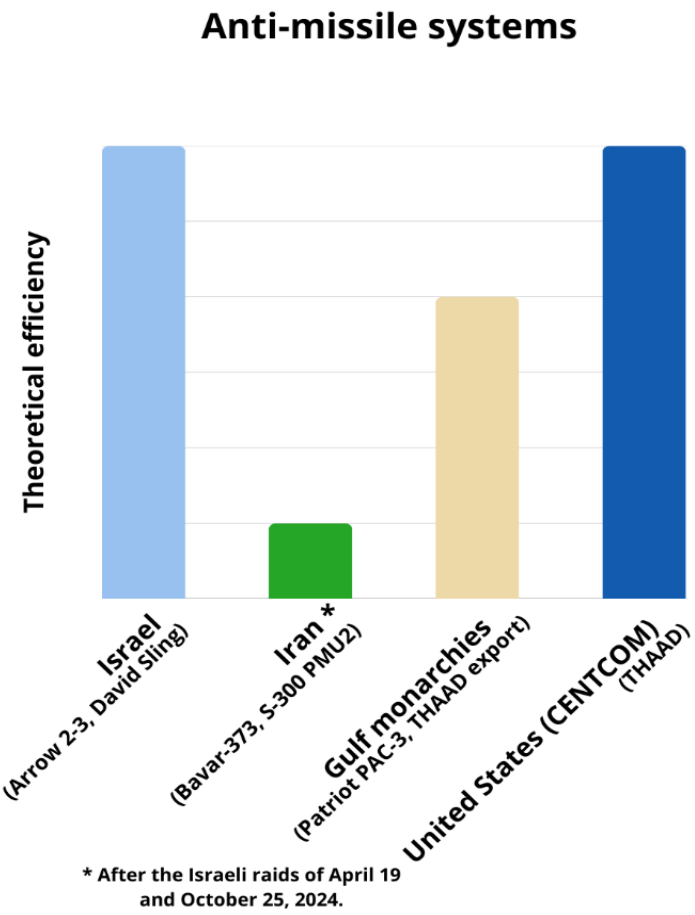


Anti-aircraft systems



* After the Israeli raids of April 19 and October 25, 2024.



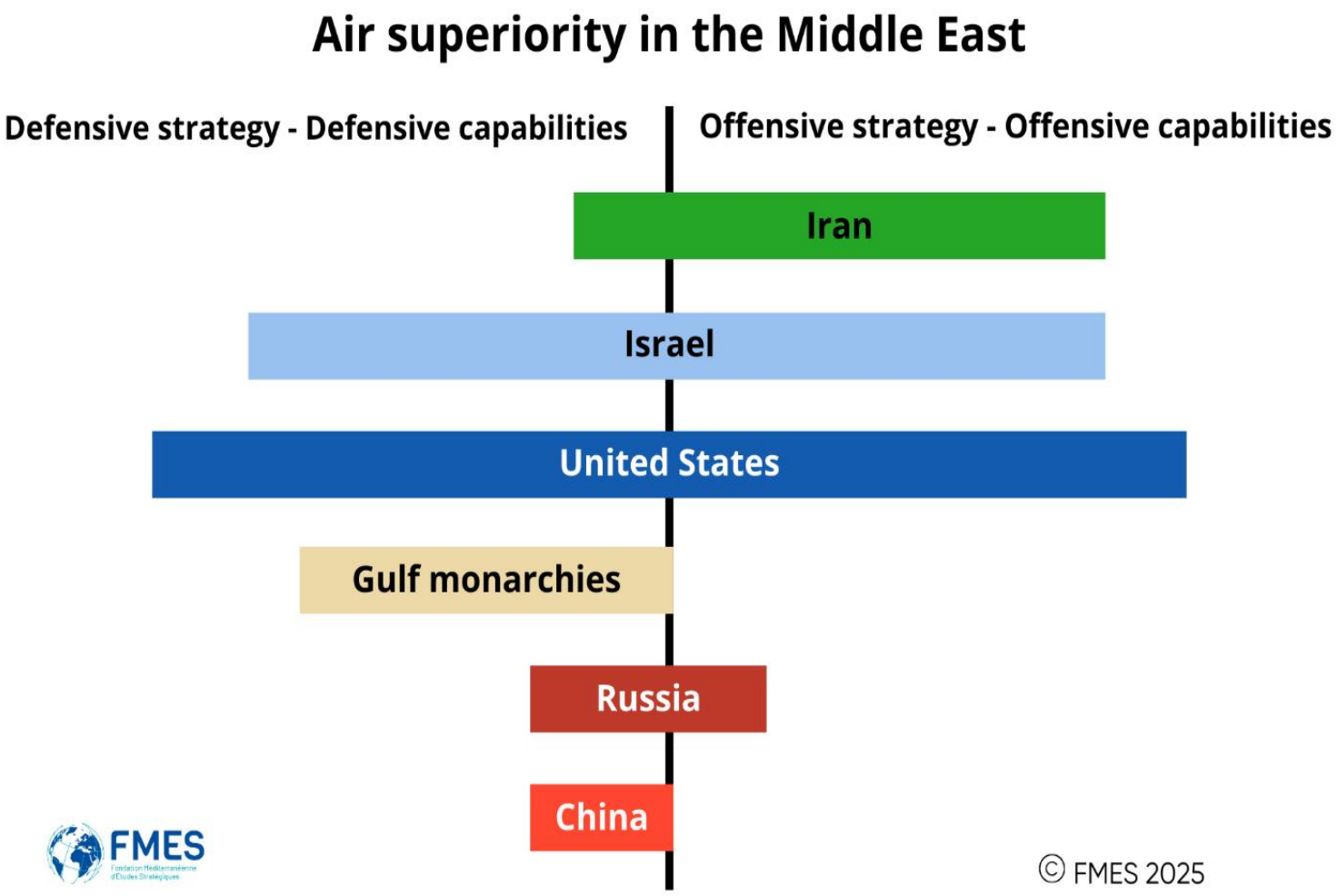


These graphs clearly illustrate several points:

