

Forged Under Fire: Middle East Air Defense After Iran's 2024 Attacks on Israel



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Preface

The scene: Two combat jets race through the night sky on opposite sides of the Saudi-Jordanian border. In one cockpit, a pilot from the Royal Saudi Air Force. In the other, one of Israel's top air commanders. For most of modern Middle East history, this might have been the prelude to a mid-air dogfight waged by combatants in one of the region's multiple wars pitting the Jewish state against its Arab neighbors. But on the evening of April 13, 2024, a radically different scenario was unfolding. Rather than enemies, these pilots were part of a remarkable multinational coalition, mobilized under American auspices, to defend Israel against a massive Iranian aerial assault involving more than 300 ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones—among the largest barrages in the history of warfare. Rather than firing at each other, the Israeli and Saudi jets were on a shared mission of hunting down and neutralizing hundreds of incoming Iranian projectiles.

More than a year later, fully comprehending and assessing the monumental nature of what transpired that evening remains something of a challenge. Since the shocking Hamas attack of October 7, 2023, Israel has been at war for 20 months, fighting at times on up to seven fronts against Iran and its network of heavily armed proxy groups in Gaza, Lebanon, the West Bank, Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. The rush of daily events, battles, death, destruction, and geopolitical disruptions has been relentless and oftentimes overwhelming. No sooner does one extraordinary development occur only to be overtaken or overshadowed by the next day's crisis. In the face of that kind of information onslaught, it's all too easy, especially with the passage of time, to lose sight of the history-making nature of any given moment in the conflict's extended timeline.

This report is an effort to go back and analyze at greater length the two large-scale missile attacks that Iran launched against Israel in 2024. The first attack, noted above, occurred in the overnight hours of April 13. The second, less than six months later, took place on October 1. As an initial matter, we attempt to describe the crises themselves in as systematic and factual a manner as current information allows—in terms of how they were triggered, the nature of the attacks themselves, and their military consequences. As part of this effort, we also seek to identify and account for some of the important differences between the crises and the way Iran's attacks were defeated.

We then highlight the significance of the attacks along two important lines: first, in terms of what they tell us strategically about the state of Israel's evolving relations with its Arab neighbors; and second, in terms of what they tell us, at a military operational level, about the unexpectedly rapid advances being made in the region's most important cooperative defense project—integrated air and missile defenses, or IAMD. Finally, based on our analysis of the attacks, we develop a series of lessons learned and recommendations on what further steps should be taken by the United States and its partners to leverage the remarkable successes of 2024 in order to take Middle East IAMD to the next level.

This report builds on the work of two previous JINSA studies: *A Stronger and Wider Peace: A U.S. Strategy for Advancing the Abraham Accords*¹ and *Build It and They Will Come: A U.S. Strategy for Integrating Middle East Air and Missile Defenses*.² The first, written in late 2021, came in the immediate aftermath of Israel's entry into the U.S. Central Command's (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR)—a move JINSA had been advocating since 2018.³ *A Stronger and Wider Peace* urged Washington to prioritize IAMD as the cornerstone of its efforts to advance Israel's defense cooperation with its Arab neighbors and establish a new regional security architecture under U.S. leadership. Congress quickly seized on the idea in late 2022 to pass the DEFEND Act, which tasked the Pentagon with developing an official strategy for building IAMD to take advantage of Israel's entry into CENTCOM and counter the accelerating missile and drone threat from Iran and its proxies.⁴

JINSA's second study, published in 2023, drew on the expertise of four recently retired U.S. flag officers with deep regional and functional experience to provide the Pentagon with a first draft of what a U.S. strategy for Middle East IAMD might look like (the Pentagon strategy for IAMD subsequently delivered to Congress under the DEFEND Act remains classified). While JINSA's IAMD study holds up remarkably well in light of events surrounding the Iranian assaults of 2024, it is also true that the real-world crucible of Iran's attacks highlighted issues that JINSA's earlier work had not necessarily fully anticipated and considered. This report seeks to identify and address some of the gaps in our previous analysis.

An important note: Given the ongoing regional sensitivities associated with Arab-Israel military cooperation against Iran, many of the interviews conducted for this report were done under rules granting the sources anonymity. Accordingly, information gleaned from them is cited as "Interview with authors."

I. Executive Summary

The year 2024 marked a major turning point in America's decades-long effort to advance the cause of integrated air and missile defense, or IAMD, in the Middle East. The catalyst for this dramatic progress was an unprecedented set of direct confrontations between Israel and Iran, which for the first time in the two countries' long shadow conflict saw them launch military strikes directly against each other's territory.

A. Iran's April and October 2024 Attacks

In April and again in October 2024, in response to Israeli blows against the Islamic Republic's terrorist assets, Iran launched two massive projectile salvos at Israel—among the largest in history.

The April attack involved a combination of more than 100 ballistic missiles and approximately 200 drones and cruise missiles. Though smaller in overall size and complexity, the October attack was in many ways more dangerous, as Iran targeted Israel with 200 of its most advanced ballistic missiles. In both instances, Iran's intent was to overwhelm Israel's sophisticated multi-tiered defenses.

Though presenting enormous challenges, both attacks were largely defeated, causing relatively minimal property damage, a handful of civilian injuries, and the death of only one person—a Palestinian in the West Bank. In both cases, Israel's own exquisite U.S.-supported capabilities carried the brunt of the defense, with its long-range Arrow system intercepting the majority of ballistic missile threats and, in April, its shorter-range systems and air force destroying approximately half of the drone and cruise missile barrage.

U.S. forces played a critical supporting role in both attacks. In April and October, the Biden administration surged U.S. naval and air capabilities to the region in response to Iran's threats. During the Iranian barrages, U.S. systems intercepted six missiles in April and six more in October. Also in April, U.S. fighter aircraft helped neutralize upwards of 70 drones and cruise missiles.

Most important to the future of Middle East IAMD, the United States also played an indispensable role in mobilizing on very short notice an unprecedented ad hoc multinational coalition that was prepared to help defend Israel from Iran's attacks. The key player by all accounts in this military-diplomatic effort was the commander of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Erik Kurilla. The coalition—ultimately consisting of up to nine nations when it first came together before April's attack—importantly included four Arab participants, two of whom, Jordan and Egypt, had full diplomatic relations with Israel, while two others, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, did not.

Once assembled in April, the U.S.-led coalition appeared to be available again during Iran's second attack in October. However, the nature of the October barrage, involving only ballistic missiles, limited the degree to which other coalition members, including its Arab participants, could make visible contributions given constraints on their own long-range anti-missile capabilities.

It was during April's complex attack, and the heavy role played by slow-moving and low-flying drones, that the participation of the coalition's Arab members was on full display. Though only Jordan publicly acknowledged its activity, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt also participated to different degrees.

Most impressive was the active role played by the Saudis and Jordanians, over whose territory a significant percentage of the Iranian drones and cruise missiles traversed. Beyond sharing intelligence and data from air defense radars and sensors much closer to Iran's borders, both nations opened their airspace to the fighter jets of the U.S. and other coalition members, providing Israel with pivotal strategic depth.

In Jordan's case, that included the Israeli Air Force. Even more remarkably, both Jordan and the Saudis put their own planes into the sky and shot down Iranian drones headed toward the Jewish state.

B. A Leap Forward for Arab-Israel Relations and Middle East IAMD

It would have been hard to think of a less propitious circumstance to test the incipient regional IAMD network that had just started emerging in the three years since Israel's late 2021 entry into CENTCOM. The April crisis came six months into the Gaza war, long after it had become the most destructive and bloody in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Inflamed by non-stop broadcast and social media coverage of genuine Palestinian suffering, anti-Israel sentiment was at a fever pitch across much of the Arab world by the time of Iran's threatened aerial attack. That a handful of Arab governments, first and foremost Saudi Arabia, proved willing to defend Israel, despite the dramatically escalated political risks they faced, was without question a major inflection point in the history of Arab-Israel relations.

The same was true for the impact that the Iran-Israel confrontation had on Middle East IAMD progress. In the pressure cooker of Iran's massive attack, a giant leap forward occurred. Before the Hamas massacre of October 7, 2023, working under CENTCOM's umbrella, Israel and several of its Arab neighbors had taken important, but still halting steps toward an embryonic regional air and missile defense network. In the crucible of Iran's April 2024 attack, however, a number of barriers to deeper integration that might have taken years to surmount under normal circumstances came tumbling down literally overnight. The sharing of sensitive national radar and sensor data with third countries beyond the United States was approved. Foreign militaries were granted rights to use Jordanian and Saudi airspace for purposes of defending a third country. Most astonishingly, the Saudis and Jordanians both proved willing to expend their own limited national defense assets not for their own protection but to defeat an aerial attack on a neighbor—Israel, no less.

C. Lessons Learned

Though incredibly successful, the series of efforts to defend Israel highlighted several potential shortcomings that U.S. policymakers committed to strengthening regional IAMD should be alert to and, where possible, make efforts to address:

- While underscoring the indispensable U.S. role in advancing IAMD, the 2024 coalition that assembled to defend Israel did not include the United Arab Emirates, at least in part due to lingering Emirati doubts and concerns about the long-term U.S. commitment to their defense.
- The 2024 coalition was largely an ad hoc affair, assembled by General Kurilla on the fly and at the last minute as each crisis erupted, rather than the consequence of advance understandings, agreements, and training among the coalition's members.
- A major surge of U.S. capabilities to the region was critical to the coalition's success, but depended on having sufficient warning time that may not always exist going forward.
- Iran's massive October attack, in particular, exposed gaps (of different kinds) in both Israeli and Arab capabilities to address the challenge of large-scale ballistic missile barrages.
- The unprecedented coalition achievements in 2024 underscored the need for more ambitious U.S. efforts to expedite and institutionalize future IAMD progress.

- Given its distance from Iran and world-class missile defense capabilities, Israel was probably the best-case scenario for defeating Iran’s massive attacks, but consolidating Gulf Arab commitment to deeper cooperation will require demonstrating IAMD’s value proposition in mitigating similar challenges to their countries.

D. Recommendations

Taking full advantage of the IAMD progress forged in the crucible of Iran’s missile attacks will require determined work by both Congress and the Trump administration to deepen integration and cooperation, and address identified challenges and gaps.

i. For Congress

- Congress should require CENTCOM to provide a report on its own “lessons learned” from Iran’s 2024 attacks that highlights the coalition’s achievements and the extraordinary opportunities available to further advance Middle East IAMD, while also identifying problems that should be addressed and the combination of policies, resources, and capabilities required to take regional integration to the next level. CENTCOM’s report should include an assessment of the adequacy of America’s own force presence in the region as well as possible gaps exposed in the capabilities of both Israel and Arab partners.
- Based on CENTCOM’s findings, Congress should make any necessary adjustments to its annual appropriation for Israel’s missile defense needs, particularly the long-range Arrow system, and prioritize working with the administration to expedite FMS (Foreign Military Sales) and FMF (Foreign Military Financing) consideration for purchases by Arab partners that CENTCOM has identified as important to advancing Middle East IAMD efforts.
- As part of the “lessons learned” report or separately, Congress should require CENTCOM to develop a full-blown concept of operations, or CONOPS, that sets out a realistic but ambitious IAMD future end state toward which the United States and its partners should be working based on the advances made by the ad hoc coalition in 2024.

ii. For the Trump Administration

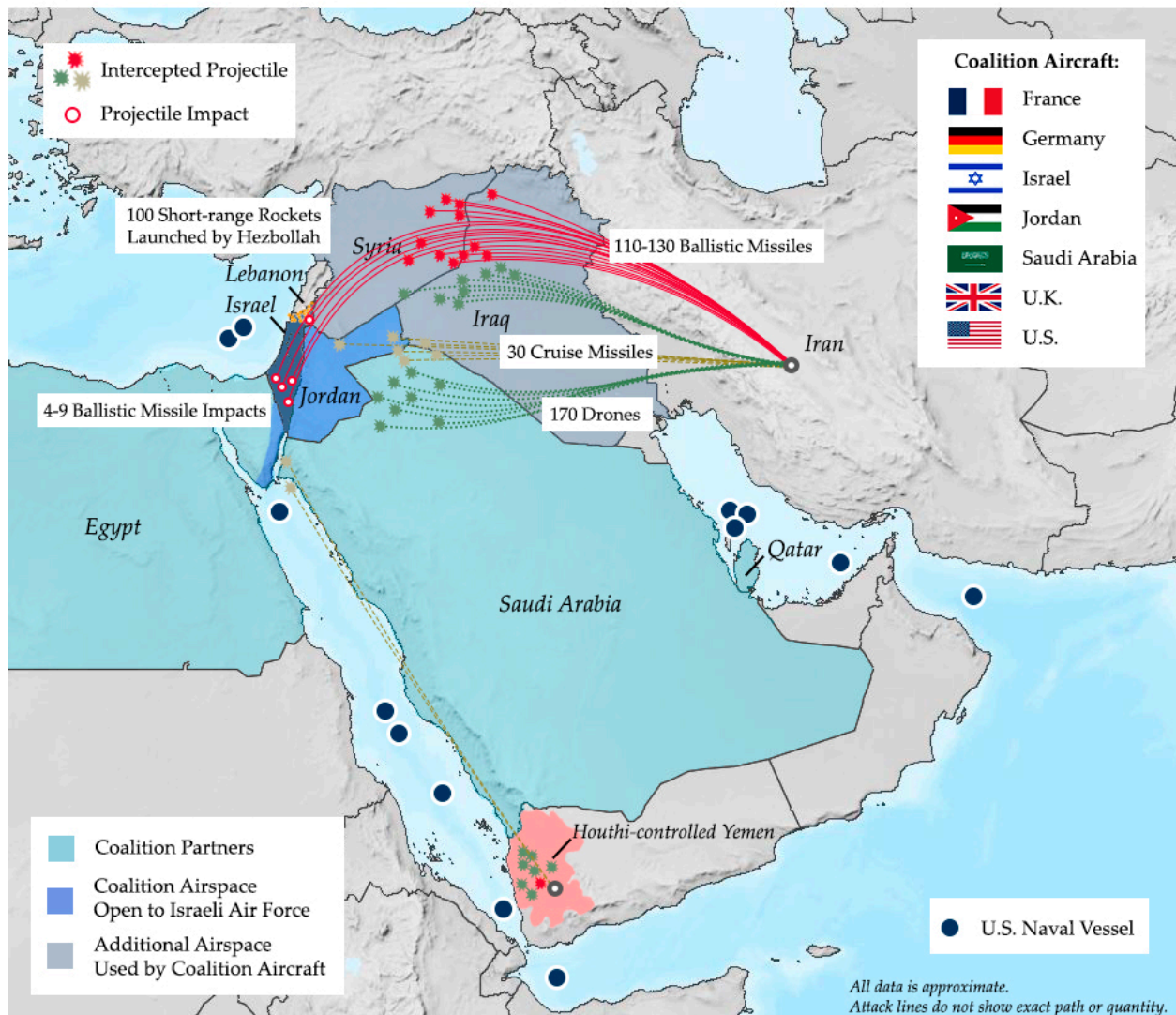
- The administration and CENTCOM, with the IAMD CONOPS in mind, should seize the opportunity to consolidate and institutionalize the remarkable progress achieved during Iran’s 2024 attacks, including:
 - » Negotiating formal agreements with coalition members on sharing of radar and sensor data with CENTCOM for integration into a region-wide common operating picture;
 - » Reaching advance understandings on opening national airspace as well as deploying national air and missile defense assets to help defend other coalition members during a crisis;
 - » Regularly exercising and training a far more ambitious set of IAMD scenarios based on the challenging large-scale Iranian barrages of 2024; and

