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## Deterring Iran Through Integrated Air and Missile Defense

By Rob Schantz

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Joe Biden Administration does not have an Iran strategy. While the Administration initially tried to revive the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), , these efforts were ultimately unsuccessful and declared “dead” by Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell in December 2023.

The Iranian threat to U.S. economic and security interests continues to evolve through rapid development of a nuclear capability, attacks on U.S. forces via Iranian proxies, disruption of global trade by the Houthis, and threats to regional energy infrastructure. Iran exerts power via the air through its missile and drone programs – which have directly attacked Israel and U.S. bases in Iraq, destroyed critical energy infrastructure in Saudi Arabia, and have disrupted global shipping. On the nonproliferation front, it is more than likely that Iran would use a missile as a vehicle for a nuclear weapon.

Thus, aerial denial of Iranian power projection is a domain with multiple stakeholders, is defensive, and can greatly diminish Iranian influence. The cornerstone of an Iran strategy should be an Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) regime, a system that would defend American economic interests and security objectives in the Middle East. IAMD is a comprehensive and combined approach to defend against airborne military threats such as traditional aircraft, missiles, and UAVs as it seeks to integrate all the resources and platforms necessary for air defense across multiple nations, thus providing greater net security than a single nation could provide.

A Middle East IAMD serves to protect U.S. economic interests, strengthen security objectives, facilitate offshoring U.S. security commitments, and limit Iran’s ability to influence the region through coercion. By leveraging the combined capabilities of regional partners, the United States can decrease its security

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commitments to the region as IAMD grows. While the United States would continue to serve a vital role in the coordination of the organization, this is far less of a task than directly committing military platforms and systems to the region.

## **The Biden Administration Does Not Have an Iran Strategy**

In an April *Politico* column, reporter Nahal Toosi asked, “Has Biden Considered Having an Iran Strategy?”<sup>1</sup> The short answer is no. Toosi argues that this is a sentiment shared by many in the Biden Administration, with one official remarking, “You know, a lot of people inside the Administration ask that same question. Sometimes they ask it on the first day. Sometimes they ask it six months later.”<sup>2</sup>

Previous presidential administrations crafted coherent strategies that sought to limit Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Famously, the Obama Administration utilized a combination of sanctions and diplomacy to secure the Iran nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), a feat that built on the foundations laid by the George W. Bush Administration. President Donald Trump then abdicated the agreement that he believed delivered the economic relief necessary for Iran to reconstitute and emerge as a regional power following the expiration of the agreement’s sunset provisions. Furthermore, the Trump Administration sought to change the behavior of the regime through heavy sanctions, which administration officials described as “maximum pressure.”

The Biden Administration entered office with a strategy: revive the nuclear deal. As a show of good faith, the Biden Administration removed some of the “pressure” placed on Iran by its predecessor; however, on December 7, 2023, United States Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell declared the negotiations “dead.”<sup>3</sup>

Since then, the Biden Administration has sought to, as one official put it, “keep it [Iran] on low boil on all fronts — nuclear, regional, whatever. That’s been the approach for some time now.”<sup>4</sup> This strategy has not, however, kept Iran off the President’s desk. In early August, the White House drew anger when it allowed \$6 billion in frozen funds from Iranian energy sales to South Korea to be transferred from two South Korean

banks to a Qatari bank, which would have given Iran access to the money to acquire humanitarian aid. The United States also released five Iranians held in the United States, and Iran released five Americans. This was dubbed a “pay for hostages” approach by critics, namely congressional Republicans, who accused the Biden Administration of “fueling [Iran’s] terror machine.”

Then, on October 7, 2023, the debate about Iran’s regional ambitions again came to the forefront when its Palestinian proxy, Hamas, executed an attack on Israel that killed 1,200 Israelis and ignited a conflict that threatened to engulf the region. On the nuclear front, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) announced in mid-November 2023 that, “Iran had amassed enough uranium enriched up to 60 percent purity for three atomic bombs.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, between October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2023, and January 11, 2024, US troops in Iraq and Syria came under attack more than 130 times, provoking a military response that struck 85 Iranian-affiliated targets across Iraq and Syria. For an administration that has sought to keep Iran “off the President’s desk,” Iran has become an ink spill that has flooded his desk.