- The Gulf monarchies theoretically have as many 1st- and 2nd-line fighters (680) as Israel (370) and CENTCOM (330) combined. They have an overwhelming advantage over Iran, which has only thirty 2nd-line fighters and is impatiently awaiting delivery of 30 latest-generation Su-35s from Russia.
- CENTCOM has a clear advantage in the field of air-to-air refuelling and air-to-air surveillance, enabling it to project power, detect and maintain air superiority fighters capable of intercepting any opposing raid, even before it reaches the range of the intended targets. Iranian capabilities in this area are virtually non-existent. The capabilities of Israel and the Gulf monarchies are far inferior to those of CENTCOM.
- Iran has a slight numerical advantage in the field of armed MALE drones, offset however by the qualitative advantage of American and Israeli drones and the effectiveness of Israeli, American and Gulf anti-aircraft systems.
- The Gulf monarchies aim to catch up with Iran in the field of drones, while at the same time improving their conventional air defence systems, so as to be able to counter any Iranian drone or cruise missile strikes on their own (without US support).

- Iran has a considerable advantage in the field of ballistic missiles, especially those with a range superior to 1,300 km that can reach Israeli territory. This advantage is even greater if we also take into account (3,000 missiles in total in the high estimate) all the shorter-range ballistic missiles (300-800 km) capable of reaching US military bases and critical civilian infrastructures on the shores of the Persian Gulf.
- Israel and the United States still have a decisive advantage in terms of ballistic missile defence, notably to defend Israeli territory and American bases in the Middle East and Diego Garcia archipelago. Nevertheless, Israel remains dependent on its ability to replenish its stockpile of interceptor missiles, over which Washington has a say since it is involved in their design.
- The Gulf monarchies are trying to increase the effectiveness of their anti-missile shield, so as to be able without the help of the United States to cope with possible Iranian ballistic missile strikes.
- Russia and China, absent from these graphs, no longer have, or do not yet have, the means to achieve their ambitions in the Middle East.

These observations can be used to model each player's perception of air superiority in the Middle East. This diagram summarizes their strategy rather than their means, since the air forces of the Gulf theoretically possess offensive capabilities.



Iran is no longer able to defend its airspace and is relying on its ballistic arsenal to protect itself

Since the Israeli raids of April 19 and October 25, 2024, Iran has lost all its S-300 PMU2 batteries (its best anti-aircraft system) as well as several long-range detection radars. As a result, its anti-aircraft and anti-missile defences were considerably degraded[3]. The Israeli air force, for its part, has demonstrated its ability to fly over Iranian territory without being intercepted. No doubt the same would be true of the American air force. By pooling their most significant resources (MiG-29, F-4E Phantom and F-14A Tomcat fighters, Bavar-373 and TOR surface-to-air missiles), the Iranians can probably deploy four relatively effective denial-of-access bubbles (see map). The first around Teheran, to protect the centres of power, the refineries and part of the nuclear and ballistic programs. The second around the Natanz-Fordo-Ispahan triangle to cover the heart of the nuclear program. The third around the Kharg oil terminal and the civilian nuclear power plant at Bushehr, at the bottom of the Persian Gulf. Lastly, around Bandar Abbas and the Strait of Hormuz, a vital artery for oil traffic. The rest of Iran's vast territory seems indefensible, given the limited resources available to the regular army (Artesh) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah). Only the delivery of high-performance systems by Russia or China could enable Iran to regain the credibility it needs to inflict losses in the event of Israeli and/or American strikes, without however being able to repel them.

Since Iran is no longer able to effectively protect its airspace, its strategists have forged an offensive strategy of circumvention to deter potential adversaries. This strategy cannot rely on the air force, since the twenty or so Su-24 fighter-bombers and the forty or so venerable F-4E Phantoms that can be mobilized have neither the range, nor the electronic support, nor the weaponry to strike distant installations and defend themselves against 1st-line fighters. To impress the Gulf monarchies, the Iranians have drones and cruise missiles at their disposal, which proved their effectiveness against Saudi Arabia in 2019 and 2020, and against the United Arab Emirates in 2022. If Teheran were to go beyond intimidation strikes, for example in retaliation for the commitment of certain monarchies to an eventual U.S. strike on Iran, it would be sufficient for the Iranian regime to resort to massive short-range ballistic missile attacks targeting the seawater desalination plants (a dozen or so lining the Gulf), power plants and main refineries of these monarchies, without even having to attack their military installations. Without fresh water, electricity, air-conditioning and gasoline (essential for generators), the Gulf monarchies would become physically unliveable, triggering a mass exodus of their populations. Their leaders would then find it extremely difficult to maintain their legitimacy. It should be remembered that, in the event of an attack on the Iranian civil nuclear power plant at Bushehr, the civil nuclear power plant at Barakah in the United Arab Emirates could be the target of retaliatory strikes, creating a significant risk of radioactive pollution in the Persian Gulf area. All these large, fixed

[3] CESA special edition, “Primo-analyse de la riposte aérienne israélienne sur l'Iran”, November 2024.

targets are easy to hit, even for ballistic missiles of low accuracy. With a stockpile of several thousand missiles of sufficient range, Iran can easily rely on saturation effect.