- » The acquisition and deployment by coalition members of new capabilities—from additional sensors to highly-encrypted communication links to more advanced anti-missile platforms—consistent with the IAMD architecture envisioned in CENTCOM’s CONOPS.
- The administration should prioritize working with Congress to streamline and expedite FMS and FMF processes for acquisition by Arab partners of key technologies and platforms identified by CENTCOM as critical to building the future IAMD architecture outlined in its CONOPS.
- As an essential element of its efforts to strengthen Arab IAMD capabilities, Washington should also be looking at the contributions that Israel’s unmatched experience and air defense technologies can make to solving the challenges faced by its Arab neighbors to build out their own national anti-missile systems to better protect themselves as well as the wider region, while also advancing strategic relations between Israel and the Arab states.
- The administration should systematically seek through a range of actions to reassure Arab partners whose participation is critical to the success of regional IAMD of Washington’s enduring commitment to their security, and to ensure that the substantial benefits of U.S.-led defense integration on display during Iran’s 2024 missile attacks are not confined solely to Israel, but would be available to help their countries as well, should they be similarly threatened.
- Based on the experience of Iran’s massive 2024 attacks, the administration and CENTCOM should consider what adjustments are warranted in CENTCOM’s sustained force posture.
- As part of any efforts to strengthen deterrence against Iranian attacks, the United States, together with Israel and Arab partners, should move toward a doctrine that explicitly vows harsh punishment of such attacks instead of relying solely on efforts to neutralize them through defensive efforts.

II. Iran's April 2024 Attack

On April 13-14, 2024, the Iranian regime launched approximately 170 one-way attack drones (also called unmanned aerial vehicles, or UAVs), 110 to 130 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs), and 30 land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs) at Israel. Concurrently, a smaller number of projectiles, including up to 100 short-range rockets, were reportedly fired at Israel by Iranian proxy militias in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen.⁵ The Iranian attack, comprising both slow-moving drones and supersonic ballistic missiles meant to converge on Israel at the same time, transpired over the course of approximately five to eight hours. Israel estimated that the warheads targeting it contained over 60 tons of explosives.⁶ The massive assault was unprecedented not just for its size, but because it marked the first time in the long history of its conflict with Israel that the Islamic Republic had launched a conventional military attack against the Jewish state openly and directly from Iranian territory.

April 2024 Iranian Strikes Against Israel



Iran named the attack “Operation True Promise.” Iran said it was launched in retaliation for an Israeli strike almost two weeks prior, on April 1, 2024, that killed seven members of its elite Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) in a building in Damascus. Iran claimed the site was part of its official embassy compound and therefore constituted a direct attack against sovereign Iranian territory under international law.⁷ Among the dead was one of the IRGC’s most important generals, Mohammed Reza Zahedi, the commander of all Quds Force operations in Syria and Lebanon with responsibility for coordinating the lethal activities of Iran’s local terrorist proxies, including its most powerful non-state ally, Lebanese Hezbollah.⁸

Of note, Israel was apparently surprised by Iran’s decision to respond with a massive direct attack.⁹ Israel’s military intelligence had reportedly assured the country’s leaders that the strike on Zahedi and his team was unlikely to trigger an out-of-the-ordinary response from Tehran. For years, Israel had been conducting attacks against Iranian-linked targets in Syria without triggering any major escalations. The expectation was that Iran’s most likely course of action after the Zahedi strike would be to arrange an indirect response by having its key proxy, Hezbollah, pursue something akin to a proportional and limited tit-for-tat strike against an equivalent Israeli military target.

Within days, however, based on the public statements of Iran’s leadership as well as other intelligence, it quickly became apparent that Israel’s initial assessment had been mistaken. Iran almost immediately began signaling that it intended to avenge the attack directly, using its own forces launched from Iranian territory. With no capability to attack Israel with manned aircraft or ground forces, that could only mean drawing on Iran’s vast arsenal of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones—the largest in the Middle East. Even then, however, in the days prior to the attack, hope remained that Iran might limit itself to a more symbolic show of force—perhaps firing no more than a handful of projectiles—whose purpose would be to demonstrate conclusively Iran’s ability to hold the Israeli homeland at risk from a distance of about 1,000 miles.¹⁰

The vast and complex attack that came instead was a shock. By using a diverse array of missiles, cruise missiles, and UAVs in such high volume, Iran sought to saturate Israeli airspace and overwhelm its multi-tiered missile defense network with the intent of doing large-scale damage.¹¹ Reports indicate that three different types of ballistic missiles were fired: the Ghadr (1,600 km range; 750 kg payload; liquid-fueled); the Emad (1,800 km range; 750 kg payload; liquid-fueled); and the Kheibar Shekan (1,450 km range; 600 kg payload; solid-fueled).¹²

The Iranian UAVs consisted of Shahed-136s (2500 km range; 45 kg payload), the one-way attack drones that Iran has famously supplied in large quantities to assist Russia’s war of aggression against Ukraine and that played the main role in Iran’s successful attack against Saudi oil facilities in September 2019.¹³

Iran also launched two types of cruise missiles during the attack. One was the Shahed-238, a jet-version adaptation of the Shahed-136 that flies much faster but also has a shorter range of approximately 1,000 km.¹⁴ Iran also fired Quds cruise missiles (1600 km range), a newer projectile originally developed for the Houthis, the Iranian-backed rebel force in Yemen.¹⁵ After October 7, 2023, the Houthis have repeatedly fired the Quds at Israel,¹⁶ while Iran (which uses the Quds under the name “Paveh”) used them alongside Shahed-136 UAVs in the successful 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia.

To have these different projectiles reach Israel at the same time as part of one overwhelming attack while accommodating for their different flight speeds, Iran had to stagger its launches. The slow-moving UAVs would take between five to eight hours to reach their targets and were fired first. Depending on where they were launched, its cruise missiles would need from one to two and a half hours of flight time and were fired several hours after the drones. Last came the barrage of ballistic missiles that would only take 12 minutes before penetrating Israeli airspace and were launched at the tail end of the operation.

Most experts assess that the primary targets of Iran’s unprecedented attack were two Israeli Air Force bases, Nevatim and Ramon, and an intelligence center on Mt. Hermon in the Golan Heights. The IRGC’s commander, General Hossein Salami, claimed that Nevatim was where Israeli F-35 jets staged from to conduct the April 1, 2024, Damascus bombing that killed Zahedi, while the Mt. Hermon base allegedly provided intelligence for the strike.

Nevertheless, even taking Iran at its word that its target set was strictly limited to military facilities, it is clear that in the process of firing hundreds of projectiles—some of limited accuracy and effectiveness—from great distance at a small and densely populated nation, the Iranian regime was willing to risk that its attack could result in large numbers of casualties, including against civilians, and widespread damage to civil infrastructure.

In an extraordinary defensive effort, Israel, the United States, and an ad hoc coalition of several other nations succeeded in almost completely neutralizing the Iranian onslaught. All of the UAVs and cruise missiles were intercepted before they could reach Israel. Of the approximately 110 to 130 ballistic missiles fired, half or more reportedly malfunctioned after launch or in flight, failing to reach Israel.¹⁷ Of the remainder, most were intercepted by Israel’s missile defenses, with a much smaller number taken out by systems deployed on U.S. navy ships stationed in waters near Israel’s coast.

Reports differ on the exact number of ballistic missiles (or parts thereof) that struck Israel, but it appears to have been less than ten and perhaps as few as four. There seems to be broad agreement that four missiles struck the Nevatim air base with one cratering a runway and the rest causing only minor damage. Some reports indicate that another four impacts occurred near the Ramon air base and one on the Golan Heights, causing no real damage.¹⁸ As for casualties, a young Bedouin girl in southern Israel was badly injured by falling missile debris,¹⁹ while roughly 31 other Israelis may have suffered injuries moving to shelters.²⁰

A. Prelude to the April 2024 Attack: Iranian Signaling and Calculations

Twelve days passed between Israel’s April 1, 2024, attack on the Iranian compound in Damascus and Iran’s retaliation. Iran began signaling almost immediately that it planned to respond directly and harshly to what it claimed was an Israeli strike against its sovereign territory. Within a day, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei vowed revenge, saying, “the Zionist regime will be punished by the hands of our brave men. We will make it regret this crime and others it has committed.”²¹

On April 5, 2024, Salami, the commander of the IRGC, similarly vowed that “our brave men will punish the Zionist regime.”²² That same day, *The New York Times* reported that Iranian sources had made clear that Iran would retaliate directly against Israel rather than leave the attack to its regional proxies, and that both the United States and Israel believed a direct Iranian missile attack would be forthcoming.²³

On April 10, 2024, Khamenei repeated his earlier warning: “When they attacked our consulate area, it was like they attacked our territory,” he said on Iranian TV. He threatened that “The evil regime must be punished, and it will be punished.”²⁴

The Wall Street Journal reported that, two days before the attack, Iranian officials alerted counterparts from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to the outline and timing of their assault so that those countries could take steps to protect their civilian air traffic.²⁵ That information was quickly shared with the United States. Other sources suggest that Jordan, Iraq, and Turkey received similar warnings up to 72 hours before the Iranian operation commenced.²⁶

Divining the exact calculations that shaped Iran’s attack plans requires a degree of informed speculation. On the one hand, the regime clearly chose to interpret Israel’s strike on the Iranian-linked compound in Damascus as a qualitative escalation requiring a robust response to restore Iranian deterrence and honor. That it decided—for the first time in its decades-long shadow war with the Jewish state—to enter the fray directly using primarily its own missiles rather than relying solely on its regional proxy forces was new, significant, and surprising. It marked a clear inflection point and escalation.

In that sense, it echoed Iran’s much smaller (about 15 short-range missiles) attack on U.S. bases in Iraq following the killing of Qassem Soleimani, the legendary Quds Force commander, in a U.S. drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020.²⁷ In both cases, Iran appeared newly risk-acceptant, willing to entertain the real danger that its retaliation could cause significant numbers of casualties that might trigger a much larger war against far more powerful forces in the United States or Israel. In the case of its attack on Israel, that danger was magnified manyfold by Iran’s decision to forego a more symbolic strike in favor of one of the largest and most complex projectile bombardments in history.

On the other hand, there were clear characteristics of Iran’s attack that signaled a desire to avoid a wider war if possible. Perhaps most importantly, Iran surrendered the element of speed and surprise while clearly telegraphing its punch. After the Israeli strike in Damascus, Iran delayed its retaliation for nearly two weeks. From the time that the Supreme Leader explicitly threatened a direct response against Israel, eleven days passed. Two to three days before the attack, Iran reportedly shared information on its timing with America’s regional partners. While the delay gave Iran time to carefully prepare its attack plan, and Israel’s anxious anticipation of the coming strike served as a form of psychological warfare, there is no doubt that it also provided Israel and the United States critical time and space to prepare their defenses.

In multiple communications with Washington’s foreign allies following the attack on its Damascus compound, Iran communicated its right to retaliate but also, reportedly, underscored its desire to avoid a broader conflagration.²⁸ Its apparent effort to limit its attack to strictly military targets linked to the Damascus strike, while avoiding major Israeli population centers and civilian infrastructure, could also be plausibly interpreted as an effort to contain the risks of further escalation. Indeed, following the attack, the head of the IRGC said exactly that, claiming that “this operation could have been very extensive, but we limited the scope of the operation to the facilities [Israel] used to attack our consulate.”²⁹ Further evidence of Iran’s desire to limit escalation was the announcement by its UN mission in New York immediately upon the firing of its last missiles, that “the matter can be deemed concluded” provided Israel stood down as well.³⁰

B. Prelude to the April 2024 Attack: U.S. Policy

Following Israel’s April 1, 2024, strike in Damascus, the instinctive U.S. response was to distance itself from Israel. In the hours after the strike, the Biden administration contacted Iranian officials directly to assure them that the U.S. was not involved and had no advance knowledge of the attack.³¹ Word leaked that U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin had called his Israeli counterpart after the attack to complain about Israel’s failure to notify Washington in advance, thereby putting U.S. forces in the region in jeopardy should Iran or its proxies opt to retaliate against them.³² Adding to U.S.-Israel tensions, concurrent with the strike against Iran in Damascus, Israeli forces in Gaza accidentally killed seven members of a prominent U.S. humanitarian organization, World Central Kitchen, ramping up even further the Biden administration’s intensifying anger and frustration with Israel’s conduct of the war there.³³

Nevertheless, after Iran publicly threatened to punish Israel, President Joe Biden and his team quickly pivoted their focus from avoiding blame to working with Israel to bolster its defenses, with the president issuing instructions

to the U.S. military to protect Israel to the “maximum extent possible.”³⁴ Several days after the Damascus strike, Biden spoke with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Afterward, administration officials told reporters that the U.S. and Israel were in “continuous contact” and that “The United States fully supports the defense of Israel against threats from Iran.”³⁵ Three days prior to the attack, Biden spoke publicly from the White House, warning that the Iranians were “threatening to launch a significant attack in Israel.” He then made clear that “[a]s I told Prime Minister Netanyahu, our commitment to Israel’s security against these threats from Iran and its proxies is ironclad. Let me say it again, ironclad. We’re going to do all we can to protect Israel’s security.”³⁶