## **America Needs an Iran Strategy**

The strategic importance of the Middle East for both the security of the United States and its economic interests lay below the nations of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait. Today, the Middle East contributes an estimated 31.3 percent of the global oil supply.<sup>6</sup> Layered over these economic interests, U.S. foreign policy has pursued a core set of objectives, which include countering terrorism, preventing nuclear proliferation, promoting regional stability, and supporting the security of strategic allies and partners. Iran threatens every single one of these objectives.

## **How Iran Can Threaten the Global Oil Supply**

Arguably, the most significant disruption to energy stability Iran can pose is closing the Strait of Hormuz. At only 21 miles (33 km) wide at its narrowest point, the majority of energy exports from Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran pass through the Strait. This amounts to one-fifth of the world’s total oil consumption. In the past, Iran has

threatened to close the Strait, thus cutting off a major artery in the global oil infrastructure.<sup>7</sup> Iran possesses significant naval capability consisting of the separate Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN) and the conventional Iranian Navy. Furthermore, Iran maintains an area denial capability consisting of unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV), cruise missiles, and mines, all of which can easily span the width of the Strait.

However, even without factoring in the military responses of other nations, Iran simply cannot afford to follow through with threats to close the Strait of Hormuz. Iran relies on the Strait just as much, if not more, than the other Gulf nations.”Roughly 90 percent of Iran’s oil exports pass through the Strait of Hormuz each year, representing approximately 83 percent of all Iranian exports,” according to World Bank data and interviews compiled by the University of Texas’s Robert Strauss Center.<sup>8</sup> This revenue is essential not just for the economy but also for the regime, as 30 percent of the government’s fiscal budget depends on petroleum exports. Furthermore, due to poor refining capacity, Iran must import one-third of its gasoline.<sup>9</sup> Should Iran deny the world access to the Persian Gulf via the Strait of Hormuz, it would significantly handicap its own economy.

A more realistic threat to the energy sector is through targeted attacks. Iran has demonstrated its ability to leverage its ballistic missiles and unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) capabilities through proxies to target and destroy critical infrastructure. In September 2019, Iran’s Houthi proxies attacked Saudi oil facilities in Khurais and Abqaiq with a battery of missiles and drones. Khurais and Abqaiq represent critical junctures in the Saudi oil infrastructure as they are responsible for stabilizing roughly half of the nation’s oil.<sup>10</sup> Impacting 6% of the global oil supply, this attack marked the largest daily supply disruption in history.<sup>11</sup> Though never directly claimed by Iran, the path of the drones and missiles, combined with recovered parts, are consistent with Iranian systems. This attack was relatively minor and only included a small number of missiles and UAVs, indicating that it was designed to test and prove the capability rather than inflict massive and sustained damage. This capability, through targeted strikes on critical energy infrastructure, represents the most significant and credible threat to U.S. energy interests in the Middle East.

## Countering Terrorism

Iran has worked to proliferate terrorism throughout the Middle East. Across four nations, Iran supports six foreign terrorist organizations (FTOs) designated by the United States. These groups include Hamas, which was responsible for the October 7th attack, which killed 1,200 Israelis. The scale of Iranian support for these operations is massive. A 2020 State Department report concluded that, “Iran has historically provided up to \$100 million annually in combined support to Palestinian terrorist groups, including Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command.”<sup>12</sup> The same report found Iran gave Hezbollah, in addition to weapons, \$700 million a year.<sup>13</sup> These investments have resulted in “executed terrorist plots, assassinations, and attacks in more than 35 countries worldwide, primarily through the [IRGC-Quds Force, or IRGC-QF] and [Ministry of Intelligence and Security, or MOIS] but also via its partner Lebanese Hizballah.”