Concerning the United States, the Iranian regime knows that it will be difficult to penetrate CENTCOM's anti-aircraft defences with simple drones or cruise missiles. However, it knows that it could retaliate to possible attacks by firing coordinated salvos of ballistic missiles against US military bases deployed close to Iranian territory, notably in Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, as well as targeting personnel deployed from time to time in Saudi Arabia. It did this with some effectiveness on January 8, 2020, when it targeted the Erbil and el-Assad air bases in Iraq in retaliation for the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani by a U.S. drone strike. Longer-range ballistic missiles can reach US air bases in Jordan, Turkey, Djibouti and Oman. Iran does not yet have ballistic missiles capable of reaching the Diego Garcia air base, 4,200 km away (3,500 km if fired from Yemen). But it is likely that the Pasdaran, in charge of the regime's defence, have come up with other solutions, such as cruise missiles and drones fired from ships (notably the *Shahed Mahdavi*) cruising in the Indian Ocean.

Iran's leaders know that in the event of ballistic strikes against American bases, most of their missiles would be intercepted, but their aim is to demonstrate that the United States is not invulnerable and that they can inflict enough losses to push them into a long, costly and unpopular conflict. Indeed, they know that Donald Trump does not wish to commit the United States to a major war in the Middle East, even if they fear the possibility of one-off American strikes, which are always possible and which would symbolically target military objectives that do not represent a “red line” for the regime (for example certain bunkerized islets in the Persian Gulf - Farsi, Abu Moussa, Little and Great Tumb, Larak), or more decisively their nuclear and ballistic programs, should the current negotiations fail[4].

Concerning Israel, the Iranian equation is more complex. Iran's leaders noted the difficulty of piercing Israel's missile shield during the “True Promise I and II” operations on April 13-14 and October 1, 2024, even though on the second occasion some 30 out of 180 ballistic missiles reached the Nevatim air base[5] (82% interception rate, compared with 95% on April 14). They are prepared to sacrifice drones for tracking and guidance missions, and then to assess the damage inflicted. They also know that Israeli Prime Minister Benyamin Netanyahu dreams of attacking Iran both to reduce the potential threat of a nuclear Iran and to justify his foreign policy and keep himself in power, an option made possible by the weakening of their anti-aircraft defence following the two Israeli raids. Their dilemma is therefore to find a way to re-establish their dissuasive posture against Israel: either by reaching an agreement with the new Trump administration, or by obtaining security guarantees from Russia and China

[4] Sketched out as early as Donald Trump's victory in November 2024, the first formal bilateral negotiations between the USA and Iran (since the JCPOA agreement in 2015) began in Oman on April 12, 2025 and have been ongoing ever since.

[5] Satellite images show dozens of Iranian missiles struck near Israeli air base: NPR; Washington Post, 4 October 2024.

(which is not yet the case), or by isolating the Israeli government as much as possible in the hope that this will weaken it, notably economically, and limit military aid from the United States, or by planning massive strikes against Israel (targeting its air bases and/or Dimona nuclear power plant), mobilizing enough ballistic missiles (at least three times as many as in Operation True Promise II) to saturate the Israeli missile shield. This would leave open the possibility of a coordinated Israeli-American attack.

The Gulf monarchies have a complete defensive panoply, but lack the political will and technical know-how to make use of their offensive capabilities

Over the years, the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula, led by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have built up an impressive air arsenal designed to provide them with air superiority capabilities.

	Saudi Arabia	**United Arab Emirates**	**Qatar**	**Kuwait**	**Oman**	**Bahrain**	**Jordan**
1st & 2nd-line Combat Aircraft	**360**	**140**	**96**	**40**	**35**	**25**	**45**
Type	F-15C/D/E Typhoon Tornado	Mirage 2000-9* F-16 B-60	Rafale F3 Typhoon F-15	Typhoon F-18E/F	Typhoon F-16 B-50	F-16 Block 40/70	F-16A/B & Block-70

* UAE's Mirage 2000-9 will be replaced by 80 Rafale F4 in 2027 and during the following years.

In practice, the air forces of the Gulf monarchies operate their fighters at only a small percentage of their capacity, due to a lack of pilot training, a lack of sufficiently well-trained personnel, a lack of staff motivation and a lack of maintenance, all compounded by bureaucratic procedures, poor logistics and a cumbersome chain of command that does not encourage initiative[6]. Many of these fighter aircraft are lying idle in hangars, and their availability rate remains low. Some air forces are forced to call on Arabic-speaking mercenaries (notably from Pakistan, Egypt, Iraq and Yemen) to pilot these aircraft. The same problem applies to ground-air and missile defence systems, which require considerable technical expertise. Numerous foreign advisors are dispatched to support the local military in charge of implementing these systems. This is particularly true for Qatar, which has to recruit and keep 150 fighter pilots and navigating officers and several hundred engineers (from a pool of 300,000 citizens of all ages and sexes) to operate its oversized air fleet and anti-aircraft batteries equipped with 12 THAAD anti-missile systems, 11 Patriot PAC-3 systems and 40 NASAMS-2 systems. By

[6] As numerous experts and technical military assistants who have served in the Gulf have testified in discussions with the author; see also CESA note no. 582 "The USAF's role in the training and education of Middle Eastern air personnel in the face of the drone threat" (January 2025), which reveals a number of shortcomings.

contrast, the United Arab Emirates has proved that it can design and conduct deep air raids in Libya and Yemen on its own, and that it can shoot down Houthi ballistic missiles with one of its THAAD missile batteries (January 17, 2022).

