

# Abraham's Fortress: Strengthening Middle East Defenses Against Iran





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# I. Introduction

The Iranian regime's several thousand attacks on Gulf countries tried to get those nations to balk at the war and pressure Washington to end it, and compel Gulf countries to move away from the United States and Israel. Instead, the opposite happened.

"We need a conclusive outcome that addresses Iran's full range of threats," wrote the Emirati ambassador to Washington, in a top American newspaper, at the height of the war in March.<sup>1</sup>

His firm words mirrored Gulf leaders' private messaging to the United States.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Gulf countries jointly threatened to retaliate against the Iranian regime—including countries like Qatar that had moved closer towards Iran's orbit in recent years.<sup>3</sup>

The Gulf states conveyed these sentiments in more than just words. Two of those nations reportedly did strike Iran at least once each; several granted basing, access and overflight rights to U.S. forces in the war; and at least one permitted the United States to conduct strikes against Iran from inside its territory.<sup>4</sup>

Recent weeks have provided more indicators of growing U.S. and Gulf ties, and growing Israel-Gulf security ties, thanks to Iran's counterproductive decision to broaden the war by striking Gulf countries unprompted. These include:

- On May 2, Israel and three Gulf nations each reached major defense deals with Washington, and if finalized, two Gulf countries will receive the same advanced system as Israel, the Advanced Precision Kill Weapon System (APKWS). The U.S. State Department approved the potential sale of Patriot missile interceptors to Qatar; APKWS precision munition kits to Israel, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.); and an Integrated Battle Command System to Kuwait.<sup>5</sup>
- On April 30, multiple outlets reported that Israel supplied the U.A.E. with the Iron Beam and Iron Dome defensive systems, and the Spectro drone detector—and put dozens of Israeli soldiers in harm's way to help defend Emirati territory during the war.<sup>6</sup>

There is now an unprecedented window to boost U.S. regional defense cooperation by taking steps to advance an integrated air and missile defense (IAMMD) and empower Gulf states to defend against Iran well into the future. This opportunity is ripe for the taking, and the United States is beginning to seize it. Yet there is far more that can and should be done. Washington should reach for even higher rungs on the ladder and work ambitiously to enhance a U.S.-led regional security architecture that deepens, and sustains, the Iranian regime's present weakness.

This is an objective that should appeal to all Americans, regardless of their views on the conflict, or their views on whether America should or should not retain a large military presence in the region. In fact, it should be particularly appealing for those who wish to reduce the U.S. footprint in the Middle East down the road, since emboldening America's Gulf partners, and boosting their ties with each other and Israel, helps with burden-sharing while still advancing U.S. security interests.

## II. The Problem

It is no secret that the Iranian regime's attacks, using cheap, plentiful drones and short-range missiles, exposed vulnerabilities in Gulf countries' air defenses.

American forces, and in some cases U.S. systems supplied to Gulf nations in years past, helped these countries defend themselves. Yet Iranian drones and missiles struck population centers, critical infrastructure, and military sites in each Gulf nation during the war. Conventional legacy U.S. radar systems came under Iranian attack across the region, reducing threat visibility and underscoring the risks inherent in the status quo, hub-and-spoke model.<sup>7</sup> This highlights the need to accelerate further towards a genuine, enmeshed, and robust defensive network.

Even countries like Kuwait and the U.A.E., which claimed high interception rates against Iran's aerial bombardments, sustained casualties and experienced economic setbacks due to near-daily Iranian attacks.<sup>8</sup> And, throughout the conflict, the coalition used Patriot missiles costing \$4 million or more to intercept Iran's \$25,000 Shahed-136 attack drones.<sup>9</sup> This dynamic is unsustainable, both for the United States and its regional partners, and requires a fresh look from Washington at regional security.