Furthermore, Iran is officially designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism by the United States State Department. Some of these Iran-backed organizations have actively attacked U.S. personnel and installations at home and abroad. Specific instances include the aforementioned recent attacks on U.S. bases across Iraq and Syria. There have also been specific Iranian-backed threats to the U.S. homeland. For example, in 2020, members of the IRGC attempted to organize an assassination plot against former National Security Advisor John Bolton. While the United States and its allies work hard to counter terrorism, Iran actively supports it.

## Nuclear Proliferation

Iran is widely considered to be a “doorstep” nuclear nation, meaning that while it does not possess a weapon, it sits on the precipice. In early 2024, the Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS) increased its rating of the Iranian nuclear threat from “High Danger” to “Extreme Danger.”<sup>14</sup> This is largely reflected by the diminished nuclear breakout time, a measure of how quickly Iran could convert its civilian nuclear infrastructure to a nuclear weapon.

The JCPOA was designed to extend this breakout time to a year, which, in theory, would give policymakers ample time to identify and nullify the threat. However, since the United States left the JCPOA in 2018, the breakout time has decreased to a matter of days. Iran has a large quantity of uranium enriched to 60%, the procedural step below high enrichment necessary for a weapon. Civilian nuclear use requires uranium to be enriched to 3%, while military applications require 90%. Currently, “the time it would need to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a nuclear bomb - is close to zero, likely a matter of weeks or days.”<sup>15</sup> While a nuclear armed Iran has obvious implications for U.S. security and economic interests, it may also lead to a regional nuclear arms race as other countries seek to regain effective deterrence.

## **Promoting Regional Stability and Supporting Strategic Allies**

Iran, through its proxies, actively seeks to upend regional stability through attacks on U.S. allies and partners. Two glaring examples of this are Iran’s support for the Houthis in Yemen and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Houthis, a group of Shia rebels in Yemen, revolted against the country’s government in 2011 and overthrew it in 2014. Now, they hold and govern substantial territory in the western part of the country, along the Red Sea.

Between the civil war in Yemen and the conflict with Saudi Arabia, the Houthis -who Iran has supported since 2009 - have cultivated instability in the region. Following the October 7th attack and subsequent conflict between Hamas and Israel, they continued to sow instability through their assault on global shipping, mainly targeting U.S. and Israeli ships.<sup>16</sup>

Hezbollah has been another source of instability and threat to U.S. strategic allies. A Shiite Muslim political party and militant group, Hezbollah serves as a military and political organization and provides social services, earning it a reputation as a “state within a state.”<sup>17</sup> Hezbollah, throughout its existence, has threatened Israel and currently maintains an arsenal of more than 130,000 rockets, many of which are provided by Iran.<sup>18</sup> Through its proxies, Iran has worked to sow instability where it can and use those proxies to threaten U.S. allies. A capability at the vanguard of these proxies is the extensive stores of missiles and UAVs, which enable them to threaten

nations in ways simple terrorist organizations cannot.

The Middle East still matters to the United States. While its importance has certainly diminished and U.S. defense priorities have shifted, the United States has immense economic and security interests in the region. The Middle East produces roughly a third of the world’s oil, an amount significant enough to manipulate global prices. Nuclear proliferation and terrorism continue to threaten U.S. national security and economic interests and are long-time features of U.S. foreign policy. Consequently, regional stability and American alliances advance U.S. economic and security objectives. Iran directly threatens every single one of these policy objectives. A coherent strategy to defend U.S. interests from Iranian influence is necessary and overdue.

## **Why the Current Approach is Failing and is Not a Strategy**

The Biden Iran strategy failed because it failed to attain a multilateral consensus and only targeted a single facet of Iranian power.