For many rulers, these prestige purchases are aimed at reassuring their elites, impressing neighbours and regional rivals, but above all at buying the protection of the states with which they conclude these contracts. While in the past this protection was primarily American or British, since the 1991 Gulf War, and even more so since the Arab Spring of 2011, these monarchs have diversified their suppliers and thus their protection, notably by including France. This choice, questionable in terms of logistical and operational coherence, is explained by the desire to no longer depend on a single partner.

Whatever their protectors, the military leaders of the Gulf monarchies see air superiority only in a defensive sense, at least in the face of Iran, firstly because it is more within their technical reach, but also because they do not want to project an aggressive image towards their powerful neighbour and rival (Iran). They are perfectly aware of their vulnerability and the ease with which Iran could harass them and drown them in saturation ballistic attacks. None of them wants to be the first to suffer the vengeful wrath of an Iranian regime that feels it has been attacked. Several air forces (Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman) have not purchased any offensive weaponry (including long-range missiles), nor have they acquired the in-flight refuelling, air-watch or electronic warfare aircraft needed to carry out long-range strikes, in order to make it clear that they do not represent a threat to Iranian strategists. Qatar, which was on the same line, ordered nevertheless 2 Airbus A-330 MRTT tanker aircraft and Rafales and Typhoons armed with SCALP and Storm Shadow cruise missiles, not to worry Iran with which it has always got on well, but to dissuade Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain with which the emirate maintains complex relations. Since Saudi Arabia and the UAE normalized relations with Iran in the spring of 2023, thanks to China's mediation, these two monarchies have taken great care to distance themselves from any aggressive rhetoric against Tehran. They say they would oppose the use of their territory and airspace by the US and Israeli air forces in any strikes against Iran.

Aware of the limitations of their military tools, Gulf leaders prefer to set up defensive denial-of-access bubbles (see map) combining combat air patrols (CAP) and ground-to-air batteries to protect centres of power, crucial military installations and critical civilian infrastructures. These denial-of-access bubbles are far from covering the whole of their territory (except for the smallest emirates), and leave loopholes through which Iranian and Houthi drones and cruise missiles could easily infiltrate to strike less vital targets. To bolster their defences, some monarchs have agreed to join the American-Israeli Middle East Air Defence (MEAD) project, which brings together the USA, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates[7]. This technical alliance, which enables the US CENTCOM command to coordinate defensive actions

[7] Stephen Frantzman, "Does Iran take Israel-Gulf air defence cooperation seriously? Jerusalem Post, July 11, 2022; Anna Ahronheim, “The Middle East Air Defence Alliance takes flight”, Jerusalem Post, July 15, 2022.

in the air, was successfully tested on April 13-14, 2024 to counter the massive strike of over 320 drones, cruise missiles and ballistic missiles fired by Iran at Israel.

Israel can conquer air superiority and strike anywhere in the Middle East, but it needs the USA to sustain a long air campaign and defend against Iranian ballistic strikes

The quest for air superiority has always been the cornerstone of Israeli strategy[8]. In offensive mode, Israel can act alone as long as its strikes do not unduly disrupt American strategy[9]. On April 19 and October 25, 2024, the Israeli air force retaliated against Iranian strikes by attacking some of the Iranian regime's critical military infrastructures at night. On the first occasion, it destroyed the radar and guidance system of an S-300 PMU2 anti-aircraft battery responsible for defending the nuclear installations near Isfahan and Natanz; this was a strategic warning strike to underline Israel's ability to attack any target located in Iran. On the second occasion (Operation Days of Repentance), the Israeli air force launched three consecutive raids involving over 120 aircraft (F-35s, F-15Is, F-16Is and armed MALE drones): the first wave neutralized Syrian air defence and Iranian radars deployed in Syria and Iraq. The second wave destroyed the most advanced radar and ground-air systems in Iran (including the last two S-300 PMU2 anti-aircraft batteries and several Hawk, Talash-3 and Bavar-373 batteries), clearing the way for the third wave, which, after refuelling in the air over Jordan and Iraq, hit a number of military-industrial infrastructures linked to the ballistic program and drone production. For the first time, the Israeli air force appears to have fired some thirty Golden Horizon and ISO2/Rocks airborne ballistic missiles[10] from a safe distance (from Iraqi territory); fighter-bombers have launched them to follow an upward trajectory similar to that of conventional ballistic missiles, thereby increasing their range and penetration power against hardened targets, and making them more difficult to intercept due to their speed and vertical trajectory on impact.

From December 8 to 15, 2024, taking advantage of the chaos caused by the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime, the Israeli air force carried out a long-planned air campaign (operation “Bashan Arrow”) involving over 500 strikes delivered by all available aircraft, enabling it to destroy 80% of Syrian military capabilities likely to represent a threat to Israel: the entire air defence system (radars, coordination centres, ground-air batteries), the entire combat air force and navy, chemical weapons and long-range missile depots[11]. Since then, it has continued its strikes against the slightest target that could reduce its ability to act over Syrian airspace. On September 29, 2024 and January 9, 2025, some twenty Israeli aircraft carried out strikes in Yemen against Houthi military targets, targeting headquarters and launch sites for drones and ballistic

[8] Joshua Dryden, « Iran, Israel and the struggle for the skies over the Middle East », Aether: A Journal of Strategic Airpower, Vol. 2, n° 1, 2023, pp. 84-95.
[9] As evidenced by the New York Times article of April 16, 2025, which explains that Donald Trump vetoed a large-scale Israeli air operation targeting Iran's nuclear program, pointing out that such an operation would have required significant American military support.
[10] CESA special edition, « Primo-analyse de l’emploi de la puissance aérienne israélienne en Syrie », February 2025.
[11] Ibidem.

missiles. On May 5, 2025, some fifty aircraft destroyed Sanaa airport in retaliation for the firing of a Houthi ballistic missile at Ben Gourion airport on May 2. At the same time, since October 2023, the Israeli air force has been carrying out a vast bombing campaign against Gaza and Lebanon, aimed at eradicating Hamas and Hezbollah[12].

