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# **The Failure of the Joint Force's Roles and Responsibilities in Missile Defense**

*By Riki Ellison*

## **Impact**

From February 28 to May 5, 2026, Iran targeted 20 U.S. forward operating bases (FOBs) and facilities across eight countries with ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. Seven American soldiers have died in combat, and an additional 380 have been wounded on those bases. At least 15 USAF aircraft and multiple American THAAD radars have been hit. Missile defense munitions are critically depleted, with expenditures exceeding \$6 billion, putting other U.S. Global COCOMS Operational Plans (OPLANS) and Campaign Plans at risk. The majority of the U.S. FOBs and facilities attacked by Iran have been evacuated, and many look to be terminated permanently.

These figures still undoubtedly understate what was actually lost. Aircraft, radars, command nodes, and interceptors cannot be replaced quickly or cheaply. The deeper loss is operational. Bases that are no longer mission capable represent the forfeiture of every dollar, every work year, and every diplomatic negotiation that built and sustained them. Decades of construction, prepositioned stocks, and hard-won host-nation agreements are gone. Once a forward base can no longer do the job it was designed, built and positioned to do, the full investment in that base is effectively written off.

Another equally consequential category of concern is the inability of the United States Missile Defense Enterprise to utilize Data from each Attack. It is a demonstration of dysfunction. A force that cannot convert the data that captures combat experience into improved defensive capability is not a defense enterprise. It is an institution absorbing punishment and waiting for the next strike.

Despite the scale of U.S. resources and the breadth of existing missile defense capability, a mid-tier regional power operating an already-degraded and diminished missile force systematically undermined American global force posture and force protection over 66 days. Credible air and missile defense is not optional infrastructure. It is the foundation of forward power projection, and forward power projection is the foundation of deterrence.



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You cannot deter from bases that are no longer defensible, and you cannot project power from bases you have abandoned. Deterrence through strength is not a strategy that survives the permanent loss of the positions from which strength is projected.

The failures documented here are traceable to a specific structural problem in how the Joint Force assigns and enforces roles and responsibilities for missile defense. That problem was known. The cost of leaving it unresolved is now on the books. The combat failures in this campaign are documented, attributed, and directly traceable to the institutional seam between Army air and missile defense authority and Air Force installation operations. This is not a new finding.

### **The Setup**

The Key West Agreement of 1948 assigned ground-based AMD to the Army. The Wilson Memorandum of 1956 attempted to distinguish area defense from point defense but in practice locked all surface-to-air missile authority with the Army. DoDD 5100.01 carries this arrangement forward to the present day. The structural consequence is straightforward and damaging: the Army holds the mission but bears no operational consequence when an Air Force base is lost. The Air Force owns the equities, including the aircraft, the personnel, the fuel, and the command nodes, but holds no formal authority over its own active air defense.

In 2004 and 2005, the Army unilaterally abrogated Joint Service Agreement 8, its obligation to defend air bases, on resource grounds. That action was the clearest demonstration of how incentive misalignment functions in practice when accountability is absent. No corrective action followed. The cost of that decision was paid in full between February and May 2026.

The Army's air and missile defense (AMD) responsibilities are not ambiguous on paper. Doctrine assigns the AMD Enterprise clear obligations: provide Combatant Commanders with flexible, integrated forces capable of multi-domain operations; defend the homeland, regional joint and coalition forces, and critical assets; and converge AMD capabilities to help the Joint Force Air Component Commander and Area Air Defense Commander open windows of air superiority that the broader Joint Force can exploit. (USA Air and Missile Defense Vision 2028, March 2019)

The command authority structure is equally clear. The Joint Force Commander normally designates the COMAFFOR as both the JFACC and the AADC — the single commander responsible for all defensive counterair across the Joint Operations Area. The JFACC uses the Air Operations Center to coordinate among components and develop the Area Air Defense Plan, and US Army Air and Missile Defense Command serves as the AOC's primary interface for land-based active AMD. (Air Force Manual 13-1, AOC, Volume 3, June 2024)



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The roles were written. The authorities were assigned. What was absent was any mechanism to enforce them — and in that gap, accountability collapsed, responsibility diffused, and no one was left answerable when the seams failed.

