



Atlantic Council
MIDDLE EAST PROGRAMS

IMPROVING GULF SECURITY:

A Framework to Enhance Air, Missile, and Maritime Defenses

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FOREWORD

Last year was a tumultuous one for the relationship between the United States and key security partners in the Gulf. Each side was disappointed by the other, and the resulting disagreements have [spilled out into the public](#) instead of achieving quiet resolution behind closed doors. Diplomatic differences have resonated in all capitals, further limiting the ability of each side to be seen as offering concessions to the other. It is not difficult to imagine the partnerships that have long endured falling away completely in the years to come, through neglect if not intent. Yet, despite all of this, the circumstances may finally facilitate the achievement of a longstanding objective, designing a system of integrated Gulf defenses that protects mutual national security interests on a sustainable basis. Leaders need to recognize this and take advantage of the opportunity.

During periods like these it is important to recall the national security interests that have long bound the United States and the Gulf. Those fundamental interests have not changed, and policymakers must determine whether chosen policies serve to secure those interests or work to undermine them.

The United States has a vital national security interest in ensuring that no regional adversary has both the capacity and will to attack the US homeland, US citizens abroad, or the key security partners on which the United States relies for local intelligence, placement, access, and diplomatic support to advance this and other vital national security interests. This drives US efforts to combat terrorism in the region and to deter adversaries from seeking weapons of mass destruction and otherwise employing destabilizing military capabilities. Today, the regime that rules Iran checks all of these boxes. It is the world's most prominent [state sponsor of terrorism](#), it is building an inherently threatening [nuclear program](#), and—alone among all of the governments in the world—it routinely gives advanced precision weaponry to [nonstate actors](#) and directs them to target civilians across borders. The United States and its partners in the Gulf share a vital national security interest in combatting these malign behaviors and have thus worked together toward those ends ever since the 1979 revolution allowed that regime to seize power.

The United States also has a vital national security interest in the global price of oil, for reasons that span security considerations (oil's centrality to the [functioning of the US military](#)), economic considerations (the impact of oil prices on [growth](#)

[and inflation](#)), geopolitical considerations (US [partners elsewhere](#) who depend directly on oil sourced from the Gulf) and political considerations (the impact of gas prices [at home](#) and abroad). Despite campaign trail rhetoric about US “[energy independence](#),” once in office US presidents in both parties discover to their frustration that they must care deeply about oil prices, especially when they get [too high](#) or [too low](#).

It is also a stubborn fact that the market price of this global commodity remains disproportionately driven by actions taken in the Gulf, and especially by [Saudi Arabia](#). This reality is unlikely to change materially for decades to come, even under the most optimistic energy transition scenarios. Therefore, the United States long ago decided that protecting the free flow of these resources from the Gulf to locations determined by market demand—a historically atypical anti-mercantilist approach—would best protect that vital national security interest. Today, again, the primary threat to this interest this interest is Tehran, which openly threatens and indeed has used military force against both [energy production facilities](#) and the [vessels that carry oil out of the Gulf](#). Once more, this US policy has aligned with the vital national security interests of its partners in the region.

While these interests remain constant, both the threats and means to protect them change over time. Thus, US and Gulf policies also need to shift, both in response to and in anticipation of the evolving threats.

The most important change in the regional threat assessment is Iran's homegrown development of highly capable precision weaponry that can be used to strike targets at a distance with pinpoint accuracy. This allowed Tehran to strike [Saudi energy infrastructure in 2019](#) and allowed their proxy to kill innocents at the [Abu Dhabi airport](#) last year. The inherent value of these weapons was clearly demonstrated when [Russia requested Iranian assistance](#) in Ukraine, a remarkable break from Russia's proud tradition of military self-reliance and a complete reversal of the situation in Syria in 2015 when [Russian air power](#) came to the aid of Iranian-backed ground forces. Moreover, these weapons' inherent precision serves to lower the threshold for their use in the Gulf, as already witnessed, which thus raises the risk of unintended escalations.

US partners in the Gulf are also building their own military capabilities. In the past, the United States was required to provide the near entirety of the military forces required to protect the free flow of energy from the Gulf. Today, and even more so in the years ahead, US local partners will be increasingly capable of sharing this burden. Even more significantly, given the

nature of these new weapons systems and the realities imposed by the region's geography, our partners in the Gulf have begun to appreciate the benefit—indeed the necessity—of launching a more cooperative approach toward defensive measures. For far too long intra-Gulf rivalries prevented such an approach, but today there is a growing recognition that each nation cannot unilaterally secure its own airspace and maritime interests. Moreover, the expansion of diplomatic relations following the Abraham Accords and the transfer of US military area of responsibility for Israel from the European Command to the Central Command is driving new opportunities for security cooperation both within the Gulf and beyond.

Given these dynamics, the door is finally open to building a multilateral, fully integrated air and missile defense system, and to achieve far greater multilateral cooperation within the established maritime security structures. US military planners have long recognized the potential utility of such steps in protecting the abovementioned national security interests, but the circumstances have not allowed them to proceed. Now they can move forward.

Encouraging initial steps have been taken at the most senior levels, but there is a [long way to go](#) before the journey is anywhere close to complete. The US Fifth Fleet launched [Task Force 59](#) to integrate unmanned systems over a year ago, and secret talks reportedly [took place last March](#) among military leaders from Israel, the United States, and key Arab countries. Little is said publicly on the subject, but the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) commander General Michael Kurilla has designated this subject [a priority](#), and Fifth Fleet commander Vice Admiral Brad Cooper has [set a goal](#) of having one hundred unmanned surface vessels in the Gulf by the summer of 2023. Only one-fifth of these will be from the United States. US President Joseph R. Biden [privately raised](#) the issue of integrated defenses during his trip to [Israel](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), and reports have since been published about plans for a future [Red Sands Integrated Experimentation Center](#) and hopes for a proposed [Middle East Air Defense Alliance](#). The year 2022 ended with the [Deterring Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses Act](#), driven by a bipartisan, bicameral group of US Senators and Representatives, which will provide necessary funding for such an endeavor.

None of this progress has been lost on Tehran, of course, which has issued [public threats](#) of a “decisive response to the nearest and most accessible targets” should the Gulf

the region by the US with participation and hidden management of Zionists.” Of course, [such threats](#) are exactly why the United States and its partners should build a system of fully integrated defenses in the Gulf. Achieving this goal will require four fundamental policy decisions.

The first and most critical policy decision is for the United States to commit to a future in which it remains intimately bound to Gulf security. In previous decades, such commitments could be made privately or remain within the purview of military and security professionals. Today, however, the single most important factor in the region, driving decisions by partners and adversaries alike, is the widespread [perception of US withdrawal](#). Therefore, the above-mentioned quiet diplomacy on integrated air, missile, and maritime security is now insufficient. A public case must be made for a new security relationship between the United States and Gulf, one that must be designed to receive bipartisan support.

Of course, [US domestic politics](#) makes doing so a tall order in the wake of an unsatisfying war in Iraq, a failed war in Afghanistan, the enduring resonance of the murder of *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the involvement of Middle East leaders in US domestic politics, and the continuing public sniping and [policy differences](#) between [US and Gulf leaders](#). Unless these dynamics are reversed, they threaten to eventually turn the region's expectation of US withdrawal into a self-fulfilling prophecy. However, reversing this perception of US withdrawal is nevertheless a requirement if US interests are to be protected. This cannot be accomplished if US presidents threaten to turn partners into “[pariahs](#)” or [openly question](#) whether the United States should protect the free flow of energy.

Leaders in the Gulf also have fundamental policy decisions to make. Thus, the second critical policy decision to be made is a mirror of the first: Gulf leaders must openly commit to a future in which the United States remains their primary—and in certain aspects their sole—security partner. This would require them to cease their oft-repeated threats to [turn to China](#) or [Russia](#) to fill perceived security voids. In some cases, this decision should be relatively straightforward—particularly for Bahrain, the longtime host of our Fifth Fleet headquarters. For others, [Saudi Arabia](#) under its still relatively new leadership, it remains an open question as to whether such a decision will be taken. Regional leaders will also need to recognize that such a commitment carries with it the requirement to ensure that US support remains bipartisan for decades to come. This is undercut every time the United States

makes a decision that is [widely perceived](#) to advance the interests of one US political party over another.

Third, Gulf leaders must make the decision to fully cooperate among themselves. If this was an easy task, it would have been accomplished long ago. Of course, the leaders of any state would naturally seek to avoid circumstances, if at all possible, in which they would need to rely on others to ensure their security. It is far preferable to jealously preserve complete freedom of action rather than allow one's security to be dependent on any neighbor's goodwill. Only after unilateral efforts to ensure security have proven inadequate do states typically consider cooperative mechanisms. Further, states that are in the midst of the heady process of [building their own militaries](#) or led by individuals [inexperienced in warfare](#) are most apt to overestimate their own abilities to accomplish missions unilaterally, as seen in Yemen.