Precise analysis of all these strikes makes it possible to identify the modus operandi favoured by the Israeli air force, which represents the spearhead of Israel's strategy, either to eliminate their ennemies or to deter them. There is, however, a conceptual debate within the General Staff on the relevance of creating a ground-based ballistic missile corps equipped with highly accurate conventional warheads, independent of the air force, to enable the Israeli government to decide on a rapid response in the event of further Iranian ballistic strikes, without being dependent on the technical constraints of a conventional air strike[13].

"Decalogue" for planning Israeli air strikes

1) Count on surprise; control the tempo[14]; take the weather into account.

2) Attack at night, in parallel with a cybernetic offensive designed to disrupt enemy command and communications.

3) Make the best possible use of space-based resources to coordinate the attack in real time, then accurately assess the results of the strikes.

4) Accompany fighters with electronic warfare and airborne surveillance aircraft to blind the enemy and detect potential threats in good time.

5) Give priority to destroying enemy radars and ground-air batteries, using SEAD[15] resources specifically designed for this mission.

6) Set up CSAR teams along the flight path to exfiltrate pilots who eject; never leave a pilot alive with the enemy.

7) Mix vectors (surveillance and attack drones, stealth fighters, multi-purpose fighter-bombers) and fire from a safe distance whenever possible (requiring large stocks of cruise missiles and air-launched ballistic missiles).

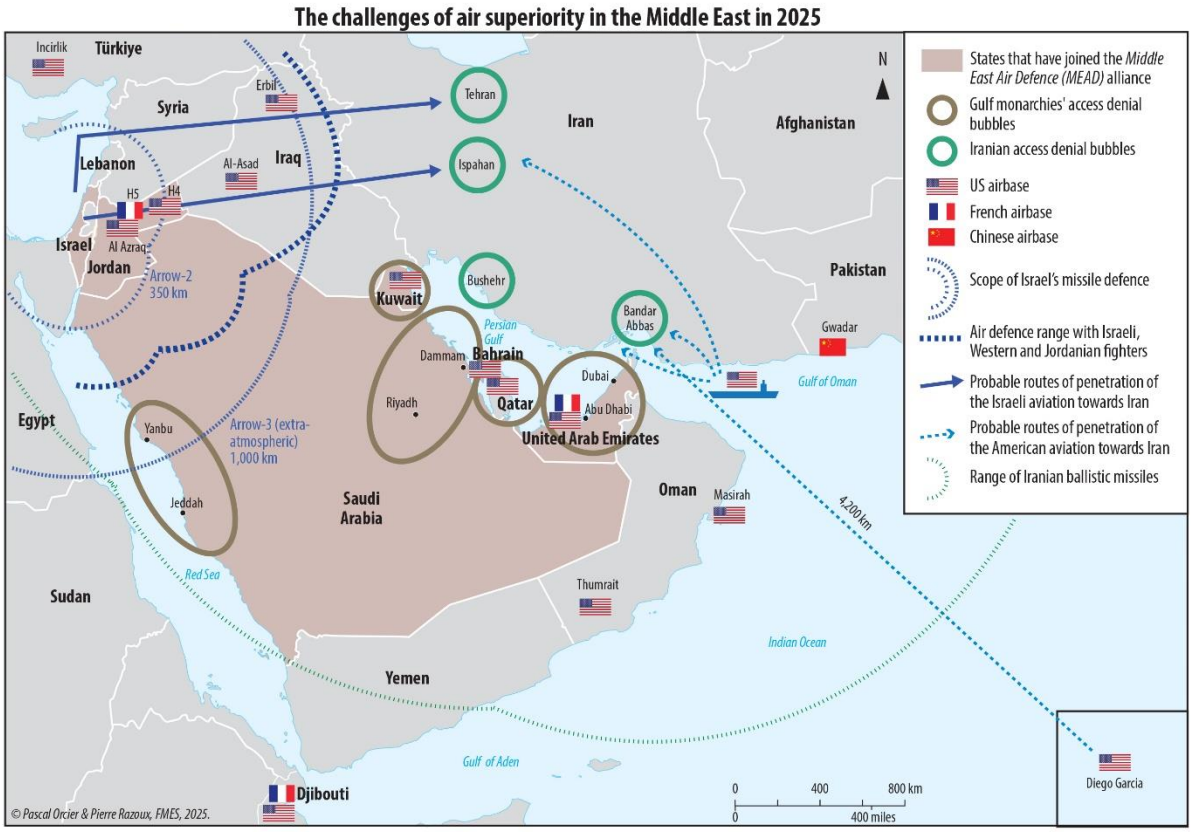
8) Use artificial intelligence to optimize targeting[16]; concentrate efforts and projectiles on the most important targets[17].

9) Link up strikes or assault waves to give the enemy no respite.

10) Master upstream and downstream communication via the media and social networks to impose the narrative and counter opposing propaganda.