## III. The IAMD Solution – And How to Get There

### A. Overview

The conflict has shown the heightened need for an improved air defense architecture among the United States, Israel, and Gulf nations. However, it has also demonstrated, given the U.A.E.'s reported success using Israeli defenses to defend against Iranian projectiles, the high potential of such an effort.<sup>10</sup> There are many opportunities for joint U.S.-Israel-Gulf investment, development, and production of weapons systems over the medium-term, particularly regarding drone defenses.

Efforts to form an integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) in the region are not new and have achieved some success. U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) has spent years forging the rudiments of this system, building links between data sensors and early warning systems.<sup>11</sup> That was enabled by Israel's 2020 move into the CENTCOM area of responsibility from European Command (EUCOM), as JINSA first raised in 2018.<sup>12</sup> CENTCOM's effort involved technical steps to forge better shared visibility of threats among the United States and its regional partners, as JINSA recommended in its 2023 report *Build It and They Will Come: A U.S. Strategy for Integrating Middle East Air and Missile Defenses*.<sup>13</sup>

This hard work bore fruit in terms of some Gulf nations' modest, though historic and unprecedented, role in helping detect and bring down Iranian drones traveling towards Israel in 2024.<sup>14</sup>

Yet much of this work was done on an ad hoc basis, and there has been insufficient formalization of an integrated regional air and missile defense architecture. There is more work to be done to facilitate integrated sensing, formalized operating protocols, real-time data exchanges, and, critically, sufficient resources for America's regional partners.

There are also a range of complementary efforts, particularly when it comes to intelligence collection and surveillance of imminent threats, that should be pursued to further advance U.S.-Israel-Gulf security infrastructure. These include the air, maritime, and space domains.

The need for adaptation underscores the need for greater IAMD among Gulf countries. In the past, the principal obstacle to a more robust IAMD was the Gulf nations' reluctance to share common platforms and data systems with one another. But Iran's strikes on their critical infrastructure over the past two months may have changed their perspective.

## B. Enhancing Defenses Through Improved Data Sharing

On the strategic level, much can be done to make Gulf nations better equipped for future conflicts by strengthening collaboration with Washington, and with one another.

For one, when Gulf partners buy advanced U.S. systems like the Patriot and Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), they are precluded from transferring data from these systems; i.e., no "third-party transfer." While the United States has previously indicated a willingness to grant waivers for certain systems, regional actors declined to take the United States up on that offer, perhaps out of confusion over what is, or is not, permitted. The United States should better clarify the terms of its discretionary party transfer approvals for data and technology transfers between its Gulf partners as a first step.

Another significant obstacle to regional IAMD integration has been Gulf countries' mistrust of one another, which has dissuaded them from more aggressively requesting permission to share threat data, systems status, and other related information. Obviously, this mistrust prevents the creation of a common regional approach to threat detection, data sharing, and cross-leveling of maintenance and sustainment resources.

The United States can and should play an important role in fostering mutual trust between the Gulf nations. U.S. technologies also offer the ability to discretely transmit, stovepipe, and filter data within certain parameters, which would provide a measure of integration but still be restricted to address Gulf nations' sensitivities. More can be done to educate Gulf leaders as to how this works in practice and better allay their concerns.

## C. Adapting to Low-Flying Aerial Threats

The nature of air and missile defense is also fundamentally changing, and U.S. efforts to strengthen its regional partners' defenses must take this into account. While IAMD previously focused on high-altitude threats, like ballistic missiles, the main challenge of today is posed by cheap, low-and-slow flying unmanned systems.

Iranian unmanned platforms capably exploited Gulf nations' defensive gaps throughout the war. While many were intercepted, dozens struck their targets, inflicting serious damage on critical infrastructure, including a major Saudi pipeline, Kuwait's international airport, and multiple regional ports.<sup>15</sup> Iranian drones also knocked out some of Qatar's main gas sites, contributing to significantly increased global energy prices.<sup>16</sup> "Interceptor Math," the principle that while the defender must intercept virtually

everything incoming to be successful, the attacker only has to “get lucky” with a few drones or missiles, was on full display.