The next day, Austin repeated Biden’s assurances to Israel’s Minister of Defense, Yoav Gallant. He told Gallant that the United States would provide its full support to defend Israel against any Iranian attacks.³⁷ That same day, General Erik Kurilla, the head of CENTCOM, visited Israel to coordinate U.S.-Israeli preparations for the Iranian attack.³⁸ To widespread media coverage, Kurilla remained in Israel on a near continuous basis in the hours leading up to the attack.³⁹ Meeting Kurilla on April 12, 2024, the day before Iran’s strike, Gallant declared that “we are prepared to defend ourselves on the ground and in the air, in close cooperation with our partners, and we will know how to respond.”⁴⁰ The same day, Biden told a news conference in Washington that he expected an Iranian attack “sooner than later” and stressed his message to Iran was “Don’t.” He underscored that “[w]e are devoted to the defense of Israel. We will support Israel. We will help to defend Israel and Iran will not succeed.”⁴¹

The credibility of U.S. public commitments to defend Israel was bolstered by the simultaneous movement of significant military assets toward the conflict zone. Two U.S. guided missile destroyers, the USS *Arleigh Burke* and the USS *Carney*, both equipped with advanced long-range Aegis anti-missile capabilities, were repositioned to help defend Israel from near its coast.⁴² The U.S. also drew from its worldwide assets to send several additional advanced fighter squadrons to the Middle East to assist in countering the anticipated Iranian attack.⁴³

On top of working hand-in-glove with the IDF and bolstering America’s force posture in the region, Kurilla was also the point person for another historic and unprecedented effort prior to Iran’s attack: assembling an ad hoc multinational coalition of countries from not just Europe, but the Middle East as well to participate alongside the United States in defending Israel. In the days and hours leading up to the night of April 13, 2024, Kurilla undertook an extraordinary campaign of personal diplomacy with several U.S. partners that saw not just the United Kingdom, France, and Germany contribute to the effort, but also Arab states and CENTCOM partners in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Qatar—some (Egypt and Jordan) that had formal relations with the Jewish state, but some (Saudi Arabia and Qatar) that did not.⁴⁴

C. The April 2024 Defense

When the attack finally came, not surprisingly, it was Israeli and American platforms that dominated the battlefield in terms of actual interceptions against the incoming Iranian barrage. In the case of Iran’s ballistic missiles, only Israeli and U.S. systems were capable of engaging the roughly 55 to 65 Iranian ballistic missiles that did not fail in flight and actually threatened to hit Israel.⁴⁵ Of those, CENTCOM announced that U.S. defense systems successfully destroyed six missiles targeting Israel.⁴⁶ Most were interceptions by U.S. Aegis anti-missile systems aboard ships deployed near Israel’s Mediterranean coast, although CENTCOM also reported that it destroyed one Houthi ballistic missile and seven UAVs in Yemen prior to launch.⁴⁷ After the United States neutralized those projectiles, the Houthis launched several cruise missiles that were intercepted outside but near Israeli territory.⁴⁸ A U.S. Patriot missile defense battery in Iraqi Kurdistan also reportedly intercepted one missile over Iraqi airspace.⁴⁹

No official data has been released on the number of Israeli ballistic missile interceptions. However, assuming between four and nine missiles (or fragments thereof) impacted in Israel, Israel succeeded in neutralizing several dozen incoming Iranian missiles. Most of those were attributed to Israel's high-altitude Arrow 2 and Arrow 3 systems,⁵⁰ though Israel's mid-range David's Sling platform may also have participated. For its part, Israel's short-range Iron Dome system likely intercepted the majority of rockets that Hezbollah fired at the Golan Heights.

The success rate against the approximately 200 Iranian cruise missiles and UAVs was even more impressive than that against ballistic missiles, with all of them being successfully defeated by manned fighter jets.⁵¹ Rough estimates suggest that Israeli aircraft were responsible for half the kills, while U.S. and other coalition pilots were responsible for the remaining half. Of the latter, reports have suggested between 70 and 80 targets were intercepted by U.S. aircraft.⁵² U.K. jets may have had several interceptions as well.⁵³ French President Emanuel Macron claimed that France also intercepted some drones.⁵⁴ Both Jordanian and Saudi fighters were also flying that night and neutralized a number of Iran's projectiles.⁵⁵

Beyond actual interceptions, the defense of Israel included many other vital contributions from coalition members. Most importantly, perhaps, was CENTCOM's capability to act as the hub for planning and coordinating the airborne defense of six national air forces across a vast geographic expanse from its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar and the headquarters of U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) at Shaw Air Base in South Carolina. U.S. radars and sensors on the ground, at sea, in the air, and space-based provided critical data to detect launches, track targets, and help direct interceptions. The U.S. ability to receive and integrate a diverse array of information and intelligence streams in real-time and communicate it to multiple coalition partners in an operationally useful manner was essential to the effort's overall success. No other country but the United States could have played that pivotal role.⁵⁶

D. The Role of Arab Partners in the April 2024 Defense

Several Arab states also made important contributions to the overall effort. Of perhaps greatest note was Saudi Arabia—the richest and most influential country in the Arab and Muslim world. A major element of the strategy for defeating Iran's attack was defense in depth—that is, intercepting Iranian drones and cruise missiles as far east of Israel's borders as possible. If Israel had been forced to deal with two hundred flying threats, on top of over 100 ballistic missiles, only after they crossed Israel's borders nearly simultaneously, it simply would not have had the necessary time to engage them all. It is certainly safe to assume that it would not have achieved the same success rate that it enjoyed the night of April 13, 2024.

Key to providing that defense in depth were the Saudis. After much diplomacy by CENTCOM, the Saudi leadership consented just prior to the Iranian attack to join the ad hoc coalition.⁵⁷ Saudi Arabia is, geographically speaking, the largest country in the Middle East at over 800,000 square miles. Israel, by comparison, is less than 9,000 square miles. That expansion of Israel's defensive perimeter proved invaluable. In the first instance, it meant that all the radar and sensor data from Saudi defensive systems—much of it comparatively close to Iran's borders—that is regularly relayed to the CAOC could be quickly communicated for use by coalition ground and air defenses to identify, track, and intercept incoming aerial threats crossing Saudi territory.⁵⁸

The Saudis, however, went well beyond merely greenlighting the sharing of very valuable data for Israel's defense. They also opened their territory to coalition aircraft. U.S. jet fighters were active in Saudi airspace conducting interceptions.⁵⁹

Perhaps most remarkably, however, the Saudis also put a small component of their own air force, perhaps a handful of F-15s, into the skies to hunt for Iranian drones targeting Israel and to shoot at least two down using advanced (and very expensive) Saudi air-to-air missiles.⁶⁰ Saudi pilots had, of course, gained ample experience combatting drones during the civil war in Yemen, when Houthi rebels fired thousands of UAVs at the Kingdom between 2015-2022.

The Saudis acknowledged no role in the coalition defending Israel and could claim that their planes and missiles were being used purely to defend Iranian breaches of Saudi sovereign airspace. The reality, however, was that valuable Saudi national defense assets were in fact expended with full understanding that the incoming Iranian UAVs and cruise missiles were in fact intended to strike targets not in the Kingdom or even in one of its Arab neighbors, but Israel.⁶¹

Jordan, the country that shares the longest border with Israel, similarly made a major contribution to Israel's forward defense. Like the Saudis, it made the full expanse of its territory, more than 34,000 square miles, available to coalition aircraft. In Jordan's case, however, in addition to giving U.S., UK, and French jets freedom of action, the Israeli Air Force was also authorized to fly over Jordanian territory intercepting Iranian UAVs and cruise missiles—a function of longstanding, albeit very discreet, Israel-Jordanian security cooperation, including an important ongoing Israeli role supporting Jordan's air defense. Like the Saudis, the Jordanians also had their own air force defending against Iran's attack.⁶² Unlike the Saudis, however, the Jordanians officially announced their role in defeating the Iranian barrage, while underscoring that it was purely a function of Jordan's obligation to defend its sovereign airspace against threats no matter where they originate from.⁶³

Of course, a final piece of the coalition's successful forward defense against Iran was its ability to dominate the skies over parts of Syria and Iraq—without requiring either government's formal concurrence or advance approval—thanks to the existing U.S. military presence in both countries resulting from its leadership of efforts to defeat the Islamic State. Germany's contribution of refueling coalition aircraft likely occurred over Iraq.⁶⁴

Qatar made a smaller contribution to the coalition's efforts than either the Saudis or Jordanians, but nevertheless an important and unprecedented one, especially in light of its lack of relations with Israel and less adversarial posture toward Iran. In this instance, Qatar was apparently the first Arab state to offer assistance to CENTCOM's efforts, agreeing very quickly to provide not only intelligence, but the raw data from its air defense radars to the CAOC—with full understanding that it would be used to coordinate the defense of Israel and even be shared with Israel directly.⁶⁵

Egypt's cooperation was less ambitious, to the extent it constituted nothing particularly new. Since Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack, and the opening of an Iranian-backed seven-front war against Israel, Egypt has authorized two Israeli aircraft at a time to fly inside a corridor over Sinai along the Red Sea to counter Houthi aerial attacks that threaten Israel. Both Israeli and U.S. jets were authorized to use the corridor on the night of April 13, 2024 but did not do so.⁶⁶

The fact that neither Kuwait nor Oman offered to participate in CENTCOM's ad hoc coalition was hardly surprising. They have lagged well behind other Gulf states in terms of both their readiness to work with Israel and their willingness to appear to take sides against Iran. Bahrain, in contrast, would likely have been willing, but its capacity to contribute meaningfully was low.

Most surprising, perhaps, was the U.A.E.'s absence from the coalition.⁶⁷ The Emiratis, arguably, have the warmest relations with Israel among all the Arab states, including an increasingly cooperative defense relationship. The U.A.E. also has a relatively impressive air defense network, including two American Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile batteries and advanced radar for tracking and intercepting ballistic missiles, as well as a highly capable air force. While none of Iran's missiles or UAVs

overflowed Emirati territory, data from Emirati radars, especially the two associated with the THAAD system, could well have provided valuable assistance if they had been turned on and shared with the CAOC in real-time.

At the heart of the U.A.E.'s reticence, according to sources involved with the coalition's preparations for the Iranian attack, were lingering resentments and distrust among Emirati leaders owing to what they viewed as a profoundly inadequate U.S. and CENTCOM reaction to a series of shocking Houthi missile and drone attacks targeting Abu Dhabi and Dubai in early 2022, which killed three.⁶⁸ Biden failed to contact his U.A.E. counterpart in the immediate aftermath of the attacks and no high-level U.S. emissary from Washington or CENTCOM showed up in the Emirates until three weeks had passed. By all accounts, the U.A.E.'s leadership was deeply disappointed and took the incident as a sign of Washington's declining interest and commitment to the security of both their country and the wider Gulf region against Iran and its proxies.⁶⁹ Indeed, according to sources privy to U.S.-Emirati discussions, in the period leading up to Iran's attack, tensions between the U.A.E. and CENTCOM came close to a boiling point. Due to Emirati restrictions on U.S. aircraft deployed at the U.A.E.'s Al-Dhafra Air Base, CENTCOM apparently came close to redeploying them to another country, but in the end decided against it.⁷⁰

E. Aftermath of the April 2024 Attack

The attack marked the first time Israel had come under assault by another Middle Eastern state since Iraq fired approximately 40 Scud missiles at Israel 33 years earlier during the 1991 Gulf War. It also marked the first time that Iran had ever directly attacked Israel after four decades of a shadow war in which a historically cautious Iranian regime had always preferred to work through regional proxies in an effort to hide its hand, blur its responsibility, and claim plausible deniability. Despite the attack's failure to inflict significant harm on Israel, Iran openly bragged that its direct assault signified a historic turning point and triumph in its long struggle with Israel. It appeared to celebrate the notion that the region's balance of forces had been decisively transformed in Iran's favor.

Within hours of the attack, Hossein Salami, the IRGC's top commander, declared that a "new equation" had been established. "Henceforth," Salami declared, "any assault [by Israel] on our people, property, or interests will trigger a reciprocal response from within the Islamic Republic of Iran."⁷¹

Not surprisingly, the emergence of any such new reality for Israel was anathema, potentially even fatal—especially in the context of Hamas's October 7, 2023, attack and the ongoing multi-front war of survival that Israel was actively fighting at the time of the Iranian assault. The notion that missile barrages of the scale fired on April 13, 2024, might somehow come to be viewed by Iran and Israel's other enemies as the "new normal" and a routine feature of the regional landscape was clearly intolerable. It was at direct odds with Israel's longstanding national security doctrine of deterrence grounded in the promise of inflicting swift and overwhelming punishment on any attacker—with the purpose of ensuring that they would not again choose to pay the high price by repeating the offense.

Immediately following Iran's attack, Israel's war cabinet convened to consider its response. Israeli Defense Minister Gallant said that Israel "has no choice but to respond" to an assault involving the use of ballistic missiles. Responding specifically to the claims of the IRGC's commander, Gallant reportedly told the U.S. Defense Secretary that "Israel won't accept an equation in which Iran responds with a direct attack every time Israel strikes targets in Syria."⁷² Israel reportedly was looking at response options that would be "painful" for Iran while limiting the risk of triggering a spiraling escalation.⁷³

Important in Israel's calculations were said to be concerns about "overstretching" existing troop commitments fighting Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah on the northern border and avoiding action that

might undermine and fracture the extraordinary U.S.-led multinational coalition that had just participated in Israel's defense.⁷⁴

For its part, the United States went immediately into de-escalation mode. Biden spoke by phone with Netanyahu on the night of the attack and told him to "take the win."⁷⁵ The administration felt strongly that the successful foiling of Iran's attack by the multinational coalition represented a major victory and a signal not only of Israeli military superiority, but of its diplomatic strength as well. Iran had been shown to be weak and isolated. Biden told Netanyahu that the defeat of the missile barrage had sent "a clear message to [Israel's] foes that they cannot effectively threaten the security of Israel."⁷⁶

The administration went even further, however, to restrain Israel by making clear both in private and through media leaks that the U.S. would neither participate in nor support any Israeli counterattack against Iran.⁷⁷ While underscoring their continued determination to help defend Israel, Biden and his senior advisors were reported to be highly concerned that any Israeli response would lead to a regional war with potentially catastrophic consequences,⁷⁸ including dragging U.S. forces into another Middle Eastern conflict.⁷⁹ U.S. allies in Europe concurred with the assessment and similarly urged restraint.⁸⁰ Biden accordingly warned Netanyahu "to think carefully and strategically about the risks of escalation."⁸¹

As part of his overall effort to limit Israeli military reaction, Biden sought instead to mobilize a robust international diplomatic and economic response to the Iranian attack. Most importantly, Biden quickly got the G7 countries to condemn Iran and emphasize their backing for Israel's security.⁸² Five days after the attack, both the United States and the United Kingdom announced the imposition of new economic sanctions on Iran.⁸³ U.S. targets included the IRGC, Iran's Defense Ministry, and its missile and drone programs.