[12] CESA special edition, "Emploi de la puissance aérienne israélienne sur le front nord", October 2024.
[13] Tal Schneider, "Reforming the Air Force? Some find ballistic missile doctrine more reliable", The Times of Israel, December 25, 2024.
[14] Israel did not hesitate to modify its plans and postpone its attack, which finally took place on October 25, 2024, as leaks in the USA had leaked certain details of the initial plan.
[15] SEAD: Suppression of Enemy Air Defences.
[16] CESA, Note n° 567 « L'usage de l'intelligence artificielle dans le ciblage et le renseignement : exemples américains et israéliens », July 2024.
[17] For example, the Israeli air force dropped 80 precision-guided munitions on the night of September 27-28, 2024 (operation "New Order") to eliminate Hassan Nasrallah, Secretary General of Hezbollah, from his headquarters in southern Beirut; CESA note already quoted "Use of Israeli air power on the northern front".

Previously, if the Israeli air force had had to launch an air campaign against Iran, it would most likely have acted in a pincer movement, flying on the one hand over the Iraqi Kurdish zone, the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to act from the north, and on the other over Jordan and the Gulf monarchies to act from the south. This option implied a longer, more uncertain route, and the tacit agreement of the countries overflown. Today, such an option would be all the more diplomatically delicate as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar vigorously oppose the use of their airspace for any attack targeting Iranian territory. In this respect, the surprise visit to Teheran (April 17, 2025) by the Saudi Defence Minister the day after a media leak suggesting imminent Israeli strikes, is a clear signal of Riyadh's opposition to any attack on the Iranian regime via its territory. The current weakness of the air defence systems of Iran and its allies opens up an unprecedented window of opportunity for Israel. Since its anti-aircraft defence systems have been destroyed in Syria, virtually non-existent in Iraq and very weakened in Iran, the Israeli air force can now attack Iran head-on by the shortest route, flying unconcernedly over Syria or Jordan, then Iraq and Iran.



In defensive mode, Israel remains largely dependent on its close military cooperation with the United States. If Israel has been able to intercept the ballistic missile salvos fired by Iran and the Yemeni Houthis so effectively, it is because its air and missile defence is connected to CENTCOM and the US global missile surveillance network, because the White House has authorized the deployment of 4 anti-missile batteries on its territory (2 THAAD and 2 Patriot PAC-3), and because the US defence industry contributes significantly to the production of the Arrow-2 and Arrow-3 anti-missile

systems. Israeli leaders are well aware that without this critical assistance, their ability to intercept an Iranian ballistic missile attack would be significantly reduced, increasing their vulnerability to a saturation attack. They know that they are engaged in a race of speed with the Iranians, and that they need to produce twice as many interceptor missiles as the Iranians are capable of producing ballistic missiles of sufficient range to reach them, not to mention deliveries of offensive weapons such as F-35s, F-15Is and anti-bunker bombs. They also know that their Arrow missiles cost between $2 and $3 million each, whereas according to their military intelligence, the cost of an Iranian solid-fuel ballistic missile with a range of over 1,500 kilometres would be around $1 million[18]. At this price, American financial assistance remains crucial, and the White House has a powerful lever at its disposal to convince the Israeli government not to oppose its interests in the region.

If the White House were to authorize a strike on Iran, Israel would need substantial American logistical support to sustain an air campaign against the Iranian regime on the long run, particularly in terms of in-flight refuelling, space imagery, ammunition stockpiles that would need to be replenished very quickly, and missile defence to protect its territory as much as possible. In essence, this was the message conveyed by researcher Erin Moseley at a conference at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv on February 25, 2025, on the theme “Air Power Next: the future of combat air”[19].

Regardless of U.S. assistance, Israeli strategists have realized the vulnerability of their territory and the need to protect their anti-missile batteries much more effectively, as they now constitute targets of very high strategic value for all their adversaries[20].

The United States can easily gain air superiority, but its willingness to commit militarily to a major conflict remains highly uncertain

In view of their technological superiority and the scope of their resources, the US armed forces can easily achieve air superiority in the Middle East. Their deep strike capabilities (B-2 and B-52 bombers, fighter-bombers, drones, cruise missiles, anti-bunker bombs) and support assets (cyber, space, electronic warfare, artificial intelligence, air-to-air refuelling tankers, aerial surveillance aircraft) enable them to strike massively anywhere in the region, including Iran. American air superiority experts believe that “The space domain and cyber capabilities will be critical for enhancing C4ISR to support future air superiority missions”[21]. Their problem is much more diplomatic, and consists in determining from which air bases to act, and over which territories. The Gulf monarchies, as well as Turkey, have made it clear to Washington that they do not intend to be involved in any strikes against Iran. Jordan and Iraq are

[18] Jerusalem Post, October 4, 2024 : https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/defense-news/article-823148
[19] Air Power Next - The Future of Combat Air | INSS
[20] By using more mobile and better camouflaged systems, multiplying decoys and jamming systems, improving the overlap of multi-layered missile defence, and deploying more conventional anti-aircraft batteries nearby capable of detecting and destroying swarms of drones; Eran Ortal and Ran Kovach, “To defend Israel, rearrange the sky”, BESA Perspectives Paper no. 2292, August 11, 2024.
[21] Sabahat Khan, « Rethinking combat power: Air superiority in the age of pervasive threats », The Air Power Journal, 4th edition, 2024.

very cautious on this issue, as both countries know they do not have the means to oppose Iranian retaliation, which could destabilize them internally. The U.S. base in Djibouti is remote (a fortiori in the event of a ban on overflights of Gulf territories) and does not come under the responsibility of CENTCOM, but of the AFRICOM command. As a study by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy points out, “The biggest enduring US military advantage in the Middle East involves its ability to obtain access, basing and overflight”[22]. If Washington were to respect the conditions set by its partners, CENTCOM would probably launch its air raids from the US base at Diego Garcia and the aircraft carriers deployed in the Gulf of Oman (see map), perhaps from an Israeli base (especially for the F-35), but more likely from US bases in Europe, with overflights of the eastern Mediterranean, Syria and Kurdish-controlled northern Iraq. Given the enormous logistical effort that such raids would entail (particularly in terms of ammunition and in-flight refuelling), it is unlikely, given the stakes involved and the need to maintain large stockpiles facing China, that the United States could sustain the pace of a long air campaign, a fortiori if it were to support possible Israeli strikes in parallel.