Upon entering office, President Biden sought to recreate the JCPOA. However, the conditions that made the JCPOA possible no longer existed. The intense pressure from the international community brought Iran to the table, particularly the combined power of the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, China, Russia, and the European Union. After the Trump Administration reneged on the deal, the Russians and Chinese reengaged with Iran. Despite U.S. sanctions, Iran is now “exporting on average more than 1.4 million barrels of crude oil per day, two-thirds of which ends up in the People’s Republic of China.”<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the war in Ukraine has created additional economic opportunities for Iran, which has sold the Russians more than 2,000 UAVs along with other military equipment. Unlike in 2015, Iran is not isolated from the world’s economy. Thus, the economic pressure of the Biden Administration was simply not enough to induce the desired concession without the assistance of the Russians and Chinese.

The other reason for failure is the Biden Administration’s narrow approach to addressing Iranian power and its challenge to U.S. interests.

Reviving the JCPOA would only work to constrain Iran's nuclear program. While important, this is only a single, and still unrealized, aspect of Iranian power. The strategy failed to account for Iran's use of missiles, UAVs, proxy forces, terrorist organizations, or IRGC operations. Each component consistently achieves Iranian objectives while competing with American interests. While the Biden Administration sought to prevent the worst-case scenario, it failed to address the most prominent current problems. Thus, when Iran utilized its full spectrum of irregular warfare, the United States was unable to prevent it, forcing Washington to adopt a reactive posture. This is not conducive to achieving American objectives or providing regional stability.

## **Elements of a “Good” Iran Strategy**

A successful Iran strategy must benefit the United States, fit into the larger strategic picture, induce reasonable commitments, be realistic and restraint-based, and emphasize multilateralism.

### **Fit into the Larger Strategic Picture**

The current U.S. strategic picture seeks to prioritize the Indo-Pacific and recommends deep engagement in European security. Successive administrations have sought to demote the Middle East to a secondary interest. Despite Iran's challenges to U.S. economic interests and security objectives in the region, Iran does not currently possess the capability to strike the American homeland, and the economic importance of the Middle East has drastically decreased.

When assessing the Iranian threat, it is vital to distinguish between security requirements (the level of security necessary to defend the United States) and security objectives (the level of security necessary to defend U.S. interests). Iran is more than 5,000 miles from the continental United States. Its longest-range missile has a projected range of 1,200 miles. Iran is not an existential threat to the security of the United States.

Additionally, from an economic standpoint, there are many definitions for “energy independence,” and the most used (and easiest to operationalize) is whether oil exports surpass imports. This occurred in 2019 in the United States for the first time since the 1950s.

Last year, America produced 2.5 percent more energy in 2022 than it consumed, making the United States energy independent. This is not to diminish the Iranian threat, as Tehran is still capable of striking U.S. allies and partners. As oil markets have globalized, a shock anywhere impacts domestic prices everywhere. However, context is important to adequately understand the nature of the challenge.

### **Induce Reasonable Commitments**

The recent congressional battle over aid for Ukraine, Israel, and Taiwan indicates the lack of appetite for expensive and extended foreign policy adventures. With finite resources available, the Middle East must compete with the priority Pacific and European theaters. It is also important to remember that strategic competition takes time. It is vital to build a strategy that can be credible and attainable in order to attain the maximum dividend. Thus, a realistic Iran strategy must be accomplished on a budget. The fewer resources required, the more feasible it is to implement and sustain.

### **Realistically Attainable**

The original JCPOA was a longshot. However, fortunate international conditions, a reformist Iranian president, and clever foreign policy combined to implement what few thought possible. When the Biden Administration sought to revive the deal, it is fair to say it was dead on arrival. The JCPOA was built on the premise of delaying nuclear breakout in exchange for sanctions relief. While Iran viewed sanctions relief as essential for its economy, the Trump Administration understood the JCPOA as a threat to American security and interests. The JCPOA did not seek to disrupt other varieties of malign Iranian behavior such as the activities of the IRGC and the Iranian ballistic missile program. Furthermore, sunset provisions would eventually enable Iran to acquire an increasing list of conventional weapons and progress its civilian nuclear program.