In the end, Israel opted to respond to one of the largest projectile assaults in history with an impressive, but extremely circumscribed, action. On April 19, 2024, long-range missiles were fired from Israeli jets operating beyond Iran's borders at a single S-300 advanced air defense radar guarding a nuclear facility near the Iranian city of Isfahan.⁸⁴ The destruction of the Russian-supplied radar powerfully indicated Israel's ability to destroy targets deep inside Iranian territory, including critical assets located in very close proximity to the regime's high-value nuclear program. Israel, however, did not claim responsibility for the attack in an obvious effort to reduce pressure on Iran's leadership to respond.

U.S. pressure on Israel was almost certainly a major factor shaping the very narrow Israeli response. While demonstrating exquisite capability and reach, and imposing a real cost on Iran, Israel's covert and very carefully calibrated retaliation seemed heavily influenced by its effort to thread the needle between Biden's pressure to de-escalate and Israel's need to restore deterrence by punishing Iran. The need to take U.S. concerns into account was no doubt made more acute by the fact that, already by April 2024, tensions between Washington and Jerusalem were at a much-heightened level over Israel's prosecution of the war against Hamas.⁸⁵ Critically, this included an escalating dispute over the continued U.S. provision to Israel of heavy 2,000 pound bombs⁸⁶ and the start of what eventually appeared to be a systematic U.S. slow-rolling of other Israeli requests for essential munitions.⁸⁷

In the initial aftermath of its retaliation, it appeared that Israel had arguably struck the right balance. As Israel designed, the secret and limited nature of the attack allowed Iran to claim no damage had been done and to forego any response of its own. It stood down and further escalation was avoided. The immediate cycle of Israel-Iran retaliation appeared to have been contained—but, alas, only temporarily.

III. From April to October

Less than six months later, on October 1, 2024, Iran launched its second direct attack against Israel. This attack involved fewer overall projectiles than in April and did not include any UAVs or cruise missiles. That said, the second assault, albeit limited to ballistic missiles, included far more of them than the April attack—up to 200 in total—and earned its own place in the record books among the largest single ballistic missile barrages in history.

The regional context of the October attack differed substantially from the April attack. In April 2024, Israel was arguably at a low point in its post-October 7, 2023, multifront war against Iran's axis of resistance. While making progress in its efforts to dismantle Hamas militarily in Gaza, the war effort was already in its seventh month, without an end in sight. More than a hundred Israeli hostages remained in Gaza with little hope for their near-term salvation. Meanwhile, on Israel's northern border, a large contingent of IDF forces appeared bogged down in a low-level war of attrition with Hezbollah, exchanging daily fire that left Israeli border communities as ghost towns, with tens of thousands of their residents forced to flee and live indefinitely as internal refugees. On top of everything, tensions between Israel and its most important patron, the United States, over the Gaza campaign were bad and getting worse, threatening to significantly exacerbate Israel's growing international isolation and, more importantly, its ability to prosecute the war against Hamas as it saw necessary.

Not surprisingly, this was an environment in which Iran could legitimately feel a high level of confidence that its proxy strategy was working and that it was ascendant regionally, with Israel and the United States at odds with each other, under pressure, and on the defensive. When it decided to massively retaliate for the Israeli strike against the Quds Force contingent in Damascus, it appeared to do so from a position of real strength and a sense that its growing power and influence had altered the risk-reward ratio for undertaking an act as audacious and game-changing as the unprecedented attack against its most powerful regional foe.

The context for Iran's October strike was very different and not in Iran's favor. Already in late July, within the space of less than 24 hours, Iran was shocked by two successive Israeli operations, one more stunning than the next. The first was the targeted killing of Hezbollah's top military commander, Fuad Shukur, one of the group's founders, the right-hand man to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, and for four decades one of the Quds Force's most important partners in Lebanon.⁸⁸ On the evening of July 30, just three days after an errant Hezbollah rocket had killed a dozen Druze children in the Israeli Golan Heights,⁸⁹ a phone call orchestrated by exquisite Israeli intelligence lured Shukur from his second-floor office in a residential building in the heart of Hezbollah's southern Beirut stronghold to his seventh-floor apartment where an Israeli air-launched missile had a clean shot that killed him instantly.⁹⁰

Even more damaging to Iran, especially in terms of the regime's honor, reputation, and deterrence posture was an astounding Israeli intelligence operation just hours later, at around 2 a.m. on July 31, that killed Hamas's political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, in an upscale neighborhood in northern Tehran.⁹¹ Haniyeh was there as the closely guarded guest of the regime, attending the inauguration of Iran's newly elected president. Israeli intelligence networks inside Iran apparently managed to plant an explosive device in a guest house that Haniyeh regularly stayed in during visits to the Iranian capital, which was part of a VIP compound controlled and protected by the IRGC.⁹² At the precise moment Haniyeh was confirmed to have returned to his bedroom in the guest house, the device was remotely detonated, killing only Haniyeh and his bodyguard.⁹³

Almost immediately after the Haniyeh attack, Iran at the highest levels again openly pledged to strike back directly against Israel.⁹⁴ As in April, the United States declared its readiness to fully support Israel's

defense,⁹⁵ surged an even larger air and naval presence to the region,⁹⁶ and dispatched General Kurilla to the region to re-assemble the multinational coalition.⁹⁷ Unlike April, however, Washington also made clear that this time it would not be pressing Israel to “take the win.” Rather, U.S. officials let it be known that another Iranian attack would likely trigger a devastating Israeli response whose “consequences could be cataclysmic, particularly for Iran.”⁹⁸

After two weeks of high tensions fully anticipating a new Iranian attack, the Iranian regime, clearly chastened by the relative failure of its April missile barrage and the ease with which Israel’s limited retaliation had exposed its vulnerability, backed down. By August 20, Iran’s initial fire and brimstone threats were replaced by an IRGC spokesman timidly declaring that “the waiting period for this response could be long.”⁹⁹

However, just a month later, things got infinitely worse for Iran. In one of the most extraordinary two-week periods in modern Middle East history, the Israeli military and intelligence services almost overnight laid waste to Hezbollah, the world’s most powerful non-state actor and by leaps and bounds the most important cog in Iran’s regional proxy strategy to surround Israel with a suffocating ring of fire. More than four decades in the making, Hezbollah’s power gave the IRGC direct access to Israel’s borders and the ability to impose constant and costly military pressure on Israel. Even more importantly, Hezbollah’s massive Iranian-supplied missile arsenal was built to serve as Iran’s guaranteed second-strike capability in the event of an Israeli or U.S. attack on Iran itself. In retaliation, Hezbollah’s missiles would be capable of overwhelming Israel’s vaunted missile defenses and inflicting unprecedented and intolerable death and destruction on Israeli society, rendering any large-scale attack on Iran itself not worth the cost and therefore unthinkable.

Between September 17 and September 27, that central pillar of Iranian deterrence went up in smoke. It began with an astonishing Israeli intelligence operation, years in the making, that left thousands of Hezbollah operatives dead or injured from exploding pagers and walkie-talkies.¹⁰⁰ It continued with a decapitation strike that eliminated almost the entire command of Hezbollah’s elite Radwan Forces,¹⁰¹ and an air campaign that destroyed a large majority of Hezbollah’s vast missile stockpiles.¹⁰² The coup de grace came on September 27 when a dozen Israeli F-15 jets dropped more than 80 tons of explosives on a single deeply buried bunker in Beirut,¹⁰³ killing Hassan Nasrallah, the all-powerful Hezbollah leader, commander, and spiritual guide who, outside of Khamenei himself, probably was the single most important and indispensable figure in the IRGC’s entire axis of resistance. Finally, on October 1, 2024, the IDF commenced a limited ground invasion to clear out Hezbollah positions in southern Lebanon.¹⁰⁴

Israel’s lightning-fast decapitation and dismantling of Hezbollah shocked the region and the world, totally upending the heart of Iran’s national security strategy that it had spent decades building at the cost of billions of dollars. Hezbollah’s effective removal from the Israel-Iran military equation in an instant transformed the Middle East’s balance of power in ways profoundly contrary to the interests of the Islamic Republic, leaving it more exposed and vulnerable than it had been in decades.

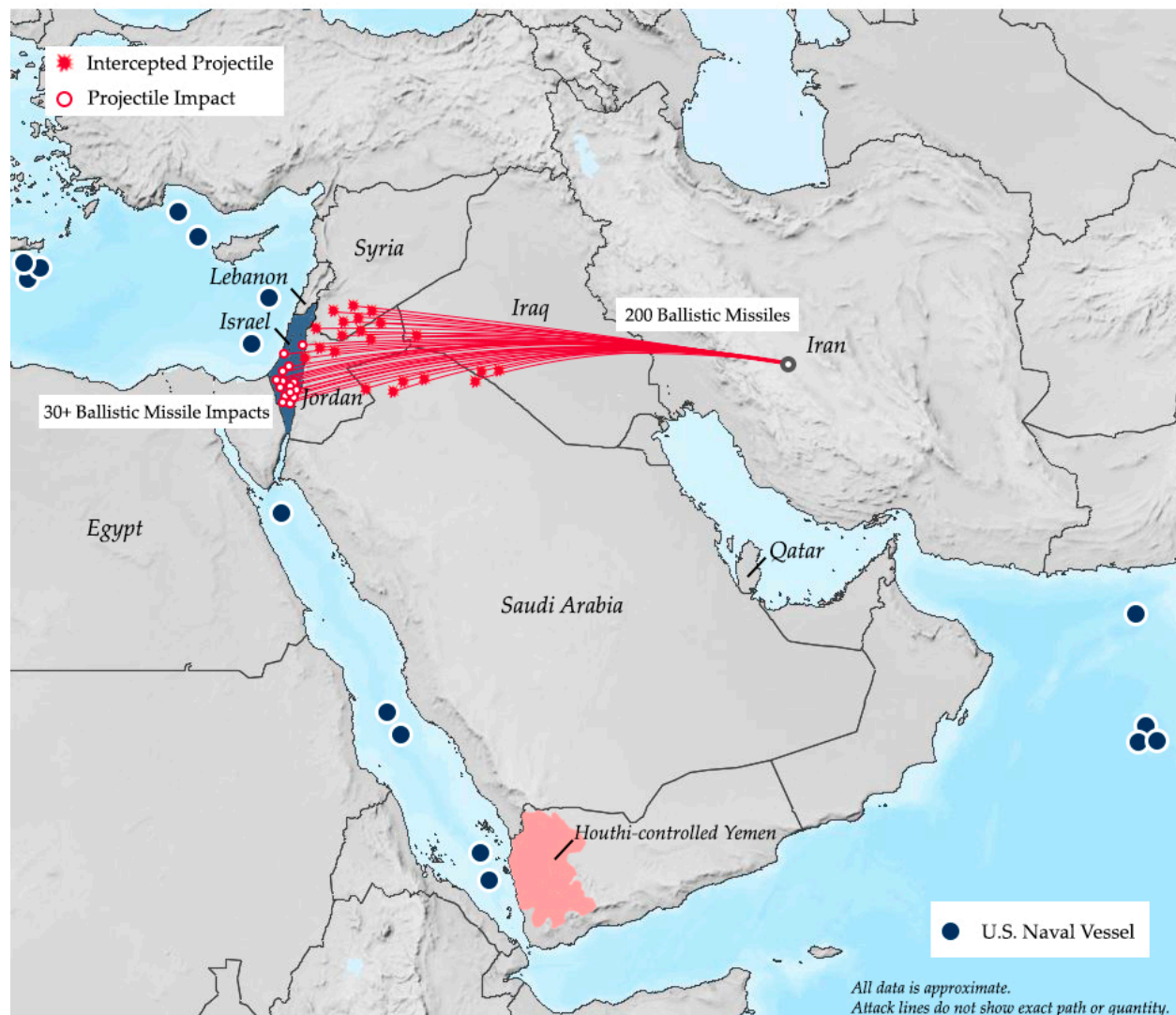
If out of self-preservation Iran was able in August to swallow the humiliation of Haniyeh’s killing, the devastation in such stunning fashion of the infinitely more valuable assets of Hezbollah and Nasrallah proved intolerable for Khamenei, the IRGC, and Iranian regime hardliners. Interestingly, in the days immediately prior to Nasrallah’s death, Iran reportedly resisted Hezbollah’s urgent request to intervene against Israel’s onslaught.¹⁰⁵ But when the unthinkable occurred and Nasrallah himself was targeted, and the very existence of Hezbollah was suddenly put in sharp relief, it appeared to be the final straw for Khamenei. Whatever the major risks associated with seeking vengeance against Israel, they were judged now not to outweigh the potential costs of appearing completely impotent in the face of such a shocking and existential assault against Iran’s most important and longstanding regional partner. Doing something—even in such a weakened state was judged better than doing nothing. But that Hobson’s choice was a long way from April’s hubris when Iran’s leaders believed their rising power and Israel’s growing weakness had put them on the cusp of “a new regional equation.”

IV. Iran's October 2024 Attack

In the end, despite the near certainty that it was courting a potentially calamitous outcome, Iran made the fateful decision four days after Nasrallah's death that it had no choice but to respond in a deadly serious manner. The enormous barrage of approximately 200 missiles¹⁰⁶ that it fired certainly fit the bill.

The nature of the attack, dubbed Operation True Promise II, underscored the degree to which the Iranians had learned important lessons from April. While the April assault demonstrated the capability to muster a multi-faceted attack combining several different projectile platforms, it transpired over the course of many hours and allowed a multinational coalition of air forces ample time to operate at great distances from Israel to first neutralize all the slow-moving drones and cruise missiles that composed close to two-thirds of the total assault package before allowing Israel and the United States to focus attention on the smaller number of ballistic missiles that were launched.