Adapting to this threat will require leveraging the best the region has to offer, regardless of origin. Recognizing this, Bahrain and the U.A.E. reportedly quietly purchased Israeli drone defenses in recent years.<sup>17</sup> The U.A.E. has even fielded Israel’s cutting-edge Iron Beam laser technology to counter Iranian drones in the conflict, recent media reports indicate.<sup>18</sup> This ground-breaking cooperation can and should be expanded, and the United States should facilitate this collaboration where possible, including urging other regional partners to follow suit.

#### D. Leveraging the Full Array of U.S. Alliances

Addressing this long-term threat will also require looking outside the Middle East. Gulf nations are now purchasing Ukraine’s battle-tested systems to counter Iranian-made Shahed drones used by Russia.<sup>19</sup> Ukraine should be brought into U.S.-Gulf-Israel efforts to strengthen the regional collective against the host of current and future Iranian threats, potentially including leveraging Ukraine’s advances in creating unmanned maritime vehicles, as well.

One example illustrates this point well. In 2025, the Ukrainian government offered to sell the United States its counter-drone technology, but U.S. officials declined, a decision that clearly has not aged well with time.<sup>20</sup> This further highlights the need for Washington to leverage all opportunities offered by U.S. partners with experience against the low-flying threats of today’s wars and collaborate with these partners to predict and hedge against the threats of tomorrow.

The main lesson of the conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, and tensions in East Asia, is that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century there are no “regional conflicts” when it comes to U.S. and partner national security. All conflicts have immediate global implications and ramifications. The United States needs to collect, analyze and synthesize all available technology, experiential data, and lessons learned from wars worldwide.

#### E. Broadening Space Cooperation

As JINSA has previously argued, Washington is missing an opportunity by insufficiently leveraging regional partners’ advances in satellite research and development—which have direct defense applications in terms of real-time intelligence and surveillance.<sup>21</sup>

Several Gulf nations, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E., have made major advances in hyperspectral satellites and nanosatellites.<sup>22</sup> Bahrain and the U.A.E. have developed advanced nanosatellites that were launched into orbit, and Israel is a global pioneer in hyperspectral and nanosatellite research.<sup>23</sup> Hyperspectral satellites can significantly advance projectile threat detection.<sup>24</sup> They scan hundreds of wavelength bands in the light spectrum to collect more detailed data, particularly regarding an adversary’s underground activities, than conventional satellites.<sup>25</sup>

The United States can make significant progress on the intelligence and surveillance side of IAMD by better advancing and utilizing regional partners’ satellite technologies. Particularly with Iran frequently using underground sites to store drones and missiles, the use of small satellites with hyperspectral capabilities

that detect underground activity, like those Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and Israel have developed, could boost regional IAMD efforts.

## F. Laying the Groundwork for Co-Production

One of the main factors needed for a robust regional IAMD will be the ability to refill stockpiles and employ the necessary systems to meet Iranian projectile threats. While the onus will continue to fall on the United States in the near-term, a successful IAMD architecture down the road could involve Gulf countries, with U.S. and Israeli help, participating in American defense production.

While Gulf partners are not yet able to co-produce advanced systems at scale, and may not be able to for some time, several have privately indicated their desire to help with co-development and co-production. U.S. and Israeli technology and know-how, paired with Gulf funding and production capacity, can be a winning formula.

JINSA has previously explored, in its September 2025 report *Partners in Production: U.S.-Middle East Cooperation to Enhance Our Collective Defense Industrial Base*, how to foster these efforts by first prioritizing more modest co-production efforts.<sup>26</sup> Then, once the institutional groundwork has been laid, these initiatives could become more ambitious, including co-production of interceptor components, and, eventually, joint research and development of other defensive systems. For example, Israel and the U.A.E. already jointly produce an unmanned maritime vessel; a template for future efforts that other regional partners should emulate and in which the United States should participate.<sup>27</sup>

## G. Ensuring America Can Be the Backbone of Regional IAMD: Revamping the U.S. Approach to Its Own, and Partner, Military Readiness

A strong and lasting regional IAMD will also require changes inside the United States. The United States provides the key defense systems for its Gulf partners, and as a result needs to address challenges facing the way it currently a) makes weapons platforms, and b) provides them to its partners.