Due to these security impasses, the initial Biden Iran strategy was not realistically attainable. Any attempt at a future Iran strategy must already show a minimum viable product that can be scaled up. In other words, reviving the JCPOA represented an all or nothing approach where the benefits would not be realized unless the entire agreement was approved. The

basis of an Iran strategy must be able to be quickly instituted, even minimally, and then have the ability to be built up to the ideal solution. This way, the entire strategy cannot be destroyed by a single disruption.

## **Restraint-Based**

Few want a war with Iran. The United States is already overstretched abroad given its support for Ukraine and Israel's defense. There is no appetite for a conflict, as it would not achieve the desired outcome. An Iran strategy must be based in restraint, realistic about the limits of American power and the cost of such a conflict, so as not to induce yet another war.

## **Emphasize Multilateralism**

An Iran strategy must draw on a multilateral design. Iran has significant proxy forces in six regional jurisdictions (Bahrain, Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories). Additionally, through its missile and UAV programs, Iran can strike anywhere in the region. Given Iran's vast capabilities, the United States it is not feasible, or in the national interest, to continue the current policy of defending all partners everywhere and all the time. Furthermore, a dedication to multilateralism facilitates burden sharing so that the United States can make reasonable commitments, given that it is not acting alone. Drawing on the power of many nations magnifies the resources of each individual contribution in order to create a larger net gain.

## **Serving US Regional Interests.**

Finally, an Iran strategy ought to serve the United States' regional interests at the lowest cost possible. Such a strategy must defend the free flow of oil and provide for regional stability.

## **Components of a Better Iran Strategy**

### **Integrated Air and Missile Defense**

The cornerstone of an Iran strategy should begin with an Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMD) regime, a system that would accomplish many of these objectives. This approach would enable threatened nations to pool resources to generate a high

capacity for security, thus decreasing U.S. security commitments, and would represent a scalable solution that can be immediately implemented.

The domain through which Iran can exert the most power is via the air. More specifically, Iran has used its missile and drone programs to directly attack Israel and U.S. bases in Iraq. Furthermore, through the Houthis, Iranian drones have attacked the Saudis and UAE and have disrupted global shipping. On the nonproliferation front, it is more than likely that Iran would use a missile as a vehicle for a nuclear weapon. Thus, aerial denial of Iranian power projection is a domain with multiple stakeholders, is defensive, and can greatly diminish the threats Iran poses.

IAMD is a comprehensive and combined approach to defending against airborne military threats such as traditional aircraft, missiles, and UAVs. IAMD seeks to combine and integrate all the resources and platforms necessary for air-based defense across multiple nations, thus providing greater net security than a single nation could provide.

This is a system used by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and other regionally based security organizations. Within NATO, IAMD is directed by the NATO Integrated Air and Missile Defense System (NATINAMDS), which includes a "network connecting national and NATO weapons systems, sensors, and command and control (C2) assets."<sup>20</sup> The NATINAMDS integrates all of the resources of individual countries, such as warning systems, sensors, satellites, intelligence, and interceptors, to defend against a full spectrum of air and missile threats. Information and command of the disparate systems are integrated and housed in a single command center, ceding control to a centralized unit that can leverage the resources of the entire alliance.

Rather than one nation providing for its own defense, which can create strategic redundancy across a collective, all nations provide for the common defense, which increases the net security of the alliance and the security of individual nations provided by IAMD. In many ways, NATINAMDS represents the highest form of IAMD and, while desirable, is not an immediate realistic solution to counter Iranian influence.

A Middle East IAMD is a solution that could be implemented immediately and then scaled based

on interest. Air and missile defense requires two basic steps. First, the defender must detect the threat, and then they must intercept and neutralize it. NATINAMDS integrates both capabilities across nations and then centralizes them under a single command. This requires interoperability and a high degree of trust, which is made possible by the conditions of the NATO alliance. This may be the long-term goal, but certainly not a starting point.