Compounding these generalities are the specific mistrusts and rivalries that have long kept the Gulf divided. There are many reasons why the Middle East does not possess anything close to Europe's interlocking matrix of multilateral cooperative mechanisms, and those realities cannot be blithely wished away. Only a few years ago, a much smaller subset of countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) went through years of an ill-conceived and largely ineffectual "[Gulf Rift](#)" that saw the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia break ties with Qatar. Given this history, maximalist approaches to security cooperation in this region are doomed to fail. Instead, integrative efforts should initially focus only on a small subset of countries—Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—and only on a narrowly defined set of missions, including air and maritime defenses.

Finally, a fourth fundamental policy decision must be taken jointly by the United States and its Gulf partners. Working toward integrated defensive capabilities can be slow, dry, technocratic work that typically advances incrementally and on generational timelines. If this work is left to well-intentioned security experts, the risk remains high that perceptions will fall behind progress and reasons will be found to delay necessary additional program phases. When militaries look to work together, the typical pattern involves first working through the myriad of matters relating to questions of deconfliction. Only once this first step is successful do the counties begin work to build cooperation. When cooperative mechanisms have been established, governments begin to consider questions of military integration. Finally, only after selected military capabilities have been integrated, governments begin to explore the most sensitive

subjects of building joint systems that are inherently interdependent.

However, this project should begin, not end, with a clarion call for interdependence among all stakeholder nations. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States should declare this goal. In doing so, they will intentionally design a future together in which they are each practically incapable of achieving comprehensive air and maritime security in the Gulf without the others. The military systems being established will not work for any if they do not work for all. By coming to this agreement, the Gulf states will "lock in" the United States as their security partner, which should remove any remaining concerns of the long-term sustainability of the US regional presence.

The governments in this region have each found it useful to issue vision documents that clearly outline the intended objectives of government policies. In 2008, both [Manama](#) and [Abu Dhabi](#) published Economic Vision 2030 plans, and in 2016 [Riyadh](#) issued Saudi Vision 2030. These three countries, together with the United States, should together issue a joint "Vision 2040 for Integrated Gulf Security," laying out an ambitious path ahead toward a fully interdependent system of air and missile defenses, and to achieve far greater multilateral cooperation within the established maritime security structures. With such a joint vision guiding the way, questions about US withdrawal and partner hedging will subside, and the vital interests of the United States and its partners will be increasingly secure on a much more sustainable basis.

William F. Wechsler
Senior Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Looking at decades of US support and operations in the Gulf and recognizing a continued, arguably growing, air and maritime threat from Iran, the Atlantic Council Gulf Security Task Force developed a framework on how to best protect US and allies' interests in this sensitive, always relevant region. The report provides US decision-makers with an updated, fact-based strategy for protecting its interests in the air and maritime domain from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea, while ensuring Gulf partners' ability to assume this responsibility, with the assistance and leadership of the United States.

The task force's engagements, research, and extensive deliberations all helped to inform this report's actionable calls for the better integration and strengthening of Gulf maritime, air, and missile defenses. The task force also assesses that a concrete US commitment to assist in developing these integrated capabilities would have a meaningful symbiotic benefit of increasing trust between the United States and its security partners in the Middle East at a time when global US adversaries seek to expand their influence in the Middle East and undermine the foundations of the existing world order.

Strategic Competition in the Gulf and Regional Threat Assessment

The findings in this report are based on interviews conducted by members of the task force, which produced an assessment of the regional threat landscape that was remarkably consistent across the region.

Strategic competition is under way in the Middle East as Russia and the People's Republic of China (PRC) seek to further their influence in the region at the expense of the United States and its interests. China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), has made rapid economic and investment inroads in the region. Beijing's establishment of China's first-ever overseas base in Djibouti marked a significant milestone, and its recent courting of the UAE for basing and arms sales represents China's increased interest in the region. The perceived lack of US commitment to the Middle East has opened the door for increased Chinese influence, and the Chinese have acted quickly to fill the perceived void without incurring military commitments beyond their current capability or desire.

Despite the war in Ukraine and the poor performance of Russian forces and equipment, Russia is still willing to sell equipment, and will work to increase its influence throughout the region. Russia has a naval base in Syria and has entertained another in the Red Sea. During its invasion of Ukraine, Russian investments and energy relations in the region allowed Moscow to leverage its diplomatic ties with Gulf states, and certainly contributed to their neutrality. Russia's war in Ukraine also benefits from Syrian recruits and Iranian drones, counter to the interests of the United States and NATO.

As Arab states and Israel look to enhance their own security interests to ensure a stable and secure Gulf, the primary driver of instability remains the same: Iran. Even officials in Middle Eastern nations with active trade and friendly diplomatic relations with Tehran observed that Iran is the most prominent conflict actor and exporter of instability and terrorism in the region. Iran seeks to deter regional states and expand its own sphere of influence by providing weapons, advisers, and financial support to its lethal proxies. Iran continuously looks for openings in countries across the Middle East in which it can exploit domestic political or leadership fissures to gain leverage for its own regional agenda. The Iranian campaign of intimidation and deterrence is pursued through several means, including the proliferation of ballistic and cruise missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as its nuclear ambitions. Regional leaders contend that Iran exports advanced missile capabilities to its proxies, thereby enabling the proliferation of drones, weapon smuggling, and attacks, further complicating security matters.

Gulf officials expressed their concerns that the threats imposed by Iran continue to increase in both lethality and occurrence. Saudi Arabia and the UAE experience hundreds of attacks each year—either directly by Iran or through its proxies. What is seen as a tepid US response to those attacks, including the ballistic-missile attack on US forces at Al Dahfra Air Base in January 2022, and the lack of meaningful US response to the 2019 Abqaiq and Khurais attacks, has deepened concerns about US commitment. Countries designated as major US non-NATO allies, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, and Israel, expressed great disappointment that the United States has not done more or acted on their concerns. Those views were mirrored in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both long-standing US security partners. Across the region, officials signaled that, without greater US support,

they will have little recourse other than to turn to alternate countries to help guarantee the security of their people and institutions.

Iran's missile programs and malign activities remain critical issues for the region, and there is considerable frustration among leadership there that Iran's activities have not yet been addressed effectively or comprehensively. Regardless of whether the United States reenters the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), it must confront Iranian missile capabilities and malign regional activities. Additional and more effective defenses against these threats are appropriate and warranted. Contrary to those who insist Gulf defenses are destabilizing, such measures would help deter Iranian aggression.

An Integrated Framework for More Effective Defenses

The increasing threat from Iran and its proxies, realities of the strategic competition that impacts the Middle East, and the need for Washington to protect US assets and its own interests require a reevaluation of the US approach to securing its national interests in the region. There is a demand for US leadership that has encouraged a shift toward comprehensive, integrated self-defense among Gulf and regional allies and partners, the majority of which are US allies. It is imperative that the United States press on with, but tweak, the campaign of engagement, partner-capacity building, and encouraging integration of defense capabilities among allies and partners in the region. The current administration, through its support for the Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD), appears to be slowly working in this direction, but more engagement is needed to safeguard and advance US interests. The traditional US approach, however, must shift from an ad hoc focus on arming partners with US weapons and equipment to one that seeks the continuous enhancement and fielding of effective and interoperable capabilities.

Gulf states face the challenge of securing air and maritime domains against traditional and emerging conventional threats while addressing the changing asymmetric threat. A comprehensive framework led by the United States can address these security concerns intelligently, effectively, and with the right equipment. US willingness to provide long-term interoperable military hardware, robust training, and an exercise regime—and to do it before Gulf states feel compelled to create enterprise solutions

out of inferior and potentially non-interoperable equipment from China and Russia will be key to success. As a bellwether, note that last year Egypt's purchases of US defense capabilities amounted to less than 9 percent of purchases in 2010.

Moreover, the United States should press forward on Israel's tiered, and increasingly more robust, inclusion in the Middle East in such an integrated network. This will initially necessitate a hybrid form of collaboration in which Israel works directly with Gulf states with which it has already established relations, and through the United States where relations are not yet normalized. The United States will need to ensure both Gulf states and Israel perceive early benefits to their own security from a new, integrated regional construct. The future of Israel's role in the region, and the degree to which its security can be guaranteed going forward, will be meaningfully impacted by the level of mutually beneficial inter-reliance the United States can facilitate between Israel and Gulf partners.