### **Significant Epic Fury Events**

The following is a factual account of what happened when that accountability gap met a determined adversary that had clearly studied it.

- Three F-15E Strike Eagles were shot down by Kuwaiti F/A-18 operators working from a disconnected national air picture, a failure confirmed by CENTCOM. At Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, the Air Force E-3G Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft sat on an unprotected taxiway and was destroyed by Iranian missiles in the same attack that damaged five KC-135 Stratotankers. Both losses resulted directly from the failure to integrate active Army missile defense with Air Force passive defense. Replacing the E-3G with the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail, the only available successor platform, will cost more than \$700 million per aircraft per the Wall Street Journal. The U.S. fleet had already declined to 16 aircraft before this loss, and there is no active production line.
- At Camp Buehring in Kuwait, a 1960s Iranian F-5 Tiger II conducted a successful bombing run through layered U.S. defenses by flying nap-of-earth, below the detection geometry of the Patriot AN/MPQ-65 radar, which is optimized for ballistic missiles and medium-to-high altitude threats. A manned aircraft from the Kennedy administration defeating 2026 U.S. air defenses is not a sensor anomaly. It is a doctrinal indictment of an architecture that concentrates high-end intercept capability on the threats it was designed for while leaving the low-altitude, low-cost envelope undefended.
- Iran also executed a systematic targeting strategy against the sensing architecture itself. AN/TPY-2 X-band radars, central to THAAD integration, were struck first, blinding THAAD before interceptors could engage. Four radars were confirmed struck. There was no relocation protocol. Hardening was insufficient. Emplacements were fixed. This is a doctrinal failure compounded by an execution failure, and it directly enabled the subsequent strikes on defended bases.

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Why was missile defense neither prepared nor positioned before the conflict began? Why did drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles still penetrate the bases that were defended? (To note that after four years and 75% of air bases struck on Day 1, Zero Ukrainian air bases have been permanently destroyed or put out of action.) Why were the documented lessons of three years of Ukraine-Russia combat ignored? And why have dedicated institutions such as the Joint Counter-Small UAS Office, established in 2019, the JIATF 401, and other institutions, not delivering meaningful new capabilities to the Forces that required them most? This is a systemic breakdown demanding accountability and reform of the Joint Force's Roles and Responsibilities for Missile Defense.

## **History**

### **Roles and Responsibilities: The Structural Root Cause**

- The Key West Agreement (1948) assigned ground-based AMD to the Army. The Wilson Memorandum (1956) tried to split "area" vs. "point" defense, but in practice locked all SAM authority with the Army. DoDD 5100.01 carries this forward today.
- The core defect: the Army owns the mission but bears *no operational consequence* if an Air Force base is lost. The Air Force has all the equities — aircraft, personnel, fuel, command nodes — but zero formal authority over its own defense.
- In 2004–2005, the Army unilaterally abrogated Joint Service Agreement 8 (its obligation to defend air bases) on resource grounds. This is the clearest single data point showing the inherent incentive misalignment.

### **US Army: Roles and Responsibilities For AMD**

The Army Air and Missile Defense (AMD) Force “will **provide** Combatant Commanders with a flexible, agile and **integrated** AMD force capable of executing multi-domain operations and defending the Homeland, regional joint and coalition forces, and critical assets in support of unified land operations.”

The Army AMD Enterprise will:

- Develop AMD capabilities
- Build AMD capability for MDO
- **Provided trained and ready AMD forces**
- Maintain forward presence and build partner capacity

AMD forces execute three essential tasks:

- Protecting maneuver forces, and their fixed and semi-fixed assets



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- Defend critical assets in theater and operational support areas against complex integrated attacks
- AMD capabilities converge to help the JFACC or Area Air Defense Commander (AADC) create windows of superiority in the air domain that the Joint force can exploit

**USA Air and Missile Defense Vision 2028, March 2019**

### **US Air Force: Roles and Responsibilities For AMD**

Due to the inherent linkage of air operations and defensive counterair, the Joint Force CDR normally designates the COMAFFOR as the JFACC and the AADC to conduct defensive counterair for the Joint Force.