October 2024 Iranian Strikes Against Israel



By concentrating the October attack solely on ballistic missiles, and nearly doubling their volume from April, the Iranians dramatically shortened the time available for defeating the barrage while greatly complicating the defensive effort. A response time of hours was reduced to a matter of minutes. Supersonic ballistic missiles were the only element of Iran's April attack that enjoyed even a modicum of success, clearly posing the most challenging aspect of Iran's assault. By dramatically increasing the size of the salvo in October, and firing its most advanced models of missiles, the Fattah-1 (1,400 km range; 450 kg payload; solid-fueled) and Kheibar Shekan, at a limited number of sites, Iran significantly improved the chances of overwhelming Israel's defensive capabilities and having an even larger number of missiles get through.¹⁰⁷

In that regard, the Iranians were correct. By almost doubling the number of missiles fired, Iran increased the number of strikes by at least a factor of three or four. If approximately nine missiles or fewer landed on Israeli territory in April, a number closer to 35 may have gotten through the anti-missile effort on October 1, 2024. The Nevatim air base in southern Israel was again a major target for Iran and up to 32 missiles may have landed within its perimeter,¹⁰⁸ although damage appeared to have been limited and no aircraft hit. Several strikes were also reported at the Tel Nof air base, including one that hit a nearby school in the city of Gedera,¹⁰⁹ as well as in proximity to the Mossad headquarters in northern Tel Aviv.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, the only death reported from the massive attack occurred when a missile booster landed on a Palestinian in the West Bank.¹¹¹

The attack almost certainly highlighted a significant vulnerability in Israel's defenses: its limited stockpile of expensive Arrow batteries and interceptors.¹¹² Given the sheer volume of the Iranian attack, Israel had to engage in very hard-headed rationing that prioritized the defense of areas that carried a higher risk of harm to population centers and critical civilian infrastructure.¹¹³ In turn, a decision was made to allow Iranian missiles targeting more remote air bases to land—based on the assumption that repairing base facilities would be less expensive than the cost of expending the interceptors and that damage could be mitigated by moving the base's most valuable asset, its aircraft, out of harm's way in advance.¹¹⁴

As in April, the actual damage Israel suffered in October was relatively minor in the context of the enormity of the attack. However, it nevertheless underscored the potential threat that Iran's massive ballistic missile arsenal continues to pose. The fact is that Israel's high-altitude defenses appeared highly stressed by the number of incoming Iranian missiles. It certainly raised the question of what would happen if Iran were to launch a similarly sized barrage or an even larger one not at several military or intelligence sites, but at a small number of high-density population centers or high-value civilian infrastructure facilities. Iran's military chief, Major General Mohammed Bagheri, sought to make the threat clear when he noted that Iran "had the capability to attack [Israel's] economic infrastructure, but we only targeted military bases." Next time, he warned, "If the Zionist regime is not controlled and takes action against Iran, we will target all of its infrastructure."¹¹⁵

A. Prelude to the October 2024 Attack: U.S. Policy

The United States gave Iran little reason to believe that its support for Israel's defense would be any less robust than it had been in April or August—although there was some dissonance between U.S. diplomatic and military messaging in the days leading up to Nasrallah's demise. In particular, as Israel's dramatic escalation against Hezbollah was ramping up to its crescendo, the Biden administration together with France and other countries pressed for an immediate ceasefire and de-escalation that could have short-circuited the campaign.¹¹⁶ Netanyahu ultimately rejected any ceasefire in the hours before ordering the Nasrallah strike.¹¹⁷ Immediately afterward, while acknowledging that the killing of Nasrallah was just,¹¹⁸ Biden and other U.S. officials worked to distance themselves from the attack, griping that Israel had failed to provide

Washington with advance notice and that the United States only found out about the attack minutes before Nasrallah's bunker was destroyed.¹¹⁹

Militarily, however, fairly soon after Israel's escalation began in the third week of September, the Pentagon started fortifying its regional posture in an effort to deter and defeat any potential escalation by Iran and its proxies. It quickly announced that it was sending an undetermined number of additional troops to assist in the protection of forces already in the region.¹²⁰ As for those existing forces, the Pentagon made sure to underscore publicly that "we have more capability in the region today than we did on April 14, 2024, when Iran conducted its drone and missile attack against Israel."¹²¹ That included 40,000 troops on land and at sea, an aircraft carrier, at least a dozen other naval vessels in the region's surrounding waters, and a large contingent of aircraft.¹²²

Upon Nasrallah's killing, and in response to Israeli requests for U.S. help to deter Iranian retaliation, Biden ordered Secretary of Defense Austin to "further enhance the defense posture of U.S. military forces in the Middle East region to deter aggression and reduce the risk of a broader regional war."¹²³ Austin soon thereafter dispatched several thousand troops associated with additional squadrons of fighter and attack aircraft to the region, specifically F-16s, F-15s, A-10s, and F-22s, while extending the deployment of existing aircraft units already in theater¹²⁴ with the purpose of significantly augmenting America's "robust and integrated air defense capabilities."¹²⁵

Following a phone call with Israeli Defense Minister Gallant, Austin revealed publicly that he had underscored that the United States was "well-postured to defend U.S. personnel, partners, and allies in the face of threats from Iran and Iran-backed terrorist organizations."¹²⁶ Furthermore, Austin explicitly emphasized that he had also "reiterated the serious consequences for Iran in the event Iran chooses to launch a direct military attack against Israel."¹²⁷ Nevertheless, late on October 1, 2024, after the first Israeli ground forces had entered Lebanon, U.S. officials warned that intelligence indicated with a high degree of confidence that an Iranian attack was "imminent."¹²⁸ They were right.

B. The October 2024 Defense

Data on the number of Iranian missiles that failed before reaching Israel in October is not available but, as in April, was likely not insignificant. Israel's high-altitude Arrow anti-missile system again made the majority of successful interceptions that occurred, which the IDF reported as "a large number." Aegis anti-missile systems aboard the USS *Bulkeley* and USS *Cole* reportedly also recorded six successful interceptions¹²⁹—although they reportedly attempted a dozen interceptions¹³⁰ which, if accurate, made for a relatively disappointing success rate of approximately 50 percent.

A major difference between the defense of Israel in April vs. October concerned the relative lack of active participation by other foreign states, including Arab states. In October, the only countries that expended national assets to conduct interceptions were Israel and the United States. Importantly, this appears to have had less to do with the willingness of other countries to reprise their roles in defeating the Iranian attack than with the nature of the attack itself. An assault involving only ballistic missiles rendered the primary contribution these other states made in April—the use of their air forces and airspace—largely irrelevant to the April effort. To the extent that more passive forms of cooperation remained important, including passing intelligence and sharing radar and sensor data during the attack, it appears that the same ad hoc coalition that formed in April was again available in October to assist in Israel's defense.¹³¹

C. Aftermath of the October 2024 Attack

The attack proved to be a fateful mistake for Iran, one that only further accelerated and intensified the unprecedented and rapid degradation of its strategic situation. U.S. officials had explicitly warned, and Israeli officials had strongly intimated beforehand that another attack on the order of April's would end badly for Iran and incur an Israeli retaliation orders of magnitude more severe. Within hours of the Iranian barrage, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan reiterated that "We have made clear that there will be consequences, severe consequences," and that the United States "will work with Israel to make that the case."¹³² Lest there be doubt, Sullivan added that "The United States is fully, fully, fully supportive of Israel."¹³³

Though it was certain that Biden would not repeat April's unwise effort to stop Israel from responding at all, he was still not prepared to give it carte blanche. A month out from the November 5, 2024, U.S. presidential election pitting his vice president, Kamala Harris, against former President Donald Trump, Biden and his aides remained sensitive to scenarios that heightened the risk of drawing the United States directly into a new Middle Eastern war or destabilizing the global economy by sending oil prices soaring. With those concerns in mind, Biden quickly underscored that while he agreed that Israel had a right to respond to Iran's attack, "they should respond in proportion."¹³⁴ Asked in that context if he would support a strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, Biden said "The answer is no."¹³⁵ Days later, he also indicated that economic targets should not be hit, explaining that "[i]f I were in [Israel's] shoes, I'd be thinking about other alternatives than striking oil fields."¹³⁶

Following more than a week of discussions between their national security teams, including the first phone call in two months between Biden and Netanyahu, U.S. officials briefed reporters that they had succeeded in winning assurances from Israel that neither Iranian nuclear nor oil sites would be hit. Instead, Israel had agreed to focus its retaliation on Iranian military targets.¹³⁷

Importantly, a key part of these deliberations appears to have involved a U.S. agreement to provide Israel with direct support connected with their planned operation. According to Israeli Defense Minister Gallant, as a result of his conversations with U.S. Secretary of Defense Austin, Biden had approved several Israeli requests, including providing satellite intelligence on air defense systems protecting Iran's most important oil facilities, overflight rights through Iraqi airspace, search and rescue support if Israeli pilots were shot down, and the deployment in Israel of a highly advanced THAAD battery to help Israel better protect itself against yet another Iranian missile barrage on the order of October 1, 2024. The only item on Israel's list denied by Biden was the use of U.S. aerial refueling tankers that would have made the United States an active participant in the attack itself.¹³⁸

Shortly after these agreements on the nature of Israel's retaliation and U.S. support were concluded in mid-October, the THAAD system's arrival in Israel, along with close to 100 U.S. troops, was announced.¹³⁹ At the time, only seven such batteries were reported to exist in the entire U.S. arsenal, including one each in Guam and South Korea, with two others owned and operated by the U.A.E.¹⁴⁰ Each battery possesses a very powerful radar and 48 interceptor missiles capable of destroying medium- and intermediate-range ballistic targets both within the Earth's atmosphere and above it.¹⁴¹

The urgency of the THAAD deployment was an obvious nod to how close Israel had come to suffering a much more damaging Iranian strike on October 1, 2024. It would provide critical additional coverage and capability for Israel's defense and help close some of the seams of vulnerability that Iran had exposed and would no doubt seek to exploit further in any future attacks, perhaps with an even larger volley of missiles.

Israel waited nearly four weeks to respond to the October 1, 2024, attack, launching its retaliation in the early morning hours of October 26. As expected, it was a far more expansive operation than Israel's

extremely limited retaliation in April, one that inflicted major damage on Iranian capabilities. Three waves of Israeli jets, consisting of about 100 planes, participated, including F-35s, F-15s, and F-16s. Their flight route took them primarily through Syria and Iraq to Iran. Importantly, despite their readiness to cooperate to defend against an Iranian attack, none of Israel's Arab IAMD partners were prepared to lend support to any offensive action against Iran, including the use of their airspace, due to credible threats from Tehran that doing so would open them up to direct retaliation.¹⁴²

Forced to fly over hostile territory largely aligned with Iran, the initial wave of Israeli planes cleared the path by taking out threatening air defense systems mostly in Syria and perhaps some in Iraq. The second and third waves struck against multiple targets in Iran, including all four of the Tehran regime's remaining advanced S-300 air defense batteries defending key leadership, nuclear, and energy sites around the country. Also destroyed were a UAV factory, mixers essential for the production of solid fuel for Iran's long-range missiles, and a site for conducting high-explosive tests pivotal for triggering a nuclear weapon. For the most part, standoff air-launched ballistic missiles were Israel's weapon of choice, allowing for attacking planes to fire outside Iran's borders. All of the jets returned safely to Israel.¹⁴³

In contrast to April, Israel openly took responsibility for its October 26 retaliation, which Gallant later claimed was the largest such operation by the Israeli Air Force since the 1967 War.¹⁴⁴ It succeeded in massively degrading Iran's ability to produce missiles capable of striking Israel from two per day to one per week, according to Gallant,¹⁴⁵ while also potentially crippling a key component in its nuclear weaponization work.¹⁴⁶ Perhaps most significantly, however, by taking out not only Iran's, but Syria's most powerful air defense capabilities, the attack increased exponentially Iran's vulnerability to a future Israeli and/or U.S. operation to destroy the entirety of its nuclear program and other political, military, and economic targets central to the regime's survival.

Once Iran recovered from the shock of Israel's successful attack, it threatened, as it had on previous occasions, that it would retaliate harshly. A senior IRGC official promised that "Iran's response to the Zionist aggression is definite," further warning that "We are capable of destroying all that the Zionists possess with one operation."¹⁴⁷ Another official from Supreme Leader Khamenei's office said that Iran would deliver "a fierce, tooth-breaking response" to Israel.¹⁴⁸ *The New York Times* reported that Khamenei had instructed his military leaders to prepare for another Iranian attack on grounds that the size of Israel's assault had been too big to ignore and that not responding would be an admission of defeat.¹⁴⁹ Just days later, Khamenei went public, threatening not only Israel but the United States as well by declaring that "The enemies, whether the Zionist regime or the United States of America, will definitely suffer a crushing response to what they are doing to Iran and the Iranian nation and the resistance front."¹⁵⁰

The only question seemed to be whether Iran should delay its retaliation until after the November 5 U.S. election out of concern that greater chaos in the Middle East could benefit Donald Trump, who was promising to re-impose maximum pressure on Iran's already struggling economy. In the end, Iran held its fire, and the highly unpredictable and mercurial Trump was re-elected anyway. The man who in his first term had unilaterally withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal, driven Iran's oil exports near zero, killed the legendary Quds Force leader Qassem Soleimani, and opined that Israel should have ignored Biden and taken the opportunity to strike Iran's nuclear program in October, would be back in charge of the world's most powerful economy and military. Probably not coincidentally, despite periodic warnings that Operation True Promise III would eventually happen,¹⁵¹ Iran in the intervening seven months has done nothing yet to make good on its commitment to respond to Israel's devastating October 26 attack.

