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“Regional Security Cooperation Partnerships in the Middle East”

Testimony by

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Much has changed in the Middle East in the two years since the signing of the historic Abraham Accords. Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates have moved quickly and deliberately to normalize relations with Israel, embracing a “warm peace” with the Jewish State. Along with Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco, nearly one third of Arab States have now elected for peace with Israel, ending an ugly taboo and creating positive regional momentum. In turn, this improved regional environment has encouraged other Arab States—including those without formal diplomatic ties and technically still “at war” with Israel—to likewise engage, even if discretely.

One of the more promising outcomes of this new regional dynamic is the prospect that this enlarged pro-US Middle East peace bloc will redound to unprecedented regional strategic cooperation. Intra-regional security cooperation has long been a US interest in the Middle East, but the demand has become even more urgent with the so-called “pivot to Asia,” increasing demands on the US military around the globe, and with the heightened menace posed by Iran. Only recently, however, with the signing of the Abraham Accords and the shift of Israel from European Command or EUCOM to US Central Command or CENTCOM, has this kind of tangible collaboration become feasible.

In the past few months, as reports of contacts between senior Israeli and Arab security officials have proliferated, discussion of a new regional strategic alliance has reached fever pitch in Washington. It’s difficult to judge how much progress to date has actually been made, but the stories are impressive.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, CENTCOM convened Chiefs of Defense or CHODs from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Bahrain, and Israel, this past March in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt, to discuss the Iranian air threat.¹ In June, Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz claimed that since August 2019, there had been roughly 150 meetings between Israeli defense personnel with counterparts in regional countries “excluding Egypt and Jordan.”² Then, Jordan’s King Abdullah announced that he “would be one of the first people that would endorse a Middle East NATO.”³ All the buzz, in turn, generated widespread speculation that that President Biden would make this cooperation the centerpiece of his Middle East trip his trip to the Middle East in July. While security was on Biden’s agenda, there was no big announcement of progress on regional strategic cooperation.

Before the visit, a senior Administration official outlined in a general sense what the cooperation might look like:

“bring[ing] countries together to address common threats and challenges, something the United States can uniquely do, and with new frameworks that aim to harness unique American capabilities to enable partners to work more closely together.”⁴

¹ Michael Gordon and David Cloud, “US Held Secret Meeting with Israeli, Arab Military Chiefs to Counter Iran Air Threat,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 26, 2022. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802>

² Anna Ahronheim, “Israel Security Officials had over 150 meetings in Abraham Accord States,” *The Jerusalem Post*, July 7, 2022. <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east-news/article-711416>

³ Abigail Ng, “Jordan’s king says he would support a Middle East version of NATO,” *CNBC*, June 24, 2022. <https://www.cbc.com/2022/06/24/jordans-king-says-he-would-support-a-middle-east-version-of-nato.html>

⁴ “Background Press Briefing by a Senior Administration Official on the President’s Trip to the Middle East,” *White House Press Briefing*, June 14, 2022. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/press-briefings/2022/06/14/background-press-call-by-a-senior-administration-official-on-the-presidents-trip-to-the-middle-east/>

The US role here is critical. What the Biden Administration envisions, however, is less than the Arab NATO evoked by King Abdullah. Rather, it is a US-supported regional strategic cooperation initiative focused on countering Iranian missiles and drones, involving the sharing of radar information and the integration of layered missile defense systems. There also appears to be an element of joint air force training and exercises, as well as sales of Israeli equipment, including, most notably, a \$500m missile defense system to Morocco.⁵ By and large, to date, few details have emerged about the so-called Middle East Air Defense Alliance or MEAD, including the states involved and their level of involvement. Already, however, according to Israeli Defense Minister, MEAD is operational and “thwarting Iranian attempts” to target the region.⁶

This less ambitious approach is well-advised. Washington helping to facilitate strategic cooperation among partners isn’t something new. The US does this all over the world, and quite successfully. In the Middle East, however, the US has been less successful in promoting strategic cooperation among its Arab partners. And the record of Arab States military coordinating, without US support, is even less distinguished. While the current enthusiasm in the region is reason for some optimism, given the precedent it’s important to have realistic expectations for what can and will be accomplished.