The United States' second constraint is a political one, as both the White House and a majority of American public opinion are reluctant to commit to a new war in the Middle East. The aim of President Donald Trump, who distrusts the military and is not a warmonger despite his outrageous provocations, is to negotiate agreements that will put an end to ongoing conflicts. His Secretary of State Marco Rubio, despite belonging to the hawkish clan, has publicly declared: “Any military action at this point in the Middle East, whether it is against Iran by us or anybody else, could in fact trigger a much broader conflict which would be much messier than what people are used to seeing”[23]. The Trump administration is also engaged in negotiations with Iran to try to find a way out of the Iranian nuclear issue and avoid the use of force, even if this option remains on the table. It is with this same logic in mind that the United States has massively bombed the Houthis in Yemen, to increase the pressure on the Iranian regime, which knows that it has become militarily very vulnerable to possible American and Israeli strikes.

Defensively, and despite its formidable missile shield of land-based THAAD batteries and sea-based Aegis/SM-3 systems, the Pentagon faces the same challenges as Israel's Ministry of Defence. It knows that its military assets in the Middle East are not invulnerable. In the event of Iranian retaliation, the United States would probably suffer significant losses, which could only be very unpopular with public opinion. Washington therefore favours a strategy based on conventional deterrence, diplomacy and pre-emptive strikes, which in its view avert the spectre of a major war.

[22] Nathan Olsen, « Preserving US military advantages in the Middle East », WINEP, 14 mai 2023.
[23] Marco Rubio, Free Press, April 23, 2025.

Russia and China cannot challenge US air dominance, but remain suppliers of technology and weapons

Russia can no longer afford its ambitions in the Middle East. Although it has been able to deploy an air-access-denial bubble consisting of high-performance radars, Su-35 fighters, S-400 surface-to-air missiles in Syria and jamming equipment[24], its massive military commitment in Ukraine has prevented it from creating an equivalent system elsewhere. The presence of this protective bubble has above all enabled it to negotiate with Israel and Turkey, giving them - or not - the green light to strike their targets in Syria (Kurdish militias for the Turks, Hezbollah and pro-Iranian elements for the Israelis). Since the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, Russia has been negotiating hard with the new Syrian government to maintain its Hmeimim air base. With the outcome uncertain, the Kremlin is seeking to establish itself elsewhere in the region, without any convincing results to date. Even if it succeeded, it would probably be unable to deploy more than a similar denial-of-access bubble (perhaps with S-500 ground-to-air systems), given the losses suffered on the Ukrainian front and the need to defend Russian territory. In any case, Russian strategists have always favoured a defensive approach to air superiority[25]. Their air presence abroad[26] is primarily a logistical hub for supplying their light forces, currently scattered across Africa. To operate today in the Levant or in Iraq, Russian aircraft would have to cover more than 1,500 kilometres from their bases in the North Caucasus and from their advanced base at Gyumri in Armenia, thus drastically limiting - even with several in-flight refuelling - the time spent over a contested zone. Only northern Iran remains within effective Russian fighter range. On the other hand, Russia can indirectly influence air superiority by supporting its Middle Eastern partners in cyber, space, guidance and detection, as well as countermeasures, all areas in which it has proven offensive and defensive capabilities.

China does not seem ready to deploy major air or anti-aircraft assets in the Middle East. Apart from access to military facilities at the Gwadar base in Pakistan, it currently only has access to its Djibouti base, where it does not yet have permanent access to the country's only air base. Its strategy is to defend and secure these two bases as much as possible, deploying UAVs, air defence ships and ground-based denial of access systems, but not yet air superiority fighters. Unless China is granted exclusive use of the Djibouti air base, it will have to build a dedicated one, which could be the case once the Obock space base is operational. If China were to establish itself militarily in certain countries with which it has forged a strategic partnership (Iran, UAE,

[24] Russian offensive resources (Su-24 and Su-34 fighter-bombers, Bastion and Kalibr anti-ship missiles) deployed in Syria were part of a strategy of posturing in the eastern Mediterranean, as was the presence of the naval Eskadra based in Tartous.

[25] Even at the height of their military involvement in the Middle East during the War of Attrition between Israel and Egypt (1969-1970), the Russians (Soviets at the time) had deployed only 2 air defence divisions equipped with SA-2/SA-3/SA-6 surface-to-air missile regiments and MiG-21 and MiG-23 interceptors.

[26] In the spring of 2025, Russia can count on its air bases at Gyumri in Armenia and Al Ghardabiya and Joufra in Libya to contribute to this logistical mission.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Iraq and Oman), it is possible that it would reassess its posture and deploy denial of access bubbles made up of the latest equipment, including fighters. In the meantime, Russia and China remain suppliers of technology likely to contribute to the struggle for air superiority, notably in the fields of space, cyber, artificial intelligence, detection, guidance (latest-generation satellites and radars) and electronic warfare, as well as weapons systems contributing more directly to this crucial mission. The catalogue is well-stocked, from latest-generation fighters (Russian Su-34, Su-35 and Su-57; Chinese J-15, J-16 and J-20) to sophisticated ground-air systems (S-400, S-500 on the Russian side; HQ-12, HQ-16, HQ-22 on the Chinese side).