V. Iran's Attacks: Significance for the Middle East and IAMD

The year 2024 was a momentous one in the history of Israel's relations with Iran. After decades of shadow war, the militaries of both sides for the first time undertook direct attacks on each other's territories, dramatically raising the stakes of each confrontation. Initiated by Iran's fateful decision to launch its missile, cruise missile, and UAV barrage in April, an escalatory process was set in motion that by the end of the year saw Iran's deterrence strategy in tatters. The unexpected collapse in early December of the Assad regime in Syria,¹⁵² Iran's oldest Arab state ally and the linchpin in the IRGC's land bridge to Lebanon and Hezbollah,¹⁵³ was the coup de grace for the Islamic Republic's *annus horribilis*. With Iran so heavily exposed, and with the return of Trump to the White House, the stage appeared set for 2025 to be a possibly decisive year in the decades-old U.S.-Israel cooperative struggle to contain and curtail the longstanding threat posed by Iran's dangerously advancing nuclear program.

Of course, 2024 was also a momentous year for the effort to advance the cause of IAMD in the Middle East. For years, U.S. officials had worked to educate their regional partners on the value of joining efforts to defend themselves against the rising threat of ballistic missiles, but to little avail. While most were interested in working bilaterally with the United States to purchase and operate advanced capabilities to protect their own territories, deep-seated regional rivalries and distrust proved a major impediment to the kinds of information sharing and cooperation required for effective IAMD, even at a more rudimentary level. Inter-Arab tensions alone proved showstoppers to progress, long before Israel's participation in such a network was ever a question for serious consideration.¹⁵⁴

The barriers to cooperation began receding largely thanks to two inter-related developments. The first was the reality of the growing threat posed by the advancing missile and UAV arsenals of Iran and its regional proxies. Saudi intervention in Yemen's civil war eventually put its towns and cities on the receiving end of roughly 2,000 rockets, missiles, and drones by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.¹⁵⁵ In 2019, Iran itself attacked critical Saudi oil infrastructure with a barrage of about 25 drones and cruise missiles, putting half of Saudi oil exports offline for several weeks.¹⁵⁶ In January 2022, the U.A.E. had its own near-death experience when its extreme vulnerability to Iranian-backed missiles was highlighted by a series of relatively small Houthi projectile salvos that, while largely foiled by U.A.E. and U.S. missile defenses, left three dead.¹⁵⁷

The second development that served as a major catalyst for IAMD was the 2020 Abraham Accords, which saw Israel normalize relations in rapid succession with four additional Arab states, including two Gulf countries in very close proximity to Iran, the U.A.E. and Bahrain. Shortly thereafter came the decision to move Israel out of the area of responsibility of U.S. European Command (EUCOM) to CENTCOM,¹⁵⁸ whose primary mission was countering Iran and which oversaw the vast majority of America's defense cooperation with key Arab partners.

Under CENTCOM's umbrella and convening power, a wealth of new opportunities opened to expand military-to-military contacts and interactions between Israel and its Arab neighbors, even ones with whom it did not yet enjoy formal diplomatic relations. Given the escalating urgency of the threat that all faced from Iran and its proxy armies, particularly their vast missile and UAV arsenals, and given the fact that Israel already fielded the most experienced and effective multi-layered missile defense system in the world, the Arab interest in IAMD—after decades of relative lethargy—at last began to get real traction and gain momentum.¹⁵⁹

From the time of Israel's shift into CENTCOM in September 2021 to Hamas's October 2023 attack, Middle East IAMD saw unprecedented progress. Regular meetings to discuss and oversee expanding IAMD cooperation were instituted at multiple levels, including among chiefs of defense, air commanders, and planners building out possible threat scenarios and discussing tactics, techniques, and procedures for

neutralizing them. These discussions were open to relevant CENTCOM partners with an interest in IAMD and for the first time brought senior Israeli military leaders together with their counterparts from multiple Arab nations, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Bahrain, and Qatar to begin thinking through the requirements of IAMD as well as the operational details of how a multinational coalition might work in practice. Simulations and even live exercises among regional air forces, including the Israeli Air Force, were initiated. Ad hoc intelligence sharing efforts increased significantly, eventually numbering in the hundreds, with multiple instances of Israel and Saudi Arabia providing aerial threat information to CENTCOM that each knew would be passed to the other to help address an emerging danger.¹⁶⁰

While impressive in a relative sense—especially against the backdrop of years of no forward movement—the progress made on IAMD remained limited and in its infancy. In JINSA’s 2023 report, *Build It and They Will Come*, we noted that in light of historic obstacles to cooperation, ambitions for IAMD should be kept in check. Progress would likely be gradual and very much an incremental step-by-step process.¹⁶¹

Thus, while live exercises had begun, the initial scenarios were extremely modest—for example, how air forces from Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia might deal with the common threat posed by a single Houthi drone traversing the Red Sea. Similarly, the sharing of threat information via CENTCOM, though important, remained entirely analog, done largely telephonically. To the extent that countries like Saudi Arabia had recently agreed to the critically vital step of connecting the real-time data from their radars and sensors to CENTCOM’s CAOC in Qatar, no agreements were yet in place that would authorize CENTCOM to share the kingdom’s information with neighboring nations.¹⁶²

The JINSA report’s top recommendation was for CENTCOM to prioritize the eventual creation of a real-time common operating picture, or COP, that would have all participating countries digitally transmit their national radar and sensor information to the CAOC for near-instantaneous development and distribution of a common region-wide threat picture that would enhance the air domain awareness of the entire IAMD network. From this giant leap forward, the expectation was that each nation would then be much better positioned to use its own national air defense capabilities to defend against threats to its sovereign territory. The notion that countries would move beyond relatively low-cost real-time data sharing to actually expending their own limited national air defense assets to protect a neighboring state seemed highly improbable in the short term. While an ideal end state to be aspired to, JINSA’s 2023 report treated such a scenario as a relatively distant prospect well off in the future.¹⁶³

A. Iran’s Attacks as an Inflection Point for Arab-Israeli Relations

Counterintuitively, Hamas’s October 2023 attack on Israel ended up serving as a major accelerant for regional IAMD efforts. In the real-world crucible of a large-scale direct confrontation between Israel and Iran, both the durability of the Jewish state’s nascent defense relations with its Arab neighbors and the region’s rudimentary IAMD network were subjected to an almost unimaginable stress test and passed with flying colors. Under almost the worst possible conditions, they demonstrated a strength and resilience that even the most optimistic observers would have shied away from predicting they were capable of mustering at such an early and fragile stage of development.

Consider the context. By the time of Iran’s mass attack on April 13, 2024, Israel had been at war in Gaza for more than six months. It had long before become the most brutal and destructive conflict Israel had ever fought against the Palestinians. Though accurate casualty figures were hard to come by, almost certainly tens of thousands of non-combatant Gazans had already been killed by the time of Iran’s April attack, victims of Hamas’s purposeful strategy of hiding behind human shields and maximizing civilian deaths to increase international pressure on the IDF to cease operations.

It certainly had its intended impact across the Arab world. Though leaders in most of Israel's moderate neighbors privately harbored the hope that the IDF would make quick work of eradicating Hamas and delivering both the Iranian axis and the Muslim Brotherhood a devastating defeat,¹⁶⁴ the vast majority of their populations were almost solely fixated on Palestinian suffering and tragedy at the hands of an overwhelmingly more powerful Israeli military. Arab satellite TV, especially the Qatari-backed *Al Jazeera* network, as well as algorithms on Arab social media, made sure that Hamas's unspeakable atrocities of October 7, 2023, and its intentional efforts to run up Palestinian casualty figures were never acknowledged. Instead, these platforms made sure that by and large, the only thing Arab populations were exposed to was near continuous 24/7 images of dead and suffering Palestinian women and children.

The result by April 2024 was a simmering rage and rising anti-Israel sentiment among average Arabs across the region. Their governments were acutely attuned to these shifting popular attitudes and to criticisms stoked by Iran in particular that the Arab states were not doing enough to oppose and punish Israel.¹⁶⁵

Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, had been inching ever closer to a decision to normalize the kingdom's relations with Israel prior to October 7, 2023.¹⁶⁶ But as the war in Gaza dragged on and scenes of Palestinian suffering mounted, he was known to have been put on the defensive. MBS told visitors that Saudis under the age of 35, who composed 60 percent of the population and who previously had not shown any attachment to the Palestinian cause, for the first time were becoming emotionally invested in the struggle with Israel.¹⁶⁷ Indeed, by the war's third month, in January 2024, MBS alarmingly told Secretary of State Antony Blinken that by moving forward on normalization with Israel, he might risk meeting the same fate as the first Arab leader to make peace, former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat—assassination by his own people.¹⁶⁸

It was into that hothouse environment of boiling anti-Israel sentiment that CENTCOM's request for Arab participation in the April coalition to defend against Iran's pending missile attack landed. It would have been difficult to conjure up circumstances less favorable for a positive response from Arab governments. Opening themselves to charges of aiding Israel militarily at a moment when a majority of their populations were fully bought into charges that Israel was perpetrating a genocide against innocent Palestinian civilians was without question a high-risk proposition that none of them could have welcomed. On top of that was the added risk that joining such a coalition could easily put these states back squarely in the crosshairs of Iran and its proxies. As such, it would have been relatively easy, entirely keeping with past behavior, and surely the path of least resistance for these governments to demur, citing the potential political and military peril.

The fact that as many as four of them—Egypt, Qatar, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—did not demur, and instead agreed to participate in some manner in Israel's defense and at potentially great cost to their own security and stability was a remarkably positive development, to say the least. Few, if any, experts on Middle East affairs would have predicted it in advance.

Indeed, in the case of Saudi Arabia, the Saudi military on multiple occasions in the days immediately preceding Iran's April 13, 2024, attack turned away CENTCOM's repeated requests to support the assembling coalition. It was not until the final hours before the attack commenced that MBS himself directly intervened and agreed to participate.¹⁶⁹

That decision, along with the participation of the three other Arab nations, was certainly unprecedented in the long history of the Arab-Israeli conflict and, as such, well worth pausing over to note its importance as a major inflection point for the Middle East. At a minimum, it served to highlight just how powerful the underlying commonality of national interests had become that increasingly bound Israel and its neighbors together in shared opposition to Iranian aggression and hegemony—strong enough, in the end, to overcome even the dramatically heightened tensions triggered by the ongoing war in Gaza and the

Palestinians' plight that had, until that point, for decades served as a powerful centrifugal force driving the region's states away from Israel.

B. Iran's Attacks as an Inflection Point for IAMD

As historically significant as Iran's April attack was in underscoring the surprising staying power of the new era in Arab-Israeli relations birthed by the Abraham Accords, it was equally significant for the statement it made about the extraordinary progress and future potential of the region's IAMD efforts. The massive Iranian barrage in April 2024 served as a huge forcing function that took the important, but relatively incremental progress that IAMD had been steadily making since Israel's inclusion in CENTCOM three years earlier to a whole different level of cooperation that virtually no one foresaw or predicted in advance.

Simply put, there was no inkling among even the closest observers of CENTCOM's IAMD efforts that the nascent system being developed since 2021 was remotely prepared to respond to, much less defeat, the largest missile, cruise missile, and drone salvo in the history of warfare. Up to that point, a small number of participating countries had discussed and, on rare occasions, exercised very simple contingencies that at best involved one or two drones passing over the Red Sea but posing common threats to their territories. To go from that to figuring out, in real time and in the heat of a live combat situation, how to divide responsibilities and coordinate activity to counter 200 incoming UAVs and cruise missiles traversing multiple national air spaces was a challenge of an order of magnitude larger than not even CENTCOM's most ambitious IAMD planners had contemplated.

Indeed, any proposal prior to April 2024 to undertake an IAMD exercise mirroring such a mass Iranian attack would have almost surely been shot down out of hand as wildly unrealistic and premature. Neither the system nor the participating countries were anywhere close to being ready to handle it yet. As one U.S. pilot who participated in the April defense openly acknowledged to *CNN*, "the scale that we expected for the most dangerous was vastly under, probably four to five times under what actually occurred on April 13."¹⁷⁰

It is true that the defeat of Iran's April attack could largely be attributed to the excellence of Israel's existing national air defense capabilities, bolstered by the strength of U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation—both of which pre-date and were separate from CENTCOM's more recent efforts to increase regional cooperation on IAMD.

Nevertheless, at least two other points are also indisputable. First, that several of the Arab states that joined CENTCOM's ad hoc coalition for the defense of Israel made contributions to the effort that were both novel and quite unexpected, going well beyond anything that they had committed to before the Iranian attack. Second, it is also almost certainly the case that some of the Arab contributions to the coalition were critical to the operation's extraordinary success.

Thus, Qatar quickly agreed to allow data from its air defense radars to be shared with CENTCOM for use in the coalition's defense of Israel, something it had not done previously. Saudi Arabia, which had first agreed to share its radar feeds with the CAOC in 2022,¹⁷¹ similarly had not agreed prior to the Iranian attack to allow that data to be incorporated into a CENTCOM-generated COP that could be shared with other IAMD participants, much less with Israel. But on the night of April 13-14, 2024, it did.

The most operationally consequential Arab contribution to defeating the Iranian attack was almost certainly the Jordanian and Saudi decisions to open up their air spaces to the fighter jets of multiple countries for Israel's forward defense. Absent that decision, it is extremely difficult to imagine that the coalition would have achieved the 100 percent kill rate it experienced against the more than 200 incoming

Iranian UAVs and cruise missiles. The ability to conduct interceptions at great distances from Israel's actual borders was without question invaluable to the coalition's success.

Jordan's readiness to open its skies may have been somewhat less surprising given the Hashemite Kingdom's 30-year bilateral peace treaty with Israel and even longer standing reliance on Israeli military support for its own security. The Saudis, however, had no such history of defense cooperation with Israel. Nor had any of CENTCOM's work on IAMD to that point come close to having participating countries agree to open their airspace for use in the defense of their neighbors. The fact that the Saudis did so, in the heat of the moment and without prior rehearsal, was not only a huge surprise, but also represented a tremendous leap forward for Middle East IAMD in practice.

Though less critical to the actual conduct of the April 13, 2024 defense of Israel, the decision by Jordan and Saudi Arabia to deploy their own aircraft and air-to-air missiles in the operation was arguably the most significant contribution they made in terms of advancing the future of Middle East IAMD. If there was a sliding scale of actions showing progress on regional air defense integration, with information sharing to assist other countries in defending themselves at the lower end of the scale and opening airspace to other countries' aircraft at the mid-range, at the highest end would be expending concrete, limited, and expensive national defense assets to protect a neighbor from a pending attack.