Previous Attempts

Historically, bilateral trade between Arab states has been negligible. So too has intra-regional strategic cooperation.

The Arab League has deployed several peacekeeping and expeditionary forces since its inception in 1945.⁷ In 1976, the so-called Arab Deterrent Force was established to help end the Lebanese Civil War. The force, comprised primarily of Syrians augmented with some symbolic Saudi, Sudanese, and Libyan troops, ended up facilitating the decades-long Syrian military occupation of Lebanon. In 1982, the six member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) contributed troops to the Peninsula Shield Force, a 40,000-strong unit designed to counter Iranian subversion. With the exception of a 2011 deployment to repress a popular uprising in Bahrain, however, the force has never seen combat.

Seven Arab States participated in some capacity in Operation Desert Storm (1991), when a US-led coalition of 35 states liberated Kuwait from Saddam Hussein’s Iraq. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the GCC agreed to build a regional military force including Egypt and Syria, but the corps was never established. The Gulf War represented the height of Arab military cooperation, under a carefully orchestrated US umbrella. This level of coordination has not since been repeated.

More recently, in 2015 Riyadh established a coalition to support Saudi Arabia in its intervention in Yemen, following the Iranian-backed Houthi rebellion. While seven Arab League members participated in Operation Decisive Storm, the intensity of each state’s involvement was uneven, as was battlefield performance and interoperability. In short, the force did not operate “jointly.” Moreover, Qatar and

⁵ Sam Sokol, “Israel Inks \$500m Air Defense Deal with Morocco, Reports Say,” *Haaretz*, February 15, 2022. <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2022-02-15/ty-article/israel-inks-500m-air-defense-deal-with-morocco-reports-say/0000017f-f19b-d487-abff-f3ffae520001>

⁶ “Israel’s unexpected military alliance in the Gulf,” *The Economist*, June 30, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2022/06/30/israels-unexpected-military-alliance-in-the-gulf>

⁷ For a more comprehensive discussion of Arab Forces, see David Schenker and Gilad Wenig, “Uncertain of Obama, Arab States Gear Up for War,” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 29, 2015. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/david-schenker-and-gilad-wenig-uncertain-of-obama-arab-states-gear-up-for-war-1427662165>

Morocco exited the coalition in 2017 and 2019, respectively. Abu Dhabi—Riyadh’s indispensable partner in the campaign—also withdrew, reportedly without the consent of Saudi, in 2019.⁸

Rightsizing Expectations

A common threat perception on Iran has driven a change in approach to regional military cooperation with Israel. While the current trajectory of strategic cooperation between Israel and Arab states is unprecedented, however, there remain significant obstacles to building out an effective operational “alliance.”

Intra-Arab rivalries. Notwithstanding the perennial talk of “brotherly” relations, Arab States do not necessarily get along. Between 2017 and 2021, six Arab states imposed a political and economic blockade on Qatar. The rift has been bridged, but suspicions remain. Likewise, in recent years, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been both strategic partners in Yemen and economic rivals. Saudi Arabia is currently making an effort to compel multinationals to relocate their corporate headquarters from Dubai to Riyadh. In 2021, Riyadh reportedly tried to undercut a water and solar energy deal between Jerusalem, Abu Dhabi, and Amman.⁹ Regional rivalries and distrust may undercut efforts to forge closer cooperation.

Public vs. Quiet Cooperation. Public opinion polling—and empirical evidence alike—suggests that the Abraham Accords and normalization with Israel is not popular in the Gulf and the Middle East writ large.¹⁰ For that reason, historically, both Jordan and Egypt—Israel’s first peace partners—preferred to keep diplomatic and strategic cooperation with the Jewish state quiet. Fledgling ties between Israel and the Gulf states, forged in the aftermath of the 1993 Oslo Accords, were also handled discretely. In the aftermath of the Abraham Accords, however, Arab state’s dealings with Israel have become more overt.