Until now, Russia was considered a first-rate supplier for countries not wishing to buy from Western countries, as its armaments were reputed to be reliable, inexpensive and combat-proven. However, Russia's abandonment of Bashar El Assad and its inability to rapidly deliver the armaments promised to Iran, India and Algeria as a result of its war effort against Ukraine, have scalded its usual customers[27]. The latter (notably Iran) are now looking more to China as a more reliable partner, even if its weapons do not have the same reputation for rusticity and effectiveness. Beijing and Moscow also find themselves in competition with India and South Korea, which offer high-performance fighters and anti-aircraft systems at affordable prices. The United Arab Emirates are reportedly very interested in the South Korean K-21 Boramae fighter[28], since they were unable to obtain the American F-35 stealth fighter.

What are France's challenges?

Some Middle Eastern states, doubtful of the U.S. security guarantee, are stepping up the diversification of their sources of supply and turning to other suppliers, including France, following the example of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates which have signed major contracts to acquire Rafale fighters[29] (Dassault), Thales radars and ASTER 30 surface-to-air missiles. There is no doubt that the war missions carried out over the last few years by the Rafales of the French Navy and Air Force, permanently deployed at the Al-Dhafra (UAE), H-5 (Jordan) and soon Djibouti bases, have helped to reinforce the credibility of this particularly effective multi-mission fighter. Their presence, complemented by the deployment in Jordan of long-range SAMP/T surface-to-air missile batteries (EUROSAM / MBDA-Thales), enables France to establish denial of access bubbles that contribute to the protection of Emirati, Djiboutian and Jordanian territory. In January 2022, the Rafales at the French air base in Abu Dhabi were put on alert, helping to dissuade the Houthis - and thus Iran - from continuing their intimidating strikes on Emirati territory. On the night of March 8-9, 2024, Mirage 2000-5 aircraft based in Djibouti shot down several drones fired by the Houthis against

[27] Although, according to the IISS Institute), Algeria has just received several Su-35s; "Felon outflanked?", April 8, 2025.
[28] Laurent Lagneau, Zone Militaire OPEX 360, April 15, 2025.
[29] 36 Rafale F3 (all delivered) + a further 24 to F4 standard (under discussion) for Qatar, and 80 Rafale F4 for the UAE (deliverable from 2027).

merchant ships over the Bab el-Mandeb Strait[30]. On the night of April 13-14, 2024, French forces deployed in Jordan successfully detected and intercepted a number of Iranian drones and cruise missiles before they reached Israeli territory.

The French Navy also contributes to this air superiority mission through the permanent presence of air defence frigates (FREDA or FDA) in the Eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea (Aspides mission), as well as through the punctual presence of the *Groupe aéronaval* (GAN) of the aircraft carrier *Charles de Gaulle*, which establishes a denial of access bubble of several hundred nautical miles around itself.

Beyond the defensive dimension, the added value of France's armed forces (Air Force and Navy) lies in their offensive strike capabilities in the depths of an enemy territory, thanks to their Rafales armed with cruise missiles, in-flight refuelling aircraft, AWACS, satellites, frigates and submarines. This capacity for pre-emptive or retaliatory strikes is designed to deter further aggression, or even limit its intensity[31]. At the operational level, this means maintaining the ability to enter first into a hostile environment that can be defended by interceptors, sophisticated ground-to-air missile batteries and a variety of jammers. To strengthen its capabilities in this area, France would benefit from[32]:

1) Urgently rebuild the SEAD capabilities (detection and destruction of enemy ground-air and radar systems) it abandoned some thirty years ago, in particular by acquiring a type of missile optimized for destroying enemy ground-air batteries and their fire-control radars.
2) Significantly increase ammunition and missile stockpiles (especially ground-to-air, sea-to-air and cruise missiles).
3) Improve penetration capabilities for deep strikes by developing hypervelocity capabilities, in particular from ballistic missiles (ground-based, ship-mounted or airborne).
4) Increase the number of ground-to-air and anti-missile batteries.
5) Create an encrypted data storage infrastructure for operational use in theatres of engagement for the French armed forces.
6) Expand tactical data links for use by air and naval assets deployed in the Middle East.
7) Accelerate the use of artificial intelligence for operational purposes.
8) Strengthen the strategic thinking and agility of those who design and execute air superiority operations, through the widespread use of wargames, simulation exercises and brainstorming sessions, in partnership with dedicated organizations and think tanks such as FMES Institute.

[30] CESA Note n° 590, « L'utilisation des drones houthistes au service d'une stratégie de déstabilisation régionale », March 2025.
[31] Following the example of the “Hamilton” operation against certain Syrian infrastructures on April 14, 2018.
[32] These suggestions are in line with the conclusions of the above-mentioned IFRI study (No. 122, January 2025) on the future of air superiority.

At the diplomatic and strategic levels, the challenge is to maintain the air bases in Jordan, the UAE and Djibouti (or replace them with others if necessary), while keeping open air corridors over partner countries with which France sometimes has complex relations. These include Turkey (the northern gateway to the Middle East), Israel (the central gateway to Jordan and Iraq) and Egypt (the southern gateway to the Red Sea and the Arabian Peninsula). This constraint means that the French government must not get angry with these three states at the same time. It should be noted that night flights over Syria, now without air defences, remain an option.

To guarantee air superiority over key sectors of the Middle East, even on an occasional basis, France needs to maintain access to this region, reinforce its missile stockpiles and logistics, improve the penetration capabilities of its vectors, increase its ground-air and missile defence, and optimize synergies between its various assets (notably its drones and those of its partners). Finally, France must develop its SEAD, cyber, electronic warfare, AI and Data capabilities. This is an efficient way to deter hostile actors in this region as well as in many others.

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