Gulf states can be prompted to take on a more significant role in their own security, but, in the initial stages, greater integration will require substantial and sustained US commitment, assurances, and, above all, leadership. Gulf Cooperation Council nations are able, and will be willing, to purchase high-end US military equipment, increase interoperability, share information with each other in a data-protected environment, and engage in training and exercises together—if the United States is willing to demonstrate the necessary leadership and articulate a vision underpinned by a US-led organizational structure.

There are some immediate steps the United States should take within the context of development of an Integrated Air and Missile Defense (IAMMD) architecture. Early portions of a comprehensive plan should include the United States creating a combined Gulf-centric operational headquarters with all participating countries. Gulf militaries already operate and lead in several combined task forces, but expanding this to the operational level would focus the necessary staff and institutional mechanisms, and create the necessary training and doctrinal foundations to facilitate integration. This need not mandate brick-and-mortar construction or the creation of new billets. Retooling or dual-hatting underutilized program offices in the region can accomplish initial headquarters-like oversight tasks.

Importantly, the establishment of a cross-regional, networked air-domain plan for protecting US partners and interests should be communicated to potential member states as an executive-branch priority. The US military has pressed the Gulf on IAMD before. Washington should emphasize that it is willing to commit US resources to defending the region, but doing so will be tied to participation in smarter, more integrated, and more efficient mechanisms for that defense.

Action Plan and Way Ahead

The Atlantic Council's Gulf Security Task Force recommends that US leaders and policymakers take the following steps:

The White House/National Security Council

- The White House should clearly express grave concerns about Iranian destabilizing activities and announce renewed commitment to defending the safety and security of its allies and long-standing partners in the Middle East whose people are threatened by those malign activities. This is imperative to begin restoring trust in the region.
- The president should communicate to regional leaders that, regardless of whether there is a revival of the 2015 JCPOA, the United States is committed to taking the lead to aggressively build a coalition to improve air and missile defenses and enhance maritime security.
- The president should direct the National Security Council (NSC) staff to launch an interagency process to develop, within ninety days, an initial strategic framework for IAMD and maritime security with specific Gulf allies and partners and other allies, as appropriate. The framework should be consistent with proposed legislation S. 4366 and H.R. 7987, the Detering Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses Act of 2022. Doing so would elevate the effort and ensure the interagency takes responsibility for achieving regional buy-in. Existing US Department of Defense (DoD) plans for a regional construct should be included or otherwise incorporated.
- The White House should designate officials no lower than the assistant-secretary level from the Office of the Secretary of Defense, State

Department, the Intelligence Community, the Joint Staff, the Missile Defense Agency, and US CENTCOM headquarters to conduct consultations with Gulf states and the GCC secretariat on the NSC strategic framework.

- Based on the results of consultations, the White House should announce that the State Department will host a summit to agree on the defensive framework and formalize the process for moving forward with member states on key issues.
- Pursuant to consultations, the White House should announce the immediate establishment of a provisional Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF) to protect US interests, allies, and civilian populations in the region.

US Department of State

- The US Department of State should develop the formal diplomatic instrument to form and maintain the coalition, and seek formal approval from all attendees at the summit convened at the behest of the White House.
- The department should compile a comprehensive list of specific defensive military equipment required to support an integrated and layered air- and missile-defense system and improve maritime security in the Gulf.
- The department should actively secure congressional approval of those listed capabilities within the statutory thirty-day review period in the Arms Export Control Act (AECA).
- In collaboration with the US Department of Defense, the Department of State should develop mechanisms to help allied and partner countries in the coalition better navigate the Foreign Military Sales (FMS) process in a deliberate manner, and also work to ensure congressional notification and processes do not impede US-led coalition efforts.
- The department should encourage those countries that normalized relations with Israel and agreed to participate in the various working groups to consider a regional IAMD architecture as one of the foundations for the regional security working group that was announced following the Negev Summit.

US Department of Defense

- The Defense Department should designate an executive agent (or agents) for the implementation of the strategic framework, the planning and development of coalition IAMD and maritime security capabilities, leadership for information-sharing and cyber-defense requirements, and the formalization, operations, and sustainment of these coalition efforts.
- The secretary of defense should order the establishment of a provisional CJTF in the region, under the command of a US three-star general or flag officer, to immediately begin the implementation of any presidential directives.
- The Defense Department should recommend, for consideration by the president, changes to the Unified Command Plan that outline responsibilities—and the appropriate roles, missions, and organizations—for defending the safety and security of US allies and long-standing partners in the Middle East whose people are threatened by Iranian malign activities.
- Working through CENTCOM and with the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs (ASD-ISA) and Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA)—and in coordination with and concurrence of the assistant secretary for political-military affairs—the Defense Department should begin to work with Gulf countries to determine the level of strategic, tactical, and operational engagement they are willing to have with Israel in developing, and ultimately operating, a regional integrated air- and missile-defense system.

US Congress

- If not done before this report is issued, Congress should consider passing into law S.4366 and H.R. 7987, known as the Deterring Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses Act of 2022.

To mitigate continuous, individual approvals that protract timelines for implementation, Congress should either stick to the thirty-day review period as required by the AECA and waive the informal

tier-review protocol or consider specific legislation pre-approving the sale of defensive equipment (under the FMS process), designed to operate within the US-led coalition framework for IAMD and for maritime security.

ASSUMPTIONS

This assessment rests on the following assumptions:

- Iran will continue to pursue and proliferate advanced military and technological capabilities, most prominently in the range and precision of its ballistic and land-attack cruise missiles.
- The future death of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei will not fundamentally change the system of government in the Islamic Republic of Iran, and any successor's policies will be broadly consistent with those the Iranian regime has pursued for several decades.
- A restoration of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action will not produce an appreciable shift in the motivations of the Iranian regime, reassessment of its regional goals, or moderation of its destabilizing activities.
- China will seek to expand its economic influence and ensure the security of its own investments and assets in the Gulf region over the next three to five years.
- Despite the war in Ukraine, Russia will continue to sell military hardware, leverage its energy and economic ties to the region, and retain, at minimum, its current levels of influence in the Middle East.

I. Strategic Competition in the Gulf and Regional Threat Assessment

On January 23, 1980, former US President Jimmy Carter announced in his State of the Union address, "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."¹ The manifestation of the Carter Doctrine was

¹ <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>

an expansion of US security commitments in the Middle East and the Gulf. With the creation of the Rapid Deployment Force and CENTCOM, and following the liberation of Kuwait during the Gulf War, the United States has continuously deployed military forces to the region, creating the image of an enduring US presence. The United States also retains significant military capabilities in the region, led by two robust staffs at Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT) in Qatar and Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) in Bahrain. As a result, for several decades, Gulf states viewed the United States as the protector and guarantor of stability and security in the region.

Over the last decade, however, US presence in the Gulf has not been sufficient to assuage allies' and partners' concerns about US reliability and long-term commitment. Announced shifts in US priorities, such as the so-called "Pivot to Asia" and the manner in which the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, caused deep concerns about US resolve and continued commitment to allies' and partners' security. Those policies, coupled with the current drive in Washington to return to the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal, signaled the United States could leave the Gulf states vulnerable and on their own, with little to no warning.

At the same time, however, China and Russia continue to expand their interests in the Middle East. Both have emphasized the failure of liberal-democratic governments such as that of the United States to deal with a crisis, such as Covid-19. This message that has found sympathetic listeners in the region. Both China and Russia seek to increase their influence and maintain a naval presence in the waters adjacent to the Arabian Peninsula and establish forward-operating bases. However, the war in Ukraine will likely impact Russia's ability to project power in the region, at least for the next two to four years. Meanwhile, both Russia and China's support for Iran are expected to continue for the foreseeable future, enhancing Iranian influence and further encouraging reckless behavior from Tehran and its proxies.

A. China's Strategic Approach

The primary objective of the Chinese Communist Party is to remain in power by ensuring China's prosperity, increasing China's share of the global market, and preventing rapid social or political change at home. China remains highly dependent on petroleum imports from Gulf states, which have themselves become major importers of Chinese goods and services, such as engineering and

construction. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, China significantly expanded its economic and political influence in more than twenty Arab countries, building roads, railroads, and ports. In the process, China has transformed itself into the major bilateral trading partner of Arab states. Many Western analysts have ignored this dimension and expansion of Chinese influence, at US expense. In addition, China actively enabled Iran to weather US sanctions. Further, in 2021, China and Iran signed a twenty-five-year agreement for economic, military, and security cooperation.

While not as extensive a weapons supplier as Russia, the Chinese have provided advanced weapons—particularly rockets, missiles, and drones—not only to Iran and Iraq, but also to Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. China does not maintain a significant military presence in the Gulf, but—to complement its substantial commercial inroads across the region—China established an operating and logistics base in Djibouti and recently pursued the development of a military base in the UAE. China deploys ships to the Gulf of Aden, and actively publicizes its counter-piracy operations there and its participation in United Nations peacekeeping operations in Africa. China recently committed to the reconstruction of Syria—another advance for its Belt and Road Initiative in the region and an affront to US policy. Analysts must acknowledge the substantial influence that China has already accrued across the region without having to resort to a more aggressive military role.