The Area Air Defense Commander (AADC) has overall responsibility for air and missile defense of the Joint Operations Area (JOA) or Area of Responsibility (AOR)

- The JFACC employs the Air Operations Center (AOC) to coordinate with other components and develop the Area Air Defense Plan (AADP)
- Once approved the AOC plans coordinates, and manages defensive counter operations (in support of the AADC) simultaneously to offensive counterair operations (in support of JFACC)

When designated as the AADC, the C/JFACC will provide overall direction, through the AADP, for air and missile defense, including BMD.

As the senior Army air and missile defense element at the AADC's location, the US Army Air and Missile Defense Command (AAMDC) serves as the primary interface at the AOC for all land-based active air and missile defense

**Air Force Manual 13.1, AOC, Volume 3, 25 June 2024**

### **MDAA "U.S. Missile Defense – An Overview Of Past, Current, and Future Roles and Responsibilities" - Key Recommendations:**

1. The Department of Defense must clarify each of the Services' specific responsibilities for air and missile defense and require the Services to fully resource the deployment, sustainment, and operation of their MD forces.
2. OSD must clarify each of the Combatant Command's specific responsibilities in the MD enterprise and support the deployment and operation of their MD forces.

**"Game-Changing Plan Seeks to Transform U.S. Missile Defense"; April 13, 2022**



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### **Bases and Facilities Struck**

The following U.S. FOBs and facilities were struck by ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones:

#### **Ali Al Salem Air Base, KUWAIT**

Damage confirmed across nine distinct locations, concentrated in tent areas and logistics facilities.

#### **Al Dhafra Air Base, UAE**

Home of the U.S. Air Force's 380th Air Expeditionary Wing. Main aircraft hangers directly hit.

#### **Prince Sultan Air Base, SAUDI ARABIA**

U.S.A.F. E-3 Sentry AWACS struck by missile and drone attack while parked on an unprotected taxiway. Replacing it with the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail — the only available successor platform — will cost more than \$700 million per aircraft, per The Wall Street Journal. The U.S. air fleet had already declined to 16 aircraft before this loss, and there is no active production line.

#### **NSA Bahrain — 5th Fleet HQ, BAHRAIN**

Direct hits to multiple radar domes, along with widespread damage to several vital facilities and buildings within the base — a fundamental command-and-control failure.

#### **Al Udeid Air Base, QATAR**

Confirmed strike damage across three distinct locations: destruction of a logistics operations building, structural damage to a small aircraft shelter, and impact inside the Camp Andy housing and support facility.

#### **Camp Buehring, KUWAIT**

A strategic hub for U.S. and coalition forces providing vital airlift support and military operations across the region.

#### **Camp Arifjan, KUWAIT**

A major logistics and command hub for U.S. Army Central operations in the theater.

#### **Shuaiba port, KUWAIT**

Six Army Reserve soldiers killed at a tactical operations center in the opening hours of the campaign.

#### **Jebel Ali port, UAE**

A critical logistics hub supporting U.S. naval operations and supply chains across the Gulf region.

#### **Muwaffaq Salti, JORDAN**

AN/TPY-2 radar systems central to THAAD integration were hit.

#### **Erbil International Airport, IRAQ**

U.S. forces and the U.S. Consulate General Erbil were targeted

#### **Victory Base Complex and multiple other coalition facilities in the Erbil region, IRAQ**

Multiple coalition facilities supporting U.S. operations in the Erbil region were struck

#### **Al-Tanf Garrison, SYRIA**

A strategically critical outpost in southeastern Syria, Al-Tanf serves as the primary U.S. position blocking the Iran–Iraq–Syria land corridor. Its targeting represents a direct Iranian effort to eliminate U.S. interdiction of its regional resupply routes.