The Iran conflict has significantly drawn down already strained U.S. and partner stockpiles, and while major U.S. defense manufacturers have committed to accelerating high-end munition production, replenishment should be looked at through a broader lens.<sup>28</sup> It should include not only expensive, top-shelf systems but also less exquisite, cheaper, and quicker-to-produce systems able to better counter low-altitude and medium-altitude threats, rather than just high-altitude threats.

As part of this effort, the United States needs to modify its own attitudes towards defense collaboration and innovation. This will require the implementation of three main changes to America's own research, development and acquisition (RDA) and U.S. foreign military sales (FMS) processes. To this end, three urgent efforts include:

### **1. Boosting Collaboration and Transparency**

The FMS enterprise is really a complex consortium involving numerous Pentagon and other government (State Department, Congress, etc.) stakeholders, often with parallel, but not always convergent, interests. There is no single decision authority.

Recent Presidential Executive Orders directing the reform and streamlining of the FMS process are a step in the right direction.<sup>29</sup> The Executive Orders focus on facilitating greater collaboration, accountability and transparency between government stakeholders, and between the government and private industry. Achieving success will require sustained senior leadership attention and commitment to implementing reforms.

### **2. Streamlining Technology Transfers**

Washington should update its approach towards transferring technology to partners. Put simply, the current FMS system was set up to export tanks, planes, ships, and bullets, and all the various components thereof. It has not evolved to reflect the transfer of the highly sensitive system data and technology inherent in modern weapons systems.

Our legacy approach to the vetting of technology transfer was based on an initial response of "no," then an often-lengthy evaluation process prior to release. In an era of quickly evolving artificial intelligence (AI) and hypersonic weapons, this is unacceptable. We must find a way to accelerate this process while not sacrificing the U.S. qualitative and technological military advantage or risking our sensitive technology falling into the wrong hands.

### **3. Improving Public and Private Sector Fusion in the Acquisition Process**

The U.S. defense acquisition system should be more transparent, collaborative, and, most importantly, open to new ideas. The slow-moving nature of the acquisition process is a barrier to quickly acquiring and fielding new systems, compromising major progress.

This will require more forward-leaning investments in industrial base capacity to yield cutting-edge defensive systems for the United States, which we can sell as needed to our allies and partners. It will also require clear demand signals from political leaders to defense contractors.

Again, recent Presidential Executive orders address this issue, but merely issuing the orders is not enough. While the current administration has made some progress towards reforming these processes, overcoming institutional inertia and, more importantly, changing the institutional culture will require sustained leadership attention.

## IV. Conclusion

The United States can and should accelerate its efforts to foster a collective, mutually beneficial, and innovative multilateral approach to regional defense. That means Washington will need to invest not just resources, but time and effort, to stimulate trust *multilaterally* with its Gulf partners, among its Gulf partners, and between its Gulf partners and Israel. Fostering collective trust will help shift the IAMD concept from its current bilateral “hub-and-spoke” construct, with the United States at the center, to a genuine, enmeshed, and robust defensive network with the U.S. as a “critical node” in that network.

Iran’s assault has brought Gulf partners directly into the conflict, and they are desperately looking for solutions to the near-term, and longer-term, threat posed by Iranian and proxy drone and missile threats.<sup>30</sup> Though they have sought to make inroads with the Gulf, China and Russia are actively helping the Iranians attack Gulf countries.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, the United States is uniquely qualified and positioned to provide the exquisite command-and-control capabilities, and political leadership, to spearhead a comprehensive and inclusive multilateral approach to regional security. As in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, the United States remains the indispensable partner in the Middle East. The time is now for the United States to aggressively and decisively take the lead in countering the airborne threats of the present—and the future.

## Endnotes

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