Going forward, US decisions and commitments regarding Gulf security will influence China's choices regarding its Gulf policies. For the next three to five years, China will likely focus on aggressively pushing its Belt and Road projects, opportunistic military-equipment sales, cooperative diplomatic agreements with little regard for human-rights criticisms, and wholesale technology acquisition, all aimed at displacing the United States on the global stage and reducing US influence in the region. It should be assumed that, if conditions permit, China will likely pursue a more expansive military and basing presence in the Gulf.

B. Russia's Strategic Approach

Because of its ongoing war in Ukraine, Russia will probably play a more limited direct role in the region than either the United States or China, but its role should not be ignored. Although its economic influence is dwarfed by the United States and China, Russia is a significant grain supplier to the Gulf, and can selectively exert substantial military

influence. Russia operates a military port in Syria, and entertained establishing a base on the Red Sea following an agreement with Khartoum. Moscow currently lacks the depth to replace the United States in the region, but will seek influence through economic trade and arms sales that fill gaps that the United States is unwilling to fill (such as the S-300 or S-400). In this way, Russia can undermine US freedom of action in the region. Among Arabs, Russia touts its commitment to keeping Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in power, drawing a contrast with US disengagement from the region and the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. As far as direct involvement, Russia is expected to continue to deploy private paramilitary forces (such as the Wagner Group) to intervene in regional conflicts that Moscow views as supporting its interests, if competing priorities for resources—namely its efforts in Ukraine—permit.

During the invasion of Ukraine, Russian investments and energy relations in the region allowed it to leverage its diplomatic ties with Gulf states, and certainly contributed to their neutrality vis-à-vis the war. Russia's war in Ukraine also benefits from Syrian recruits for urban warfare and the proliferation of Iranian drones, both counter to the interests of the United States and NATO. In the Gulf, some expressed hope that Russia's war with Ukraine would lead to the United States reassessing its threat perception of Iran and better understanding

the concerns about Iran held by US allies in the region.

Russia's military, economic, and energy relations with Iran have flourished at the expense of US interests. The Russians and Iranians recently signed agreements for greater economic and security cooperation. As a sign of this cooperation, Russia launched an Iranian spy satellite into orbit in August 2022. The launch sparked Western concerns that the Russians would employ the satellite for intelligence gathering over Ukraine and, simultaneously, Middle Eastern concerns that the satellite would be used to target Israel or Iran's Arab neighbors. In September 2022, Russia began to use Iranian drones on the battlefield in Ukraine. This provides Iran with valuable performance data that enable improvements to its unmanned platforms. Based on past patterns, these improvements will likely be shared with Hezbollah and Ansar Allah in the near term.

C. Chinese and Russian Military Sales in the Middle East

The Atlantic Council's March 2022 report, *Great Power Projection in the Middle East: The China Russia Relationship as a Force Multiplier*, asserts three key findings.² First, while there is no evidence of Russia and China coordinating their efforts in the Middle East, it is clear they are not competing directly with each other. Second, Russia's Middle

	Air Defense	Attack Helicopter	Anti-Tank Helicopter	Anti-Tank Missiles	Transport Helicopters	Ground Attack Fighters	Fighter Jets	Multiple Rocket ?	Tanks or Infantry	SAMs	S-300s	S-400s	Air Search Radar	Corvettes	UAVs	Anti-Ship Missiles	ISR	Satellite	SRBM	Towed Gun
Bahrain		R		R				C												
Egypt				R C			R			R	R		R	R	C	R C		R		
Iran				R						R C	R		R			C				
Iraq	R	R	R	R C	R	R		R	R	R					C					
Israel																				
Kuwait									R											
Lebanon																				
Libya																				
Oman																				
Qatar								C		R									C	
Saudi Arabia								R							C					
Syria		R		R C			R		R	R										R
Turkey				R						R		R	R							
UAE				R C				C							C					C
Yemen																				

Figure 2: The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute maintains a database of arms transfers and shows all international transfers of major conventional arms since 1950 (<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>) Note: Russia had a contract to sell SU-35 fighter aircraft to Egypt, but it was canceled in 2021.

² <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/great-power-projection-in-the-middle-east-the-china-russia-relationship-as-a-force-multiplier/>

East priority is to export grain to the region, while China's is economic development supported by its Belt and Road Initiative. Third, both Russia and China seek greater influence in and across the region, seeking to displace the long-standing US influence in the Middle East.

The chart below reflects the differences in Chinese and Russian military investments across the region,

and the fact that Russia historically has sold more military hardware in the region than China, which now can boast significantly greater economic inroads in Arab countries as a result of its Belt and Road Initiative.

D. Iran's Strategic Approach³

The authority and survival of the Iranian government rests on maintaining and exporting the Iranian Revolution. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Iranian regime married its religious and political ideals, instilling the idea that "saving" Islam and preserving the regime in Tehran demands that it aggressively export the Islamic Revolution across the region. Over the past forty years, Iran's domestic politics—including calls for the destruction of Israel and the removal of Western, especially US, influence—were directly associated with the revolution itself, meaning any compromise on these points was seen in Tehran as a direct challenge to the regime's authority.

Iran's export of the Islamic Revolution and the development of proxy groups across the region—most prominently, Hezbollah in Lebanon—have enabled Iran to assert its influence throughout the Middle East, destabilize Arab states, and pursue a policy aimed at driving the United States out of the region. This policy is bolstered by Iran's development, proliferation, and employment of advanced weapons and capabilities, including anti-tank weapons, rockets, ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and drones. Most recently, Iran expanded its proxy network with Shia militant groups in Iraq and Syria and the Houthis in Yemen, which continue to conduct lethal attacks against Western and Gulf interests. Tehran continues its development of what it claims is a civilian space-launch capability, and almost certainly views achieving nuclear-weapons capability as a deterrent against a conventional

attack on Iran that will provide the regime with a powerful asset for regional influence and coercion.

E. Destabilizing Threats from Iran⁴

There is widespread agreement throughout the Gulf that Iran is the primary threat in the region, and that the behavior of its affiliated proxies undermines the stability of Arab states and Israel. That threat could morph into an existential one for many in the region if Iran's nuclear-weapons program produces a working bomb. There is also agreement by Arab states that among Iran's goals is the elimination of US leadership in region. There are six discernable lines of effort to the Iranian campaign.

1. Exporting the Islamic Revolution and lethal facilitation by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force.

The Quds Force is the primary organization responsible for Iranian "extraterritorial operations," exporting the Iranian Revolution, and undertaking terrorist acts for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Quds Force conducts smuggling operations throughout the Middle East, transferring advanced weapons to extremist groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Bahrain, eastern Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa. Weapons shipments—intended for Iranian forces, proxies, and supporters in Syria, the Gulf, Yemen, the Horn of Africa, and the Palestinian territories—move by land through Syria, Iraq, and Oman, and by sea along the coastlines of Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the UAE. Those illicit shipments include small arms, anti-armor mines, anti-tank missiles, rockets, and ballistic missiles.

2. Proliferating ballistic missiles and land-attack cruise missiles.

The proliferation of ballistic and cruise missiles remains a priority for Tehran, and a persistent and dangerous threat to the region. Iran's missile arsenal serves the regime's needs for strategic influence, coercion, and warfare. Further, Iranian missile capabilities have sharply eroded Gulf states' previous advantages in terms of offensive air. Iran possesses, and continues to actively develop and expand, the largest ballistic and cruise-missile arsenal in the region, and its conventionally armed systems provide precision lethality and diverse strike

3 For a comprehensive assessment of Iranian regional objectives following the Iranian Revolution, see: "Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East," International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier>.

4 For a comprehensive assessment of Iranian military and irregular-warfare capabilities, see: Ibid., and "Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf.

profiles that are easily sheltered and dispersed or transferred to proxies. Iranian development of these systems has included their combat deployment by Lebanese Hezbollah against Israel and by the Houthis against Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as their direct attacks into Iraq and Syria. Iran initially developed its missile force as a retaliatory capability. However, as Iran continues to pursue the capability for increased range and greater precision among its missiles, it is certain that leaders in Tehran will be increasingly enamored with its potential first-strike capability, particularly given the porous character of current air and missile defenses.