A Middle East IAMD would initially seek to integrate and centralize detection capabilities, which could then be disseminated to members. In the business of air defense, particularly in the case of missile interception, seconds matter. The earlier an object is detected, the more time decision-makers have to neutralize the threat. Integrating and centralizing this capability across nations augments the individual capacity for detection, thus increasing the security of the individual and collective. Once a coalition of the interested is formed, and detection capabilities are integrated, the IAMD can be scaled to either involve more nations or work to integrate more capabilities. However, IAMD could begin as a very basic institution with limited integration and few countries, but it could still deliver increased security with the option to be scaled.

The United States, particularly CENTCOM, will have to play a vital role in a Middle East IAMD. With the inclusion of Israel in CENTCOM's area of responsibility (AOR), CENTCOM is now the regional unified combatant command for the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. As such, CENTCOM commands an extensive roster of capabilities in the theater, which it currently uses to provide aerial defense in the region. Thus, CENTCOM would work as an active partner in an IAMD.

However, CENTCOM also has the unique distinction of being the organization that centralizes information sharing. IAMD requires intimate knowledge of existing systems, capabilities, and vulnerabilities in order to provide maximum results. The level of trust between Arab nations, particularly with Israel, simply does not exist. However, CENTCOM operates in a unique space as it maintains active relationships with each nation, including the Gulf nations, Oman, Israel, Iraq, and Jordan. Many of these nations simply trust the American military, particularly CENTCOM, more than their neighbors.

Thus, CENTCOM would have to operate as a central unit in the IAMD, which entails a long-term commitment.

The central node in the IAMD already exists in CENTCOM's Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) in Doha, Qatar. The CAOC, located at Al Udeid Air Base, provides regional command and control of three US Air Force missions: Global Vigilance, Global Reach, and Global Power. Of particular interest for IAMD is the Global Vigilance mission, which leverages surveillance, reconnaissance, and intelligence gathering to generate a common operation picture (COP). This is crucial for delivering real-time intelligence and providing early warning of potential threats. At a cost of \$60 million, the CAOC essentially delivers the capability the IAMD hopes to deliver on a larger scale.<sup>21</sup> To alleviate the trust issue, the CAOC can expand to facilitate information sharing within the IAMD. This offers member nations plausible deniability to domestic audiences of the fact that they are helping Israel. Rather, as one report finds, "CENTCOM's so-called Kingpin squadron is capable of receiving, scrubbing, fusing, and redistributing incoming data as part of a C.O.P. in less than two seconds."<sup>22</sup> Such actions would anonymize information yet allow other nations to take advantage of collectively gathered information.

To make a Middle East IAMD a reality, the largest cost to the United States would be connecting partners to the CAOC and continuously staffing and supporting it. Connecting partners to the CAOC would require them to purchase the Link 16 system, which is a highly encrypted military tactical data link designed for real-time information sharing. This is the system used by NATO to aid interoperability. Some Middle East partners already have access to this network while others, like the UAE, are in the process of acquiring 107 MIDS/LVT LINK 16 Terminals and associated equipment, parts, training and logistical support at the estimated cost of \$401 million.<sup>23</sup> The United States can aid in the proliferation of the technology for partners and work to expand the existing infrastructure of the CAOC to receive it. As for staffing, the current CAOC is manned by a combination of active duty, Air National Guard, and Reserve personnel, which offers flexibility in continued and expanded operations.<sup>24</sup>

**Is This Strategy Realistically**

## Attainable?

While once such an idea was thought impossible, shifting geopolitical realities have made IAMD a potential reality.

## Regional Integration

Deep distrust between the Arab nations themselves and between the Arab nations and Israel has historically prevented cooperation.

