

# Build It and They Will Come: A U.S. Strategy for Integrating Middle East Air and Missile Defenses

## KEY FINDINGS

The United States and its Middle East partners face an unprecedented threat in the form of the expanding missile and drone arsenals of Iran and its regional proxies. The previous CENTCOM commander said the offensive strike power of the Iranian axis has achieved “overmatch,” not just with respect to its capability to overwhelm the air defenses of Iran’s neighbors but of those protecting U.S. forces deployed in the region. The current CENTCOM commander has recently warned that the danger has grown exponentially in just the past few years. The United States and its partners are effectively one successful strike away from potential catastrophe.

While replete with advanced American anti-missile platforms, U.S. partners (with the striking exception of Israel) have not organized their air and missile defenses to keep pace with this looming threat. Though the operational advantages of region-wide integrated air and missile defenses (IAMD) are clear and have been a subject of constant U.S. diplomatic interventions, regional rivalries, suspicions, and animosities among U.S. partners have inhibited their willingness to engage in the intelligence sharing and cooperation necessary for integrated air defenses.

This is now changing—first and foremost because of the shift in the severity of the Iranian threat. That threat, in turn, has helped prompt two critical changes in the geopolitical landscape that are helping drive the potential for greater regional cooperation: First, the Abraham Accords and the broader process of Israel’s improving security ties with Arab states; and second Israel’s shift into CENTCOM’s area of responsibility (AOR). Yet success is not foreordained.

Three key guidelines should shape efforts to take advantage of this decisive moment to advance IAMD.

- 1. U.S. political and military support.** CENTCOM is the preferred strategic partner of every U.S. regional ally and the only force with the experience, capacity, and credibility to help overcome the historical resistance of local states toward multi-national cooperation. The U.S. President is the only actor capable of reassuring the region's leaders that by taking the risks of joining a U.S.-led IAMD network to counter Iran—especially one including Israel—they will be helping consolidate Washington's long-term commitment to their security.
- 2. Step-by-step approach.** Both the region's resistance to greater integration, as well as the inherent challenges that integration poses to even the world's best military organizations and alliances, argue for a degree of modesty in how far and fast IAMD can be advanced.
- 3. Coalition-of-the-willing.** Do not allow the perfect to be the enemy of the good when it comes to the regional parties prepared to participate. While open to all relevant U.S. partners capable of contributing to the broader effort, CENTCOM should be prepared to move forward even if only a smaller subset of Arab states initially agrees to join the effort alongside Israel. Its aim should be to prove out the significant benefits of greater air defense integration over time to all its partners and remain open to adding the resources and capabilities of other prospective participants as their comfort and confidence in the system grows.

CENTCOM is already applying these guidelines. It has made unprecedented progress in assembling a coalition-of-the-willing, including Israel and at least six Arab partners, that is now meeting regularly at multiple senior command levels to discuss and plan future cooperation on air and missile defense and is already sharing threat information via telephones on a voluntary basis as part of a nascent early warning system against slower-moving drones—one that, while rudimentary, has already delivered security benefits for its participants.

While an important start, rising to the enormity of the Iranian challenge will require significantly more in the way of true region-wide integration. The first critical step is the establishment of a system that begins sharing threat data not at the speed of sound but closer to the speed of light or—more importantly—the speed of modern warfare.

It will require willingness by nations to connect their sensors and radars with CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Doha, Qatar, where the information can be fused into a common operating picture (COP) that is then shared, without restriction, with coalition members. Success will require CENTCOM to assuage concerns among its partners that such a system will protect their intelligence while not exposing them to excessive risk of cyber penetration or attack.

While the technical challenges of achieving secure and effective digital connectivity between different national air defense systems should be resolvable, ensuring political buy-in from regional leaderships worried about the reliability of their neighbors, the risk of provoking Iran, and long-term U.S. staying power and support could prove more difficult, and will require strong and sustained engagement by Washington.

In terms of building out the IAMD architecture, there are already advanced U.S.-supplied platforms in the region. Major purchases of equipment should not be immediately necessary—beyond those technologies required for existing sensors to enable the COP to have real-time digital connectivity and for all participating states to securely transfer data with high bandwidth speeds.

Beyond the connection of existing platforms, a joint effort to add more sensors to close gaps and maximize the geographic coverage should be the highest short-term priority for any purchase of IAMD capabilities. This should include exploiting and adapting available commercial unmanned platforms and artificial intelligence. Participating states should invest in joint research and development efforts to develop technologies in the air and missile defense realm, particularly those, like directed energy, that hold the promise of bending the cost curve in favor of the defender. Finally, as CENTCOM and U.S. policymakers consider future capabilities and changes to the system's architecture, they should look, wherever compatible with the network's effectiveness and integrity, to incorporating Israeli expertise and technologies to provide solutions—with an eye to enhancing Israel's value proposition to the security of its neighbors and advancing the strategic U.S. interest in deepening and expanding Israel's ties with the Arab world.

## Recommendations

In order to take advantage of the opportunities for advancing IAMD, the Biden administration and Congress should consider steps to prioritize the issue and incentivize U.S. partners to join.

### For the Biden Administration:

- Establish a common operating picture (COP) with a coalition-of-the-willing that includes Israel and Arab partners prepared to connect their sensors to CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) and share information in real-time across the coalition.
- Combine CENTCOM's efforts to negotiate data sharing and technical arrangements for the COP with messaging from Washington on the importance that the United States attaches to IAMD.

- Host conferences, simulations, and training exercises under CENTCOM’s auspices that demonstrate how the system would work, the advantages it would deliver to members, and the protocols that address member concerns regarding the protection of sensitive national security information and cyber security.
- Consider establishing (and resourcing) a unit under CENTCOM’s Area Air Defense Commander that will be responsible for executing data sharing agreements, technical requirements, and training programs necessary for creating the COP.
- Develop a mechanism for streamlining and fast-tracking CENTCOM-approved Foreign Military Sales (FMS) acquisitions by U.S. partners that are deemed essential to the establishment of a COP and for the bolstering of the IAMD network. Where essential for purchases by individual partner nations, Foreign Military Financing (FMF) should also be fast-tracked to incentivize maximum participation in the network.
- Review U.S. arms sales policy in the Middle East to address the defense needs of Arab allies—especially given China’s efforts to penetrate the region with sales of advanced weaponry that, could thwart CENTCOM’s strategy of integrating its partners.

### **For Congress**

- Explore legislation that identifies the development of IAMD in the Middle East as U.S. national policy, starting with the near-term establishment of a COP, and authorizes and appropriates funds for cooperative programs aimed at incentivizing U.S. partners to participate.
- Consider legislation that prioritizes IAMD-related FMS acquisitions approved by CENTCOM, along with necessary FMF support, would encourage regional participation in the network and improve IAMD capabilities.
- Authorize and appropriate funding for joint programs that would be beneficial and open only to IAMD participants and expand the network’s region-wide sensor coverage; a joint R&D program to develop new, cost-effective, and cutting-edge technologies for defeating Iranian missiles and drones; and the establishment of an IAMD Red Sands innovation, testing, and experimentation center of excellence in Saudi Arabia.