3. Employing combat drones for use by Iran and its proxies. The use of armed or combat drones by Iran and its proxies is rapidly expanding and will likely continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Combat drones are quickly becoming Tehran's preferred tool due to their relatively low cost, dual-use technology, ease of transport, expanded ranges, diverse strike profiles, and precision-strike capabilities. Moreover, the potential to attach biological and chemical agents to unmanned platforms will require Gulf states to consider new preparations and response strategies. The series of attacks on the UAE in early 2022, and the ongoing attacks on Saudi Arabia from across both its southern and northern borders, have compelled leaders to reconsider existing defensive measures.

4. Conducting offensive cyberspace attacks. Iran employs cyberspace activities as a low-cost instrument of statecraft and internal monitoring, often using proxies to maintain plausible deniability. China and Russia provide technical assistance to Iranian cyber capabilities, and those tools provide Tehran additional means to harass and intimidate adversaries, disrupt commercial and economic enterprises in

adversary countries, and conduct cyber espionage against foreign governments and militaries. A recent example of this activity is the July 15, 2022 cyberattack on US NATO ally Albania, conducted to paralyze public services, hack data, and disrupt communications from government systems. A challenge for conventionally minded militaries in countries such as the United States and its NATO allies is whether those Iranian actions constituted an "attack" within the sense of Article Five of the North Atlantic Charter.

5. Posing threats at sea to freedom of navigation and international commerce. Iran's two naval forces, the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN), constitute a threat to maritime commerce, legitimate trade, and freedom of navigation. In a conflict, both navies would be expected to try to interdict international shipping and commercial chokepoints as leverage, including the Strait of Hormuz, and the Bab el Mandeb and Malacca straits. For example, the IRIN conducts out-of-area port visits to the Bab el Mandeb and Malacca straits, suggesting Iran would seek to control and blockade them in the event of a conflict. In the absence of a conflict, however, Iran has been known to hijack commercial ships and take hostages to extort concessions, employ front companies to smuggle illicit weapons to proxies, and ship oil in violation of United Nations and US sanctions. In the Gulf, Iran has conducted attacks on vessels with links to the countries that signed the Abraham Accords, using drones, mines, missiles, and fast-attack boats, risking the safety of shipping transiting international waters in the Gulf.

6. Pursuing a nuclear program. Finally, Iran's nuclear ambitions constitute an ever-looming

Long-Term US Role in Integrated Air and Missile Defense

Despite different views of the threats posed by Iran, and amid ongoing tensions between Washington and Middle Eastern capitals, Gulf leaders are unanimous that any collective or cooperative security arrangements combining the capabilities of Gulf states must include the United States—not simply as a participant, but as a key, long-term enabler. Regional leaders envision the US provision of a commitment not just for training or command and control (C2) integration, but, more importantly, a guarantee to Middle East countries they will not be integrating merely to enable the United States to withdraw. Rather, integration is predicated on long-term US support that will enable holistic defense that protects regional states' domestic populations and infrastructure, as well as US economic and national security interests in the Middle East.

threat to the region. Iran's overarching strategic goals of safeguarding the survival of the regime, enhancing its influence and prestige, and securing regional dominance have led it to prioritize a nuclear-energy program. Such a program has the potential for the development of nuclear weapons.

F. Gulf States and Regional Dynamics. For nearly four decades, the Gulf states viewed the United States as the security guarantor in their region. The current strategic environment, however, has them reassessing that reliance. Gulf states do not want to be forced to choose sides between the United States, Russia, and China, but prefer to maintain good relations with all. Gulf states dread the prospect of escalating regional conflicts, specifically those related to Iran. At the same time, many view the United States as an increasingly unreliable security guarantor. US perceptions of Gulf partners are challenged by human-rights concerns, the authoritarian nature of Middle Eastern regimes, and concerns about the ability of GCC countries to remain unified in the event of a broad regional threat. Complaints about the “trust deficit” between Gulf states and the United States are not new, but need to be acknowledged and addressed to achieve durable relationships.

II. An Integrated Framework for More Effective Defenses

Calls for the integration of regional security in the Gulf, including ties with Israel, are not new. There are ongoing conversations in the region among various potential participants and among US officials on these issues resulting in minimal, but initial, progress. Since 2015, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have sought the integration of Israeli sensors and systems with those of the United States in the region. With the signing of the Abraham Accords in August and September 2020 between the United States, Israel, the UAE, and subsequently Bahrain, Gulf countries were added to the IDF air-defense framework. The idea was that by connecting all sensors and assets, participating countries would be better able to defend themselves. In March 2022, high-level discussions took place at Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, between the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE. Moreover, in July, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced the establishment of the

Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD), claiming that it was already operational and had been involved in several successful interceptions.

A regional security framework also has bipartisan support in Congress. In June 2022, a bipartisan bill introduced in the Senate by US Senator Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) called on the Pentagon to present a strategy for an integrated air defense in the region. The bill, co-sponsored by four other Republican senators and four Democrats, called for a Pentagon strategy report to be presented to lawmakers no later than one hundred and eighty days after its passage. An identical bill, H.R. 7987, introduced in the House by US Representative Cathy McMorris Rodgers (R-WA) has thirty-seven co-sponsors, of whom ten are Democrats. The purpose of the proposed legislation, known as the Detering Enemy Forces and Enabling National Defenses Act of 2022, is:

“To require the Secretary of Defense shall seek to cooperate with allies and partners in the Middle East to identify an architecture and develop an acquisition approach for certain countries in the Middle East to implement an integrated air and missile defense capacity to protect the people, infrastructure, and territory of such countries from cruise and ballistic missiles, manned and unmanned aerial systems, and rocket attacks from Iran, and for other purposes.”⁵

The countries specified in the proposed legislation included the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and “other regional allies or partners of the United States.” The legislation called for strengthening collective defenses for attacks “from Iran and groups linked with Iran.”⁶

The increasing threat from Iran and its proxies, realities of the strategic competition that impacts the Middle East, and the need for Washington to protect US assets and its own interests in the region, require a re-evaluation of the US security approach in the region. However, engagement needs to be mirrored by Gulf allies prompted to take on a more

5 <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/BILLS-117hr7987ih>

6 S.4366 and H.R. 7987 (117th Congress, 2nd Session)

significant role in their own security. To do this, the United States needs to work with Gulf states to build, step by step, a new security paradigm with four traditional but distinct steps: deconfliction, followed by coordination, then integration, and finally interdependence. To engender trust in a new integrated air, missile, and maritime defense will first require mechanisms for deconfliction between the United States, Israel, and Gulf states. Upon their success, there will be an opportunity to increase coordination by allies. As greater coordination happens, meaningful integration of information-sharing processes and interoperability should be expected. The mechanisms will build over the years, and interdependence will ultimately be achieved. This situation will keep the United States committed to the region but not solely carrying the burden, with trusted allies doing much of the heavy lifting.

The challenge for Gulf states will be to secure the air and maritime domains against traditional and emerging conventional threats while also addressing the changing asymmetric threat environment. A comprehensive framework, developed in concert with Gulf states and Israel and led by the United

States, can address these security concerns. The keys will be US willingness to provide, for the long term, interoperable military hardware, robust training, and an exercise regime. This must be done in a timely manner, before Gulf states seek out inferior and potentially non-interoperable equipment from other providers in China and Russia.

A. Current Regional Air- and Missile-Defense Capabilities.

Although US military planners acknowledged the need for missile defenses in the Middle East during the Iran-Iraq War, as well as the subsequent Gulf War and liberation of Kuwait, the little progress achieved on that front today has been accomplished on a country-by-country basis, rather than being part of a regional framework. None of these defenses possess the scope or layering of defenses to make them effective against the spectrum of air and missile threats.

Israel is an exception in the region. It has pioneered, developed, and fielded effective, layered missile and rocket defenses. Israel's multi-tiered air- and

	Air-Defense Systems					Number of Squadrons by Generation			
	Long Range	Medium Range	Short Range	Point Defense	Total	Third Generation	Fourth Generation	Fourth and a Half Generation	Fifth Generation
Egypt	4	612	180	181	19	6	11	2	
Iraq			24	2	3	1	1	1	
Israel	6	2	10	3	14		2	10	2
Jordan			2	140	2		2		
Bahrain		6	7	9	3	1		2	
Kuwait	40		12		2		2		
Oman			1	48	4			4	
Qatar	1			3	3	1	1	1	
Saudi Arabia	108	128	181	400	13		3	10	
UAE		54	42	3	6		3	3	
Iran	42	195	359	39	15	11	5		

Figure 3. The data displayed are pulled from The Military Balance 2021. The numbers reflect quantity, not the effectiveness of the capability. The red circles reflect our key findings. The green box highlights specific Gulf countries that are the primary focus of this paper.

missile-defense array is based on four operational layers or systems: Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow 2, and Arrow 3. As a result, Israel is the most capable and experienced regional actor with its homegrown Iron Dome, David Sling systems, and Patriot missiles.⁷

In contrast, the air and missile defenses of the Gulf states are not multilayered, and they have significant gaps in their coverage. The defensive systems of the United States' Arab allies and partners typically consist of Patriots to cover against air and missile threats, and surface-to-air missiles to provide protection against cruise missiles and drones. There is not a formal intelligence or information-sharing agreement between the Gulf countries to allow systems to be reoriented against incoming attacks detected by a neighbor. The fact that Oman and Bahrain do not have Patriot or other surface-to-air defensive systems leaves significant gaps in any defenses. Moreover, there is no meaningful network of existing surface-to-air defenses and relatively immature mechanisms for coordinating air combat and sharing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE purchased the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system, but those purchases are not part of an integrated framework or architecture. Gulf countries are investing in a variety of air-defense systems, specifically Patriots, I-Hawk, Mistral, Pantsir, THAAD, and Vulcan, but it remains unclear how those systems will be prioritized as part of their air defenses.⁸ In late September 2022, the UAE and Israel announced the sale of the Israeli Iron Dome System to the UAE, adding yet another system to the mix of air-defense options for Gulf states.