This is supported by a brief survey of recent events. At a high level, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are engaged in a strategic competition for regional leadership, a fact that has caused friction in multilateral organizations. Furthermore, in 2017, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE attempted a blockade of Qatar and discussed a possible military intervention due to Qatar's support for various Islamist groups during the Arab Spring, some of which were classified as terrorists. Kuwait and the UAE also have a legacy of disputes with Saudi Arabia regarding borders, territory, and oil reserves.<sup>25</sup>

Finally, there is the age-old conflict between the Arab world and the Israelis regarding the Palestinian question. This friction has so far proved insurmountable for any kind of significant security cooperation, much less the formalized integration IAMD would entail. For instance, IAMD implementation would involve providing partners with detailed information on current defenses and strategic weaknesses and can require nations to reposition platforms to better protect the collective at the expense of the individual. There are also significant political barriers caused by working with adversaries.

Many of these concerns, however, show signs of thawing. Egypt normalized relations with Israel in 1979 and Jordan followed suit in 1994. Then, as a part of the Abraham Accords, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalized relations with Israel. The next iteration of the Abraham Accords could see Israel and Saudi Arabia normalize relations, an action which would pave the way for further cooperation in the military space.

## Mutual Distrust of Iran

On the Arab front, the growing Iranian threat has

driven nations together. This is indicated by the Eagle Resolve 23 Exercise, a joint training between the United States, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, and Oman. Last conducted in May 2023, this biannual exercise seeks to “strengthen collective U.S.-Saudi and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) readiness and improves the interoperability of the forces, contributing to regional stability.”<sup>26</sup> The specific missions include air and missile defense, coordination of information operations, counterterrorism, and chemical/ biological/ radiological/nuclear (CBRN) response. Given these specific missions, this exercise is designed to prepare for and defend against Iranian aggression.

The shifting geopolitical realities, largely driven by Iran's growing capabilities, came into full view in April 2024. Iran attacked Israel, and a coalition that would have been impossible a decade ago came forward to Tel Aviv's defense. The Iranian attack included 110 medium-range ballistic missiles, 30 cruise missiles, and more than 150 UAVs. Though Israeli and U.S. forces destroyed the majority of the projectiles, it was not without vital help from the Arab nations. Jordan not only gave the Israeli pilots access to its airspace, but it is also reported that Jordanian pilots supported the Israeli effort, going so far as to engage Iranian UAVs. Saudi Arabia also actively participated in the defense, though the extent of its cooperation is unknown.<sup>27</sup>

This military coordination in the face of an Iranian attack reflects a shifting geopolitical environment dating back decades, which can lead to further security cooperation. Furthermore, while Saudi Arabia has sought to normalize relations with Iran, Iranian aggression has elicited deepening relations between other nations for defense.

## The Infrastructure is Already in Place

While not nearly as formalized or institutionalized, the genesis of an Arab IAMD recently took shape in response to Iranian aggression. In June 2022, the United States met with Israeli and Arab leaders from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, the UAE, and Bahrain. The U.S. delegation was led by CENTCOM commander Gen. Frank McKenzie. For decades, the United States had urged the Arab nations to coordinate their air defenses, but geopolitics prevented these discussions. Now, with an increasingly



aggressive and capable Iran and Arab nations that have begun the process of normalizing relations with Israel, the foundations are set for larger cooperation. The June 2022 meeting resulted in “procedures for rapid notification when aerial threats are detected.”<sup>28</sup> This informal process would be built on goodwill and communicated via unsecured phones and computers. While far from a formal IAMD, the meeting moved the compass.