Indeed, in JINSA's 2023 report on IAMD, we described an "ideal" end state, which we underscored "is likely a long way off—if ever achievable," whereby "the national assets of one country...would be used to neutralize an aerial threat to another coalition member."¹⁷²

Amazingly, and without any advance agreement, a nascent version of that ideal end state actually happened on the night of April 13-14, 2024 when, under the incredibly polarizing circumstances of the Gaza war, Saudi Arabia, a country having no formal relations with Israel, sent its own air force up to conduct at least two successful interceptions of Iranian UAVs headed toward Israel.¹⁷³ Forged in the real-world stress test imposed by Iran's April attack, a historic and entirely unanticipated new benchmark was established for what Middle East IAMD could be going forward.

VI. Lessons Learned

As historic and positive as the implications were from the coalition's two successful defenses of Israel in 2024, there were also important lessons to be drawn for the future of Middle East IAMD. As well as things went, there were certainly issues, concerns, and shortcomings that arose that should be accounted for and, where possible, dealt with to further improve the coalition's readiness and capabilities to address future challenges on a par with the two large-scale Iranian attacks of the past year.

1. The attacks underscored that U.S. leadership is irreplaceable, although troubling doubts remain among some key partners over Washington's staying power and commitment.

Absent America's role via CENTCOM, it is impossible to imagine that the IAMD coalition would have emerged to contest Iran's attacks. No other country wields the combination of influence, relationships, trust, and military capabilities possessed by the United States that enable it to bring friends and partners together in a common cause, organize them into a coherent coalition, and help mitigate their risks.

In that sense, though it arose quite suddenly, the IAMD success of 2024 was in fact decades in the making. It was built on a foundation of sustained U.S. investment in establishing strong and close security partnerships with key regional states. Most obvious in this regard has been the unstinting and essential American role in supporting Israel's development of what is by leaps and bounds the most advanced and effective multi-layered missile defense system of any country in the world. Specifically in terms of Iran's April and October attacks, Israel's high-altitude Arrow defense system, which played the starring role in countering Iran's two massive missile barrages, has been a joint U.S.-Israel funding and development project since 1986.¹⁷⁴

Similarly, the enduring American commitment to supplying its closest Arab partners with modern air forces and air defense capabilities to counter the Iranian threat paid real dividends. The political and strategic coup of getting multiple Arab partners to sign on to the defense of Israel in the middle of the Gaza war was largely attributable to the trust, confidence, and value those countries attached to their own longstanding strategic relations with Washington. Likewise, the operational contributions made to the coalition by Saudi and Qatari radar and sensor feeds, and by Jordanian and Saudi fighter jets and pilots, all U.S. supplied and trained, were the direct product of decades of commitment to building strong partners that could work alongside the U.S. military and, when a major crisis arose, meaningfully share the burden of maintaining regional security and stability.

The most discordant note in this picture of cooperation under crisis seems to have been the U.A.E.'s decision to absent itself from the IAMD coalition.¹⁷⁵ While expectations were low for other Gulf countries like Kuwait and Oman due to their strong identification with the Palestinian cause, or for Bahrain because of its lack of relevant capabilities, the U.A.E.'s failure to meaningfully contribute to the coalition stood out.

The U.A.E. hosts thousands of U.S. troops and the U.S.'s 380th Air Expeditionary Wing,¹⁷⁶ as well as the Joint Air Warfare Center that CENTCOM uses precisely for the purposes of training regional partners in support of inter-operable missions like IAMD.¹⁷⁷ The U.A.E. also possesses a large, advanced, and capable air force, mostly U.S. supplied and trained, as well as multiple high-end U.S. anti-missile platforms, including close to a dozen Patriot batteries and two THAAD batteries with the powerful AN/TPY-2 long-range radar¹⁷⁸ that almost certainly would have been helpful to tracking Iran's April and October missile barrages. Finally, of all the Arab states formally at peace with Israel, the U.A.E.'s relations with Jerusalem along almost every vector, including militarily, are the warmest and most robust.

The U.A.E.'s notable absence from the coalition appears, unfortunately, strongly linked to its diminished confidence and trust in the strength and reliability of the U.S. commitment to Emirati security. The country's leadership had not yet recovered from the trauma of a series of Houthi drone and missile attacks in early 2022 and, perhaps even more importantly, what they saw as the completely inadequate and tardy U.S. response to the crisis. Fairly or not, the experience clearly cast a shadow over the relationship that has even further intensified the U.A.E.'s acute sense of vulnerability when it comes to being drawn into any conflict with Iran, up to and including tightening restrictions on the operations of U.S. aircraft from its territory.¹⁷⁹

The potential hole left in U.S. strategy—to counter Iranian aggression more generally, and to advance the cause of Middle East IAMD specifically—from not having the U.A.E. as a committed and reliable military partner, especially during a crisis with Iran and its proxies, should be of real concern to the United States and is worthy of Washington's time, attention, and resources to try and rectify. Given its geography, influence, and capabilities, the U.A.E. is too important to be left hedging on the sidelines of any future conflict.

2. Impressive as it was, the IAMD coalition that emerged to defeat Iran's attacks was very much an ad hoc affair.

The coalition was by no means foreordained. Its membership, capabilities, roles, and missions came together very much on the fly. There was no real prior organization, planning, or training for what transpired. The fact that it came together at all, not to mention proved as extraordinarily effective as it did, was a minor miracle and not something that anyone could have foreseen or forecast in advance.

Absolutely central to the coalition's emergence was the personal role played by CENTCOM's commander General Kurilla. His leadership, energy, charisma, and relentless dedication were absolutely the "X" factor in convincing coalition members, especially among the Arab states, to step up under difficult and dangerous conditions, and then to work together effectively at the moment of maximum danger.¹⁸⁰

In a matter of just days, thanks largely to Kurilla's tireless diplomacy, the situation went from Israel standing largely alone to a U.S.-led multinational coalition of at least nine countries confronting the likely Iranian onslaught. Most impressive, perhaps, was Kurilla's efforts with the Saudis, who in the days leading up to Iran's April 13, 2024, attack had on multiple occasions deflected Kurilla's request for participation, but in the final hours relented to Kurilla's persistence and persuasiveness.¹⁸¹

Kurilla was no doubt the right man at the right time in the right job. Israel, the United States, and the Middle East were lucky to have him in place. Take him out of the equation and replace him with another commander under those same circumstances and it is far from clear that you get the same result.

While having Kurilla in command was incredibly fortunate, being so dependent on a single personality for success or failure is certainly not ideal for ensuring long-term success, especially when dealing with complex military coalitions and operations. The IAMD coalition "wheel" should not have to be re-invented on a just-in-time basis with each new eruption of aggression from the Iranian axis. The ad hoc multinational network forged in crisis largely thanks to Kurilla's indispensable efforts should be undergirded, to the maximum extent possible, by more formal processes and advance understandings, agreements, organization, planning, and training.

3. A surge of U.S. military capabilities into the Middle East played a vital role in defeating both Iranian attacks but required significant lead time that may not always be available.

In advance of Iran's barrages in April and October, the United States surged significant increments of new forces into the region to support Israel's defense, including naval destroyers equipped with the advanced Aegis anti-missile system and multiple squadrons of additional combat aircraft. On both occasions, those capabilities made important, even critical, contributions to countering Iran's assault, supplementing Israel's main effort to intercept a number of potentially devastating ballistic missiles and, in April, shooting down upwards of 70 Iranian UAVs and cruise missiles.

These were certainly impressive demonstrations of the concept of dynamic force employment, or DFE, adopted by the 2018 U.S. National Defense Strategy¹⁸² as a means of compensating for the growing need to shift U.S. military capabilities from the Middle East to other higher-priority theaters, particularly in the Indo-Pacific to better counter China's rising power. The order of the day was to "right size" (read: reduce) America's presence in the Middle East and "take on risk" in CENTCOM's area of responsibility.¹⁸³ If and when a crisis did arise, DFE would allow the United States to surge combat capabilities into the Middle East on a "just in time" basis for when they would be required, rather than keeping them routinely forward deployed in theater.

The wrinkle, of course, with the concept of DFE is that while the surge deployments can be executed rapidly, they are certainly not instantaneous. The buildup of capabilities can often take days and even weeks to be completed. In the case of Iran's April and October attacks, the United States did have adequate time beforehand to get additional forces in place. In April, Iran delayed its response to Israel's attack on its Damascus consulate by twelve days. In October, the U.S. had maintained in theater additional forces that had already surged forward in August following Israel's assassination of the Hamas leader, Haniyeh, and was able to add to them further in the days both before and after Israel's late September escalation against Hezbollah reached its climax.

The disquieting question arises, naturally: what would have happened under different circumstances? What if, in April, Iran had launched a massive barrage on April 2 or 3 rather than postponing until April 13, 2024? What if Iran launched something more akin to a bolt out of the blue by waiting months to retaliate, well after an American surge of capabilities had receded? Iran clearly demonstrated an ability to learn lessons from its attack in April that made its October attack far more difficult to counter. It's not hard to imagine it also learning the lesson that in the future it needs to place a far greater premium on acting with stealth and surprise in order to dramatically shorten the advance warning needed for DFE to work. Is the U.S. potentially accepting too much risk and should it reconsider the size of its forward deployments in CENTCOM's AOR?

4. Iran's attacks, particularly the October all-ballistic missile assault, appeared to expose gaps in the capabilities of both Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Israel, strongly supported by the United States, has for years shown itself to have the most capable and experienced air defense system in the world. Especially in repeated conflicts with Hamas in Gaza, Israel's short-range defenses—particularly the Iron Dome system—have almost flawlessly defended Israeli towns and cities, often achieving interception rates of greater than 90 percent. However, it was only after October 7, 2023, that Israel's advanced long-range system, the Arrow, got its first rigorous battlefield tests—first with individual ballistic missile launches from the Houthis in Yemen, but most severely during Iran's April and October barrages.

While the Arrow by all accounts performed sensationally, it's also true that the system was put under severe stress by the sheer size of the Iranian missile attacks. Defending against one, ten, or even twenty ballistic missiles fired in rapid succession, with flight times measured in minutes, is challenging enough. Countering more than 100, as in April, or close to 200, as in October, is a qualitatively different problem entirely. What Iran learned quite correctly from its April attack was that nearly doubling the number of missiles and using its most advanced variants would increase the odds significantly that it might be able to overwhelm Israel's finite number of Arrow batteries and interceptors.

It came close to doing so. There is no doubt that Israel in October had to make some agonizing real-time decisions to prioritize what targets it would defend and which targets it would risk being hit. It simply lacked enough Arrow batteries and interceptors. As a result, close to 35 of 200 missiles might have struck Israeli territory, with over 30 striking near the important Nevatim air base.

The deficit in Israel's long-range capabilities vividly exposed by Iran's attack was the obvious reason that the U.S. agreed to rush one of its limited THAAD systems to Israel prior to Israel's October 26 retaliation against Iran. Though Iran ultimately was deterred from responding at that time, the concern remains that it still retains a very large stockpile of medium-range missiles capable of hitting Israel.

Certainly, one should expect that Iran again learned important lessons after its relatively more successful missile barrage in October. The obvious risk is that next time, instead of firing 200 missiles in rapid succession, it will fire 300 or 400 and attempt to concentrate them on just a few critical infrastructure targets or population centers rather than military bases. Israel's existing Arrow capabilities would be hard-pressed to handle such an assault on their own. Indeed, recognition of that fact came in April 2025 when, in response to the risk of another Israel-Iran confrontation over the Iranian nuclear program, the United States rushed a second THAAD battery to Israel to help further supplement its shortfall in long-range capabilities.

The U.S. possesses very few THAAD batteries, and they probably cannot remain in Israel indefinitely given competing demands in other theaters. Israel, however, will for the foreseeable future continue to confront the real danger of even more massive ballistic missile barrages from its enemies. Serious thought will need to be given by Washington and Jerusalem whether it makes sense, strategically, financially, and in terms of both nations' defense industrial capacity to seek to expedite the ramping up of Israel's Arrow capabilities in the near term.

Iran's October attack also raised questions about the anti-missile capabilities of America's Arab partners. While the air forces of Jordan and Saudi Arabia helped in April to defeat Iranian UAVs and cruise missiles, when Iran chose to limit its October attack to just ballistic missiles, the active participation by those same states ceased—presumably due to a lack of adequate air defense systems to intercept missiles at long-range crossing over or near their territories toward neighboring states.

Unlike Jordan, the Saudis possess multiple U.S. Patriot batteries for point defense of high-value areas within the Kingdom from missile and drone attacks. Those Patriots were regularly and effectively used by the Saudis in defending against Houthi missile attacks during the Yemen civil war. However, the Patriot's utility for helping defeat an Iranian missile attack targeting Israel is much more limited. The Saudis have agreed to purchase multiple THAAD batteries from the United States,¹⁸⁴ with the first reportedly ready to go operational in the Kingdom by mid-2025.¹⁸⁵ The THAAD, with its advanced radar, will almost certainly be valuable as part of a broader IAMD architecture that serves the Saudis first and foremost, but could be helpful in the defense of neighboring states as well, including Israel potentially. Especially given the kingdom's demonstrated readiness to contribute to such a regional architecture, ensuring the Saudis get the full complement of THAAD batteries that they have agreed to purchase makes solid strategic sense.

5. The surprising success of the ad hoc coalition that countered the Iranian attacks suggests that the United States should be more ambitious in pushing to significantly expedite the progress of Middle East IAMD.

In the April attack, Qatar for the first time shared data from its radar feeds with CENTCOM for use with other coalition members in defending Israel. The Saudis did likewise. But those agreements to allow their data to be integrated by the CAOC to develop a COP for use across a multinational coalition were not based on prior commitments or understandings, but on last-minute real-time political decisions. With this successful precedent in hand, it suggests that an opening now exists for the United States and CENTCOM to press for more formal data-sharing arrangements from participating countries that pre-authorize the use by the CAOC of their radar and sensor information in a COP that can be instantaneously disseminated to other IAMD participants. Those agreements should be joined with a renewed effort to ensure participating countries have fully updated and modernized their Link 16 encrypted communication systems to allow the coalition to exploit the COP as fully as possible.

Similarly, the decision by Jordan and Saudi Arabia to open up their air spaces and deploy their aircraft as part of the coalition defending Israel represented a qualitative advancement for regional air and missile defense. Neither of these steps resulted from any prior arrangements or training conducted as part of CENTCOM's work to advance Middle East IAMD since 2021.