Two significant differences between Israel and the Gulf states are the level of system integration and the maturity of command-and-control networks and processes. Gulf air-defense systems are deployed primarily in a "point defense" to protect a single complex or discrete critical infrastructure. This is done to orient and maximize capability against the most significant threats. However, this approach, which is expensive, is not as effective against drones

and cruise missiles that can execute diverse strike profiles and leaves broad areas such as population centers unprotected. In contrast, for example, Israeli air-defense systems are typically deployed in a multi-layered manner, to protect critical infrastructure and population centers. Increased Arab investment is beginning to diversify these systems to match developing threats. However, this investment will be limited, and faces challenges with the US Foreign Military Sales system.

B. Maritime Security Environment of the Gulf and the Red Sea.⁹

The Iranian naval threat is a strategic challenge, both to US and GCC interests. Between 2014 and 2020, an average of eighteen million barrels, or approximately 20 percent of the world's oil supply, flowed through the Strait of Hormuz every day. Any disruption to the global energy supply will have significant geopolitical, economic, and social ramifications.

The coastline around the Arabian Peninsula stretches for 5,470 miles, with six different navies, plus the United States and a Multinational Force attempting to protect the waterways. Gulf Cooperation Council countries have 416 patrol craft combined between their navies and coast guards (Figure 4). The general rule of thumb for military operations is that it takes three assets to make one operational. This is due to required maintenance, crew rest, and time for resupply. This means that in the case of the Arabian Peninsula, every patrol craft would be responsible for monitoring and enforcing laws across an impossibly large forty-one miles of coastline. The primary mission of the patrol craft, however, is to provide escort and manage traffic pulling in and out of ports. When considering their primary mission, the number of available patrol craft to monitor and interdict illicit activity along the coast is drastically reduced, making the vulnerability to Iranian smuggling insurmountable without additional means.

Figure 4. The data displayed are pulled from The Military Balance 2021. The numbers are quantity, not the effectiveness of the capability. The red circles

7 *The Military Balance 2021* (London: IISS and Routledge, 2021), 346, <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance/the-military-balance-2021#:~:text=The%20annual%20assessment%20of%20military,security%20policymaking%2C%20analysis%20and%20research.>

8 Ibid., 365, 372.

9 Andy Bochman and Ian Ralby, *Cybersecurity Concerns for the Energy Sector in the Maritime Domain*, Atlantic Council, December 6, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/cybersecurity-concerns-for-the-energy-sector-in-the-maritime-domain>; Bina Hussein, *Energy Sector Diversification: Meeting Demographic Challenges in the MENA Region*, Atlantic Council, January 9, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/energy-sector-diversification-meeting-demographic-challenges-in-the-mena-region>; "Islamic Republic of Iran Navy IRIN," last visited November 16, 2022, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/navy.htm>.

	Navy					Coast Guard	
	Submarines	Frigates	Patrol Craft	Mine Sweepers	Amphibious	Patrol Craft	Amphibious Vehicles
Egypt	7	8	63	14	2	89	
Iraq			32				
Israel	5		45		3		
Jordan			9				
Bahrain		1	13		9	55	1
Kuwait			20	8		32	1
Oman		3	10		1		
Qatar			11			12	
Saudi Arabia		6	106	3	5		
UAE			157	2	19		
Iran	17		122		28		

Figure 4. The data displayed are pulled from The Military Balance 2021. The numbers are quantity, not the effectiveness of the capability. The red circles reflect key findings. The green box indicates the specific Gulf countries that are the primary focus of this paper.

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Moreover, smuggling threats range depending on the boats in use. For instance, sail-powered dhows and speedboats offer two distinct levels of threat, while US and Arab frigates and destroyers can act as command-and-control platforms. However, these do not have the speed and maneuverability to engage and counter smuggling operations.

The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council recognize the need to address those shortfalls and better coordinate their limited capabilities. In 2015, the GCC established Task Force 81 (TF-81) as its maritime security organization. The GCC touted TF-81 as a joint GCC naval force that could patrol the international waters of the Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and the Gulf of Aden. TF-81 has an operations center in Bahrain, but has been hampered by the rift with Qatar, a lack

of information sharing, and an unwillingness by national governments to put their maritime assets under the command of a different Gulf Cooperation Council country. The basic sharing of information needed for collective decision-making seldom occurs, and historically requires both third-party leadership (i.e., the United States) and the presence of an existential threat. Moreover, GCC nations are generally reluctant to “lead” each other, as a failure in leadership could prove embarrassing.

From its headquarters in Bahrain, the United States also leads the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) concerned with maritime security in the Gulf and nearby waters. Established with twelve countries after 9/11, the CMF has grown over the past two decades to include thirty-four countries. The CMF’s Task Force 150 was formed in 2001 with a focus on maritime security outside the Gulf; Task Force 152 formed in 2004 and has its focus inside the Gulf. In 2009, the CMF established a counter-piracy element, Task Force 151, and in 2022 stood up Task

Force 153 to better address Red Sea maritime security. Rather than a formal coalition, the CMF is considered a “coalition of the willing” because the participating countries are not bound by any formal political, diplomatic, or military mandate. As a result, member contributions to the CMF have varied with time and remain subject to national policies.

C. How Integrated Air and Missile Defense Would Improve Collective Security.

Integrated air and missile defense necessitates states’ use of a common system against conventional air threats—such as aircraft, helicopters, and unmanned aerial vehicles—as well as protection against ballistic and cruise missiles. As the range, numbers, varied attack profiles, and sophistication of Iranian capabilities have grown, national defensive systems present potential vulnerabilities that a broader defensive arrangement could mitigate or resolve, in terms of both geographic coverage and gaps in information and intelligence. An integrated system would make regional countries more effective against attacks from Iran and its proxies, including those that might, in the future, come from beyond neighboring states, such as the January 17 and January 24, 2022, Houthi ballistic-missile and drone attacks against the UAE. These resulted in a US Patriot at Al Dhafra intercepting an incoming missile threatening US troops.

The diplomatic solidarity of such an architecture could serve to dissuade attacks. Iran would likely be more concerned about no longer being able to exploit, directly or through its proxies, a Gulf state’s individual and insufficient defensive capabilities. Instead, Tehran would face a regionally networked defensive system in which Gulf states—and probably Israel—rely on each other and the United States for better and more up-to-date warning, intelligence, hardware, and capabilities to defend against an attack. Such an integrated network would also serve to prepare countries to better protect their vulnerable populations and critical infrastructure in the event of a future conflict in the region, all while tying Gulf countries closer together with each other, and with Israel and the United States.

The cost for Iran and other adversaries using relatively low-cost drones for an attack is often thousands of dollars, compared to shooting the drone down with a Patriot missile, which costs approximately \$1–6 million per missile. When considered alongside current gaps in coverage, the cost differential provides yet another impetus to develop a new, sustainable approach of a modern,

layered, integrated air and missile defense in the region.

As aggressive Iranian actions continue, a future direct conflict is likely to draw the United States into the region to protect its allies and interests, including the free flow of commerce. To prevent this from happening—and to strengthen defenses, and thereby bolster deterrence—the United States should work with Gulf allies to build partner capabilities and integration of air and maritime defenses, cognizant that doing so will not guarantee the prevention of a conflict with Iran, but would complicate Iranian leadership’s decision-making by rendering potential attacks less effective, more resource intensive, and less likely to succeed. Moreover, by building an integrated system, the United States will benefit from cost sharing, enhanced deterrence, and strengthened ties and influence with Middle Eastern allies and partners, which US and NATO forces could also easily integrate to missions when needed.