The infrastructure is already in place for an Arab IAMD. In 2021, the Biden Administration removed significant missile defense capabilities from the region, which included eight Patriot point defense anti-missile batteries and one THAAD theater missile defense battery. These systems were based in Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. However, the United States maintains eight Patriot batteries across Bahrain, the UAE, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia. This is significantly augmented by technology already purchased and deployed throughout the region; Egypt has deployed 20 I-HAWK and 25 Avenger systems, Iraq has deployed eight Avenger systems, Jordan has deployed 14 I-HAWK systems, Kuwait has deployed eight Patriot and five I-HAWK systems, Qatar has deployed 10 Patriot systems, Saudi Arabia has deployed 24 Patriot, 10 HAWK and six I-HAWK systems, and Qatar has deployed nine Patriot, two THAAD, and five I-HAWK systems. That totals 55 Patriot batteries and two THAAD theater missile defense batteries.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is waiting for the delivery of seven THAAD theater missile defense batteries. Divided between these nations is an incredible amount of firepower, which, if properly integrated, could serve to create a strong IAMD.

A combination of decades of diplomatic progress and a growing Iranian threat have laid the foundation for a Middle East IAMD.

## **Direct Benefits to the United States**

A Middle East IAMD serves to protect U.S. economic interests, strengthen security objectives, facilitate offshoring security commitments, and limit Iran’s ability to influence the region through coercion. Iran has demonstrated its ability to target critical energy infrastructure with missiles and UAVs, and the avenue of attack is minimized by an IAMD.

An IAMD also serves a role in each U.S. regional security objective. In the counterterrorism space, Iran has provided terrorists with extensive access to UAVs, a capability diminished by an IAMD. On the nuclear non-proliferation front, an IAMD provides a foundation for defense by institutionalizing an organization to coordinate alert systems and anti-air batteries to neutralize any airborne nuclear threat. An IAMD would promote regional stability and provide support for strategic allies and partners through increased security cooperation.

As a whole, by leveraging the combined capabilities of regional partners, the United States can decrease its security commitments to the region as the task of air and missile defense is increasingly taken over by the IAMD. While the United States would continue to serve a vital role in the coordination of the organization, this is far less of a task than directly committing defenses to the region.

Finally, an IAMD minimizes Iran’s ability to project power in the region by denying unfettered access to the region’s airspace. Accordingly, the benefits of a regional IAMD to the United States are considerable.

## **Does This Fit Into the Larger Strategic Picture by Only Inducing Reasonable Commitments?**

This solution does not require extensive resources. In fact, many of the required capabilities have already been acquired by potential member nations. Member nations can purchase additional systems, but these would not draw on U.S. capabilities. As the IAMD scales, in terms of members and capabilities, it would actually decrease the U.S. security commitment to the region through burden sharing. The only direct costs incurred by the U.S. are upgrading, staffing, and supporting CENTCOM’s CAOC.

This solution fits into the larger strategic picture as it offers significant security gains, the ability to decrease commitments through burden sharing, and represents only a minor and sustainable commitment in its own right.

## **Is This Restraint-Based and Does it Emphasize Multilateralism?**

This Iran strategy creates a multilateral defensive posture. The combined capabilities of Arab nations and Israel provide a higher level of collective and individual security for fewer resources than a nation could expect to achieve by itself. Furthermore, this system is designed to defend member nations from airborne threats. As it is defensive in nature, it is less likely to lead to an arms race. Furthermore, an IAMD does not signal a desire for the United States to pursue regional primacy, further signaling its nonthreatening intention to Iran and regional allies, partners, or adversaries. Thus, an IAMD is built on the foundations of both restraint and multilateralism.

## **Conclusion**

The United States is currently supporting the Ukrainian defensive war, the Israeli war against Hamas, and preparations for a prospective conflict with China over Taiwan. The Biden Administration simply cannot afford yet another foreign policy fire. However, in the Middle East, Iran continues to threaten U.S. economic interests and security objectives.

Without an Iran strategy, the Biden Administration can only react to Iranian provocations and regional instability, as opposed to preventing them. The clock is ticking for the Biden Administration to implement a strategy to deter Iran that benefits the United States, fits into the larger strategic picture, induces reasonable commitments, is realistically attainable, is restraint-based, and emphasizes multilateralism. The answer lies in an IAMD, a system which leverages current military relations and integrates existing defense infrastructure across partner nations to provide for increased security.

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