On the contrary, as JINSA's 2023 report on IAMD suggested, it was generally thought unrealistic to expect that at any point in the near future countries would go beyond the initial step of passive information sharing to active participation in combat operations for the defense of a neighboring state. The latter was treated very much as a distant aspiration rather than a near-term prospect. Yet Iran's attacks clearly created an unexpected crisis that forced the Jordanians and Saudis, under intense time constraints, to make decisions on IAMD cooperation within a matter of days and hours that they may otherwise have taken years, if ever, to agree to. Now that they have done so and the extraordinary precedent has been set, the United States and CENTCOM should seek to establish a new benchmark and expectation for the region's IAMD architecture by making those advanced forms of regional cooperation in active defense of neighboring states, as much as possible, the new normal.

An important part of a more ambitious U.S. strategy to accelerate IAMD progress should be regular multinational exercises based on contingencies that mirror the acute challenges posed by Iran's massive missile and drone barrages against Israel. In contrast, prior to 2024, planning and preparations had worked from extremely simple scenarios that perhaps envisioned several countries trying to determine how to neutralize a single UAV or two. However, having now been through a real-life crisis that involved hundreds of projectiles crossing through the airspace of several nations, in which the interception capabilities of multiple countries had to be successfully coordinated, the opportunity for a qualitative step-up in the ambition of regional IAMD planning, training, and exercises is obvious and should be seized upon.

6. As bad as they were, Iran's attacks against Israel were in many ways a best-case scenario for the first large-scale test of Middle East IAMD, raising legitimate concerns about what would happen if more vulnerable Gulf states are similarly targeted in the future.

Israel is located at a great distance from Iran. It possesses by far the most advanced, comprehensive, and battle-tested multi-tiered air and missile defense system in the world. It has a special historical relationship with the United States, one strongly supported by both major political parties in Congress. Its strategic ties to the U.S. military and U.S. intelligence are closer and more robust than those enjoyed by the vast majority of America's NATO allies.

All these factors played a critical part in the successful defense of Israel against Iranian attacks. The 1,000 miles separating Israel from Iran provided it with crucial strategic depth and time to mount its defense. Israel's unparalleled capabilities ensured that on its own it was able to counter the brunt of the Iranian assaults—especially the ballistic missiles that constituted the most dangerous prong. Israel's special relationship with the United States and close strategic partnership dramatically increased the likelihood that in Israel's hour of need Washington would expend considerable energy and resources in helping protect it from Iran's assault, including by working overtime to mobilize an ad hoc multinational coalition to rush to its defense.

The Arab states of the Gulf are far differently situated. All of them are much closer to Iran, most of them perilously so, with critical political, economic, and security infrastructure and assets within easy range of the Islamic Republic's missile arsenal. The time and space to act against incoming attacks is much less.

While most of the Gulf states, especially the U.A.E. and Saudi, but Qatar as well have made substantial investments in air and missile defense platforms, their capabilities and performance remain a work in progress and do not come close to matching Israel's. Over a period of seven years during the Yemen civil war, the Saudis faced thousands of missile and drone attacks by Houthi rebels. While many caused real damage, over time the Saudis demonstrated growing skill in using both ground-based Patriot missiles and combat fighters to neutralize such assaults. However, Houthi barrages tended to be relatively small, usually one to two projectiles at a time and rarely more than ten. Further, in September 2019, when Iran fired twenty-five UAVs and cruise missiles at some of the kingdom's most valuable energy assets, the Saudis failed to neutralize any of them.

The U.A.E. was also targeted on a handful of occasions by the Houthis during the Yemen war, but always in small salvos. The most serious of these occurred in early 2022 and left three dead in Abu Dhabi, though the U.A.E.'s U.S.-supplied THAAD system tallied its first interception in the same attack.

As for their ability to count on U.S. support in a crisis, the Saudis, Emiratis, and other Gulf states have fair reason to be skeptical that they would garner anything approaching the kind of backing that Washington provided to the Israelis during the 2024 Iranian attacks. Though defense and security relations between the Gulf and the United States are longstanding and deep, there are no real constituencies among the American public or Congress that would quickly rally to send U.S. forces into harm's way to help defend them. Especially over the course of the past fifteen years, as U.S. global priorities shifted away from the Middle East and U.S. dependence on the region's energy resources has declined, the Saudis and U.A.E. in particular have grown increasingly anxious about their ability to rely on U.S. security assurances. Fear of abandonment has at times been acute, particularly after what were perceived as far-too tepid U.S. responses to the traumatic 2019 Iranian attack on Saudi oil facilities and the January 2022 Houthi attacks on the U.A.E.

As impressed as they were by the neutering of Iran's attacks on Israel, and the important contributions that regional IAMD efforts made to those efforts, it would be understandable if the Gulf states are wondering how well they would have fared if their countries, rather than Israel, would have been the target of a massive Iranian missile and drone salvo numbering in the hundreds. While Israel is an unqualified beneficiary of expanded IAMD cooperation, the payoff for the more exposed Gulf states, while very real, is less of an unadulterated good, especially to the extent that working with Israel could make them more of a target for Iran while stirring up domestic resentments among pro-Palestinian elements of their populace.

U.S. efforts to capitalize and build upon the IAMD successes of 2024 should keep uppermost in mind the need to address these lingering concerns among Arab partners. As it works to deepen their participation in a regional network, Washington should also be focused on bolstering the case that Gulf governments

can make to their own people about the very real reciprocal benefits that will accrue to their own national defense and security.

While nothing can be done to solve for the acute challenges posed by their proximity to Iran, there remains much the United States and other partners (including Israel) can do to continue improving and expanding the air and missile defense capabilities and architecture of these countries, including expedited access to additional advanced platforms and technologies, increased training, and the sharing of intelligence and information. The goal should be—to the greatest extent possible—to make them far more capable of countering and surviving attacks of a scale similar to the ones that targeted Israel in 2024.

More broadly, as it has been doing in recent years with the Saudis in talks surrounding prospective normalization with Israel, the United States should also be looking for ways to reaffirm its own continued security commitments to the peace and stability of the Gulf region, up to and including new bilateral or multilateral defense treaties, long-term U.S. basing arrangements, and an increased readiness to sell those states fully committed to the IAMD network new offensive capabilities, such as fifth-generation fighters and long-range strike weapons, to bolster the credibility of their own threat to deter Iran not purely through defense and denial, but by the promise of punishing counter-strikes as well.

Finally, at the geo-political level, while the raging war in Gaza did not prove in the end to be an insurmountable obstacle to securing the participation of key Arab states in Israel's defense, it would be foolhardy to blithely assume that this will continue to be the case going forward regardless of how long the conflict persists. In considering the various ways to make the Arab decision to commit wholeheartedly to IAMD cooperation easier rather than harder, a U.S.-led effort to work with Israel and its Arab partners to bring the Gaza war to a minimally satisfactory resolution as soon as possible would unquestionably be of significant utility.

VII. Recommendations

The massive Iranian direct attacks against Israel in April and October 2024 were in many ways an historical turning point, not least in terms of the prospects for Middle East IAMD. Levels of cooperation once deemed impossible, or at least highly unlikely until some distant future, suddenly happened. The question for the United States is whether that extraordinary cooperation forced into existence under extreme crisis conditions can now be systematically incorporated into an ongoing and predictable regional network and coalition for protecting all its members from similar aerial assaults. Taking full advantage of the opportunities created by last year's events and addressing some of the continuing challenges they exposed will require focused and dedicated leadership and engagement by both the U.S. Congress and the Trump administration.

A. For Congress

- Congress should task CENTCOM with delivering its own report on the key lessons gleaned from Iran's April and October 2024 attacks and the specific implications for the future of Middle East IAMD. The pace of events in the Middle East since October 7, 2023, has been so frenetic and unrelenting that there is a real risk that insufficient time will be spent systematically reviewing and analyzing the two attacks and drawing appropriate recommendations for U.S. strategy to accelerate and consolidate IAMD progress. The report should aim to alert Congress to the extraordinary new opportunities that may now exist following the successful coalition efforts to defend Israel to deepen and expand regional cooperation and integration, and the combination of policies, resources, and capabilities required to ensure the United States can fully take advantage of them. This should include an assessment of any adjustments recommended in the size and scope of CENTCOM's own forward deployment in the region, as well as additional capabilities that should be provided to Israel and Arab participants to enhance the network's overall readiness and effectiveness.
- Congress should draw on CENTCOM's lessons learned to make any necessary adjustments to its annual appropriation for Israeli missile defense needs, particularly the allotment devoted to the longer-range Arrow system. Likewise, Congress should take account of CENTCOM's recommendations for Arab partners and make clear its readiness to streamline and accelerate the FMS (Foreign Military Sales) and FMF (Foreign Military Financing) process to ensure that Arab participants fully committed to a U.S.-led IAMD network have rapid access to U.S. equipment that CENTCOM deems essential for strengthening the system's overall architecture and operations.
- Alongside its "lessons learned" report, or as a logical part of it, Congress should also task CENTCOM with developing a concept of operations, or CONOPS, that sets out an ambitious but realistic vision for the future end-state of Middle East IAMD toward which the U.S. should be working in terms of purpose, participants, architecture, capabilities, responsibilities, and operations. The two ad-hoc coalition defenses of Israel in 2024 significantly shifted the Overton window on the kinds of progress that may be achievable on Middle East IAMD in a relatively rapid timeframe. What seemed nearly impossible before April 2024 appears entirely possible today with sufficient U.S. leadership and commitment. We are now in a new world previously thought unthinkable where Arab partners have actually deployed and expended their own military assets as part of a multinational coalition to help defend Israel against a massive Iranian attack. That is a huge precedent that should be reflected in the ambition of Washington's future IAMD planning

for the region. The CONOPS should provide guidance on several key questions: What countries should be included as formal members in a Middle East Air Defense network? What combination of new radars, sensors, and interceptor platforms should be procured and deployed over what time frame and where as part of a regional architecture that maximally serves the security interests of all participants? What agreements and understandings regarding data sharing, airspace access, command and control, and collective defense should underpin the system? How will the network function in practice under different contingencies?

B. For the Trump Administration

- With a notion of its preferred IAMD CONOPS in mind, the Trump administration and CENTCOM should prioritize with renewed urgency and ambition their day-to-day work to deepen and expand Middle East IAMD in order to take advantage of the unprecedented and unexpected cooperation of 2024 to consolidate, formalize, and institutionalize it as much as possible. Agreements should be negotiated for participants to feed their radar and sensor data to the CAOC as a matter of course for integration into a COP that, with appropriate technical safeguards in place, will be shared with all committed members of the IAMD network in real time. Any necessary procurement required to ensure safe, secure, and speedy communications and information-sharing within the network should be facilitated.
- Similar agreements and understandings should be reached regarding the conditions under which participating countries would grant a U.S.-led coalition the ability to operate in their airspace and commit to making their own national defense assets available for participation in coalition operations to defend another member of the network.
- All of these efforts should be undergirded by an expanded and intensified program of CENTCOM-led IAMD discussions and planning sessions at senior political and military levels, as well as training efforts and live exercises that replicate as realistically as possible the full spectrum of threats that Iran and its proxies are likely to pose, including those of similar magnitude to last year's April and October attacks. The goal should ultimately be to establish a formal Middle East Air Defense network under CENTCOM's leadership.
- The administration should work with Congress to streamline the FMF and FMS process for platforms and capabilities that CENTCOM deems essential to the development and strengthening of the region's IAMD architecture and operations. In addition to ensuring all IAMD participants have the necessary infrastructure required for secure real-time data sharing and communications with the CAOC, the administration should prioritize blanketing the region with additional sensors, and the sale of advanced fighter aircraft and greater missile defense batteries, particularly Patriots and THAADs, that would both dramatically enhance the ability of the Gulf states to mitigate a major Iranian attack against their own countries and contribute more actively to the air and missile defense of the broader region.
- Integral to the effort to enhance Arab defensive capabilities, the United States should also work to make Israel's unparalleled experience and missile defense systems part of the broader regional solution—both because Israel may at times have more fitting (and cost-effective) answers to the challenges that its neighbors are facing, and because of the strategic impact such defense cooperation can have on consolidating Arab-Israeli relations and deepening regional peace and security.

- More broadly, the more that the United States can do to underscore its enduring commitment to its Arab partners, the greater the likelihood that they will overcome their legitimate concerns about Iranian retaliation and fully participate in new U.S.-led collective security initiatives with Israel and their other neighbors. The more they believe that the extraordinary defenses mounted against Iran’s April and October attacks, including the key role of the United States, were not just unique to Israel, but would apply equally in the event their countries were similarly threatened, the more likely they will be to take the risks associated with deeper IAMD engagement. Such U.S. expressions of commitment could take many forms, including: explicit high-level U.S. public and private messaging targeted at deterring Iranian attacks against U.S. Gulf partners; the permanent assignment of additional U.S. forces and basing facilities in key Gulf states; and the conclusion of additional upgraded bilateral (and, perhaps eventually, multinational) security agreements between the U.S. and its Gulf partners, such as Bahrain’s recently concluded Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (CSIPA) or the Article V-like mutual defense treaty that the United States has been negotiating with Saudi Arabia as part of a larger package connected to the kingdom’s eventual normalization of relations with Israel.
- Mindful of how important the repeated “just-in-time” U.S. surge of naval and air power was to defeating Iran’s attacks, the administration, Pentagon, and CENTCOM should review the adequacy of force levels regularly assigned to the Middle East to determine whether adjustments are required to ensure risk has been properly assessed and America’s regional force posture is capable of meeting the full range of contingencies likely to be faced.
- As part of any effort to enhance deterrence messaging against Iranian missile and drone attacks, the Trump administration and CENTCOM should in their messaging and operational planning move toward a doctrine that promises to harshly punish such attacks by retaliating against Iranian territory. Simply defeating an attack and “taking the win” should no longer be the operating assumption. Instead, Iran should be on notice that such attacks, successful or not, will be met by painful counterstrikes against valuable Iranian assets. While the threat of U.S. and Israeli offensive strike options will be key to these efforts, the Trump administration and CENTCOM should give serious consideration to ensuring key Gulf partners with by far the greatest vulnerability to Iranian missile barrages also have the national wherewithal in terms of advanced fighter aircraft (including potentially fifth generation F-35s) and long-range strike capabilities to hold important Iranian targets at risk in the event they are attacked.

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