Interviews with senior defense officials from Gulf countries reflect the level of trust required to develop interdependency in order to counter Iran through a mutually beneficial security construct. This is something that only the United States can facilitate on the scale required. Given the scope required to include a consistent flow of information and intelligence between Gulf states, the United States, and probably Israel, Gulf officials see the United States as the leading state to provide coordinated command and control.

Since 9/11, the US Armed Forces developed and honed the ability to conduct globally integrated operations. This includes not only the integration of unmatched US command-and-control systems and sensors, but also the professional experience and expertise of US staff, targeters, and intelligence professionals, many of whom have extensive deployments in the Middle East. It is noteworthy that these servicemembers and staff have also developed a degree of agility against evolving threats, while working to enhance coalition effectiveness in areas such as joint air-ground integration and conventional special-operations force integration. An example of this is the indispensable US role in the coalition effort in the Combined Joint Task Force to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Washington worked by, with, and through regional partners to defeat a regional threat that also poses a threat to US interests.

Importantly, the framework for integrated air and missile defense helps address many of Iran's non-nuclear malign activities in the region, including both conventional missile and weapons developments and support to terrorist entities and proxies. Whether or not the United States re-enters the JCPOA, Iranian missile capabilities and destabilizing activities will still need to be confronted and addressed comprehensively. As a result, additional and more effective defenses against these threats are not only appropriate, they are also likely to help deter Iranian aggression in the region more than they would provoke Iran.

D. Strengthening Maritime Security.

Any effective security strategy aimed at combating Iranian maritime threats will require additional investment in naval resources and the closer integration of the limited resources available at any time. Fortunately, interviews with security and defense officials in various GCC states revealed that the impetus already exists for Gulf nations to strengthen their ability to defend their maritime interests.

Three recent, significant events provide unique opportunities to further encourage Gulf counterparts to strengthen maritime security in a regional context. First, the signing of the Abraham Accords resulted in Israel's first participation in a naval exercise in the Red Sea that included the UAE and Bahrain in November 2021. Second, in September 2021, the Fifth Fleet announced the establishment of NAVCENT Task Force 59 to rapidly incorporate seaborne and airborne drones, along with artificial intelligence (AI), into US Navy fleet operations in the Middle East. Based at hubs in Bahrain and Aqaba, Jordan, Task Force 59 partners with industry and CMF members for evaluation and employment.

Third, to address the smuggling problem, and following the success of the exercise in the Red Sea, the commander of NAVCENT and the CMF on April 14, 2022, announced the creation of multinational Task Force 153, designed specifically to tackle weapons smuggling in the waters around Yemen. Through this new task force, designed to consist of two to eight ships at any time, the United States will be able to better coordinate ISR with Gulf counterparts, enhancing operations designed to cut off the flow of illegal weapons from Iran to Yemen.

In addition to the need to increase maritime platforms and better integrate them, conversations with officials in the Gulf states indicated it would

be valuable to create a forum for coordinating law-enforcement efforts and analysis across the region, similar to INTERPOL. This initiative would address the violations of international law and associated criminal aspects of Iran transferring weapons and other malign capabilities through maritime efforts. Such a forum would enable increased communication between internal security services, and allow them to share information, help identify organized crime trends, and create avenues for training to achieve higher professional standards in law enforcement. Creating a combined headquarters for law-enforcement support would better position the region to counter the threat posed by Iran's proliferation activities. The key to this cooperation is building maritime domain awareness through integrated ISR platforms, intelligence sharing, and a concentration of assets in locations to counter Iranian proliferation, when indicators are tripped. Such a law-enforcement capability could also contribute to coalition awareness of the aerospace domain and illicit Iranian transfers by aircraft.

E. Elements of the Architecture.

Much of the equipment needed to achieve the foundation and initial operating capability of a regional IAMD network already exists in theater. Gulf Cooperation Council countries and Israel recognize that updating air-defense systems with the most advanced technology is a priority, based on interviews with the task force and recent purchase and incorporation of THAAD, most notably by the Emiratis, in their defense. To improve air-defense systems' effectiveness, however, Gulf states desiring a layered system need to be integrated, along with Israel, to eliminate major gaps in sensor and interceptor coverage, provide a common framework for early warning, and make the most efficient and effective use of their national budget resources. Moreover, each country in the region should recognize a level of dependency on each other, to include dependency by Gulf capitals—including those that have not yet normalized relations with Jerusalem—on Israel.

Israel's missile-interceptor systems and technology—including David's Sling, Iron Dome, and Arrow II—that form the layered umbrella of Israel's own missile defense are far ahead of what most US allies in the Gulf currently have available to them. As such, Israeli participation in the regional architecture should be the strong preference not only of the United States, but of Gulf allies. Including Israel would enable the United States to build a regional integrated defense system with its closest ally in the region.

Washington could depend on such a system for its technological and defense prowess, reducing the burden on the United States. For Israel, the benefit would include the more directly integration of the country into the region—at minimum, with allies with which relations have already been established, including through the Abraham Accords. Over time, it would likely engender broader coordination and stronger defense relationships with those countries that have not yet normalized relations, potentially providing yet another reason to eventually do so. Even if countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar wish to join a regional integrated defense network but are not be ready to do so immediately, Israel would still have the opportunity to publicly work through fellow Gulf states and the United States. Moreover, it could eventually lead to Israel's ability to put early-warning radar sites for its national defense in Gulf states themselves, such as the UAE. For the Gulf states, access to Israeli missile-defense technology would speed the process of integration, and likely accelerate the acquisition of more advanced air capabilities, enabling greater protection of their citizens and interests. Interviews across the region with various officials lead us to assess that Gulf Cooperation Council nations are able and willing to purchase high-end US air-defense equipment, share information with each other, share information with Israel—directly or through the United States—and engage in needed training and exercises. That willingness, however, is predicated on US willingness not only to sell them the equipment, but also to design and model the senior leadership and organizational structure required for full implementation of capabilities.

US Commitment to IAMD

The character of the Iranian threat, and the imperative to assure allies of US commitment, warrants consideration for the United States to stand up, on a provisional basis, a Combined Joint Task Force under command of a US three-star officer to begin to drive this integration in a meaningful way. That general or flag officer would be supported by a small staff that could form the nucleus of a more robust CJTF headquarters, manned with officers from the coalition. The establishment of a provisional headquarters would also serve to provide important insights into the authorities, intelligence-sharing agreements, and capabilities required as the organization stands up and evolves, and Gulf countries begin to take concrete steps to prepare for an integrated defense system. Those insights would inform Pentagon

decision-making and future changes to the Unified Command Plan. Presumably, the CJTF would be a sub-unified command under the commander of US CENTCOM.

Such a provisional CJTF could be formed out of one of the current US headquarters in, or oriented on, the region: NAVCENT in Bahrain, AFCENT at Al Udeid, Qatar or Al Dhafra, UAE, ARCENT (Forward) in Kuwait, or potentially in Israel. Considering access needs for all members of a combined staff, the normalization agreements between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain might make those Arab states most suitable for the establishment of a provisional CJTF headquarters, at least during an initial phase.

In regional consultations, the potential membership of the CJTF would be identified and then formalized through a diplomatic agreement. The states under consideration during the initial consultations would be those indicated in the proposed congressional legislation. Under US leadership, a CJTF initially comprising the United States, the majority of the GCC states, Jordan, Egypt, and possibly Israel, is attainable. Tensions within the GCC can be mitigated with US patience and resolve, so all GCC members should be invited to join the defense alliance. The integration of Iraq into the coalition will be difficult, at least until the coalition is mature and fully operational. Even then, Baghdad will likely need to decide whether it values excessively hardlines policies toward Israel more than being part of such an integrated regional system. Other NATO and non-NATO allies with significant interests in the region could be included in the coalition or granted observer status.

Another consideration is whether a formal structure for maritime security is also warranted, particularly to ensure closer integration of limited systems and to guide the naval-acquisition decisions of the GCC countries. If, in addition to air and missile defense, the new CJTF is focused on the maritime domain, Bahrain would seem to be the most likely candidate to host the provisional headquarters.

Interoperability, robust training, and an exercise regime are required elements for executing a comprehensive plan. For this effort to succeed, the traditional US approach must shift away from merely selling US weapons to one that seeks the continuous enhancement and fielding of effective and interoperable capabilities. As the United States works to generate effective capabilities, US leaders must assess current capabilities and ensure that, in addition to equipment, they seek

comprehensive and interoperable solutions that consider training, manpower, leader development, doctrine, infrastructure and basing, information flows and intelligence sharing, while sustaining each potential member of the coalition.