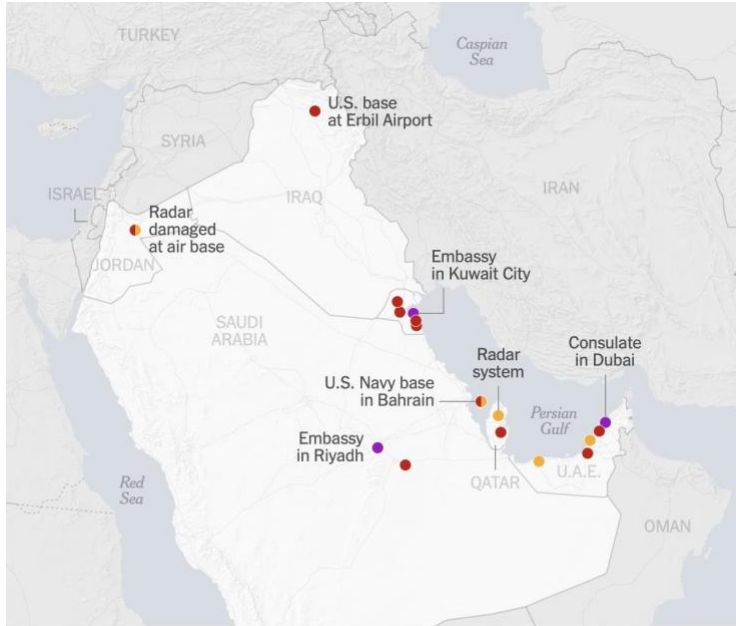
#### **Diego Garcia and associated coalition bases, JOINT U.S. - U.K. FACILITY**

Critical strategic hub for long-range bomber operations and pre-positioned logistics.



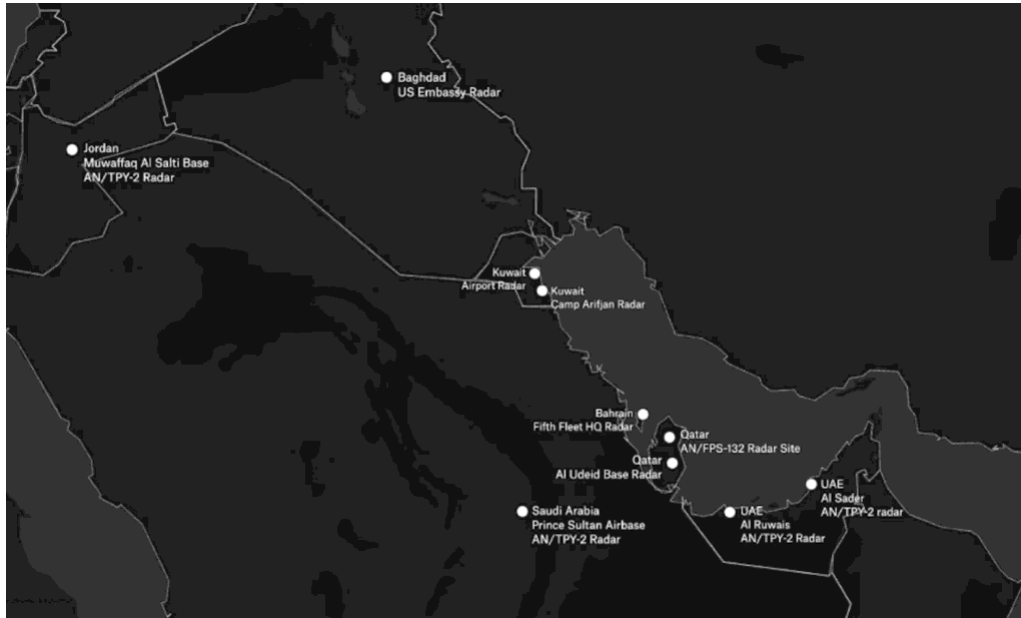
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**Exhibit 1: Locations of FOBs and other military facilities targeted by Iran**



● U.S. base or a base hosting U.S. forces ● Air defense infrastructure ● Diplomatic site

**Exhibit 2: Locations of attacks on radar technology**



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**Exhibit 3: Satellite imaging of destroyed U.S. FOBs and other military facilities**

Ali Al Salem, Kuwait; March 1

Muwaffaq Salti, Jordan; March 4



Erbil Airport, Iraq; March 1

Jebel Ali port, U.A.E.; March 1

Al Udeid, Qatar; March 9



Al Dhafra, U.A.E.; March 3

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Prince Sultan, Saudi Arabia; March 1



Camp Buehring, Kuwait; March 5



U.S. Navy 5th Fleet HQ, Bahrain; March 1

Shuaiba port, Kuwait; March 2



Camp Arifjan, Kuwait; March 4



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