Still, reticence remains. Although it’s widely believed that Riyadh will inevitably normalize with Israel, until now the kingdom has kept its reported dealings with Jerusalem quiet. Last month, disagreements about Israel making public a phone call between Israeli interim premier Yair Lapid and Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al Thani, scuttled plans for opening an Israeli consulate in Doha during the World Cup.¹¹ The hesitancy of some Arab states to go public with strategic cooperation may make it difficult to station Israeli equipment and/or personnel in non-Abraham Accords states. Israeli officials’ predilection for leaking will not reassure states still undecided about upping the ante.

Antagonizing Iran. To a greater or lesser extent, Arab states have concerns about popular opinion related to normalization with Israel. These states are equally if not more apprehensive about how Tehran will respond to closer strategic cooperation with Israel. Since 2019, senior

⁸ The UAE remains involved in Yemen, but not as part of the Saudi-led coalition. Indeed, the Emirati military effort in early 2022 to blunt the Houthi offensive in Maarab was critical in bringing the Iranian-backed group to the negotiating table.

⁹ “Saudis attempted to block UAE-Israel-Jordan deal on energy, water—report,” *The Times of Israel*, November 25, 2021. <https://www.timesofisrael.com/saudis-attempted-to-block-uae-israel-jordan-deal-on-energy-water-report/>

¹⁰ Dylan Kassin and David Pollock, “Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords,” *Fikra Forum*, July 15, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/arab-public-opinion-arab-israeli-normalization-and-abraham-accords>

¹¹ Guy Azriel, “Qatar-Israel talks fail over Israeli demand to go public,” *I24 News*, August 31, 2022. <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/sport/1661941110-exclusive-qatar-israel-talks-fail-over-israeli-demand-to-go-public>

Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials have repeatedly warned Gulf states against pursuing security ties with their new peace partner.¹² Early on, Abu Dhabi reportedly sought to preempt these threats by announcing the UAE would not allow Israel to base military aircraft on its territory. While not as menacing as F-35 fighter jets, Israeli radars on Emirati territory would no doubt also be seen as problematic by Tehran. For the UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, then, the key question will be how closely these states can coordinate with Israel until Iran responds, either directly or via its proxies. Like the Emirates, Qatar and Oman, also have important economic and diplomatic ties with Iran, and may prove even more cautious about taking steps with Israel that might antagonize Tehran.

Sharing what with whom? Strategic cooperation between Israel and its Arab partners is a positive development. Intelligence sharing will all but certainly improve security for regional states threatened by Iran and its proxies. At the same time, however, some of Israel's best potential partners in the region have increasingly close relations with China. If Israeli equipment—some of which has been co-developed with the US—is deployed abroad, measures will need to be taken to ensure the technology is not compromised. Some of the Arab states that Israel is hoping to strengthen its strategic cooperation vis-à-vis Iran are also currently leading efforts to help Iran bust US sanctions.

Conclusion

The regional security partnership between Israel and Arab states has significant potential to help Washington's friends and allies in the Middle East better defend against the growing Iranian missile and drone threat, but it remains in the nascent stages. While intelligence sharing may ultimately expand to include other threat sets—including ground-based counterterrorism challenges posed by Iran's proxies—it's difficult to imagine this cooperation taking on a more proactive kinetic approach. Indeed, given different threat tolerances across the region, coordinated proactive air-to-ground operations seem unlikely. However this cooperation evolves, though, it's a vast improvement from where the region was two years ago.

Still, it's important to have reasonable expectations as to the limitations of the strategic cooperation. While the Arab partners are at best non-democratic if not authoritarian, considerations remain about public opinion. Furthermore, the capabilities of many of these Arab states remain limited. Israel as well, continues to lack sufficient capabilities in aerial refueling and ordnance to accomplish certain missions vis-à-vis Iran. In this regard, while helpful, MEAD is no panacea.

The new strategic architecture made possible by the Abraham Accords is an important new element of burden sharing, but it is not a Plan B for when Iran truly becomes a threshold nuclear state. Even if regional strategic cooperation achieves its full potential in defending against the missile and drone challenge, the United States will remain the indispensable ally of its regional partners in countering the Iranian nuclear threat.

¹² See, for example "Iran warns Persian Gulf countries about security ties with Israel," *Tehran Times*, June 11, 2022. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/473523/Iran-warns-Persian-Gulf-countries-about-security-ties-with-Israel>