F. Challenges to Establishing and Implementing More Effective Defenses.

Beyond the establishment of a provisional headquarters and its initial operational capability, any permanent IAMD structure will take between three and five years to establish. Several challenges will need to be comprehensively addressed to strengthen deterrence and build effective defensive capabilities in the region, and for the United States to achieve the operational and strategic benefits envisioned in this framework.

Washington will need to overcome the lack of trust from the region, generate confidence, and take action to secure the US role as the preferred and most reliable ally of Gulf states for another generation. To succeed, the United States will require a long-term, consistent strategy that transcends any single administration, rather than simply short-term, tactical-level military-force adjustments. Rather than measuring the health of US relations by the size and content of military hardware deals or the number of soldiers or airmen at a particular base, where troop levels necessarily ebb and flow, the United States must engage across the board and build ties for the long term. Doing so means actively competing with adversaries and coordinating with allies and partners in the region, taking their concerns seriously, and working to build their professional competencies.

The United States possesses significant geostrategic advantages that Washington must mobilize and harness in order to succeed over the middle and long terms. Risk aversion by policymakers and practitioners to address the operational and strategic risks, and act to take advantage of this opportunity, remains the United States' most glaring shortcoming and a risk to US interests.

- 1. Intelligence collection and sharing.** To support and ensure a regional collective self-defense including the Gulf plus probably Israel, intelligence-sharing agreements will need to be updated and adjusted to facilitate integrated air- and missile-defense systems, and possibly maritime security. Commercially available intelligence—specifically, signals intelligence (SIGINT) and geospatial intelligence (GEOINT)—has become widely available and cheaper. To be

effective, the United States will probably need to approach the GCC as a collective intel-sharing challenge. The US Intelligence Community must be ready to find creative solutions to ensure bureaucratic standards and processes do not lead to failures—and, when they do, that sharing efforts are not diminished as the default response. An effective integrated air- and missile-defense and maritime strategy will require geospatial, radar, SIGINT, and sensors for tactical-level execution in near real time. These domains should be prioritized for intelligence sharing by the United States and Gulf countries.

The structure and focus for intelligence organizations in GCC countries are centered, externally, on two primary threats: Iran and Iranian proxies. The secondary concern is mistrust between the Gulf Cooperation Council members. The friction between GCC states will continue to hinder cooperation unless a third party plays a leading role in helping coordinate security efforts. The interviews conducted by the task force discovered a unanimous opinion that the United States needs to play such a role, or else sharing between the Gulf countries will continue to be limited and inconsistent.

Moreover, a complicating factor is the need for institutional oversight and lines of separation to prevent abuses of power. In several cases, Some GCC states recognize these challenges, and are embarking on institutional development and transformation projects to professionalize the force and create higher standards. However, Gulf Cooperation Council state institutions are only decades old and patience on the part of the United States is warranted so long as these intelligence organizations show they are trending in a professional direction.

Over the past thirty years, each Gulf country has purchased a host of different assets, resulting in a hodge-podge of capabilities not suited to their needs and an inability to tackle the most challenging threats comprehensively. Compounding this problem, these same countries reach out to the United States for certain technologies, but the United States is often unwilling to share them and European allies often fill the gap instead. Today, the situation has only gotten worse, as Washington can take years sometimes to simply say “no” or provide an answer at all. Even then, the results are often inconsistent with what other

US allies are doing. For example, the United States will not sell imagery at certain levels of mensuration, but countries can buy the imagery from France. The US Intelligence Community needs to reevaluate how it engages its partners the Middle East to develop a holistic solution that supports US security interests.

The United States should act as the honest broker facilitating intelligence provided by one country to be actioned in another. Solely engaging in bilateral intelligence sharing is likely to be insufficient to mitigate future threats leveraged against any ally in the region. Under CENTCOM authority, both AFCENT and NAVCENT are already laying the foundations for these efforts. Building a CJTF headquarters will require the United States to establish a common operational picture with feeds coming directly in and disseminated back with all participating countries. In doing so, this approach will give each country confidence in the intelligence picture, while bypassing political sensitivities. Moreover, this will require the United States to lead by establishing standards and regulations in cyber, AI, combined doctrine, training, and processes. Creating these standards in a multinational construct provides a model and an opportunity to create more integrated security arrangements elsewhere.

2. Cybersecurity. The cyber mission area represents a significant vulnerability for US Gulf partners, and an area where multilateral cooperation remains infrequent, even among trusted allies.

The Iranian cyber threat is generally considered one of the four most extensive global efforts, alongside those of China, Russia, and North Korea.¹⁰ While the overwhelming majority of Iranian cyber activity in the last two years has been espionage, Iranian hackers routinely demonstrated their ability to conduct damaging cyberattacks against critical

infrastructures. Iran's 2011–2013 campaign of distributed denial-of-service attacks against the US financial system and attacks on Saudi Aramco were two of the earliest examples of cyberattacks against economic infrastructure.¹¹ The 2016–2017 Shamoon 2 operation against Saudi Arabia was significant; the wiper malware destroyed data and disabled systems at more than a dozen Saudi companies and government entities.¹² In recent years, Iran launched a series of cyberattacks against Bahrain. Similar to the 2021 attack on Saudi Aramco, Iran-sponsored hackers targeted Bahrain's electricity, water, and oil infrastructures by disrupting the digital functions of Aluminum Bahrain and Bapco through data erasure.¹³ At the end of 2019, IBM's destructive-malware researchers shared findings that point to Iran-sponsored hackers as the culprits behind a "disk-wiping malware" targeting the industrial and energy infrastructures of Middle East nations.¹⁴ Increasingly, Iranian cyber activities have done more than go after economic targets; they have threatened the lives of millions of people in the region. In April 2020, Iranian hackers attacked a water-pumping station in Israel, an incident that could have impacted water supplies to millions.¹⁵

Gulf-partner cyber-operations capabilities are not openly discussed, but they are assumed to generally be less than sufficient for mitigating and countering the cyber threat from Iran. A number of Gulf partners have begun to address the cyber threats to their critical infrastructure and government information systems in the wake of the repeated Iranian threats and known penetrations, but this progress is inconsistent across the Gulf partners.

The United States has several opportunities to support Gulf-partner cyber-capability development. Washington should consider increasing the level of cyber-intelligence

10 "Iran Cyber Threat Overview and Advisory," Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, last visited November 15, 2022, <https://www.cisa.gov/uscert/iran>.

11 "Iranian Offensive Cyber Attack Capabilities," Congressional Research Service, January 13, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/IF11406.pdf>.

12 "ICS Joint Security Awareness Report (JSAR-12-241-01B)," Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, last updated July 20, 2021, <https://www.cisa.gov/uscert/ics/jsar/JSAR-12-241-01B>.

13 "Compromise of Saudi Aramco and RasGas," Council on Foreign Relations, August 2012, <https://www.cfr.org/cyber-operations/compromise-saudi-aramco-and-rasgas>; Annie Fixler, "The Dangers of Iran's Cyber Ambitions," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, October 28, 2022, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2022/10/28/the-dangers-of-irans-cyber-ambitions>.

14 "New Destructive Wiper 'ZeroCleare' Targets Energy Sector in the Middle East," IBM Security, January 2020, 22, <https://www.ibm.com/downloads/cas/OAJ4VZNJ>.

15 Matt Burgess, "A Hacking Spree Against Iran Spills out into the Physical World," *Wired*, November 30, 2021, <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/iran-israel-hacking-infrastructure>.

cooperation, thus enabling better defensive preparations and identification of possible adversary operations. Moreover, the Pentagon should plan for US Cyber Command cyber-mission forces sitting side by side with Gulf-partner cyber operators. Together, they can form a new frontline to combat Iranian cyber operations. The lessons Gulf counterparts will learn could ultimately enhance everyone's cyber defense, including that of the United States. Finally, the Department of Homeland Security should consider infrastructure security training for Gulf allies on the conduct of risk and resiliency assessments and how to build emergency-response plans to recover from cyberattacks. This will build and enhance the needed resilience among Gulf partners.

3. The US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) system.

The US FMS system is vital for the security of Middle East allies and partners, but it lacks the agility and responsiveness in this post-Cold War era to serve US interests in the face of escalating threats inclusive of non-state actors.

FMS remains a cornerstone of GCC and Israeli military capabilities, while also creating a critical link between US and Gulf militaries, their capabilities, and interoperability. FMS provides opportunity for increased integration between Gulf states and the United States—and more importantly, among the Gulf states with each other. Gulf officials are explicit that multiple challenges remain in engaging with the United States for FMS. Out of necessity, many consider reaching beyond the United States to US allies and adversaries seeking the very types of systems the United States has refused to transfer or has seemingly delayed in delivering. These decisions—cognizant of US legal requirements to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge (QME)—not only have the potential to diminish US influence in the region, but threaten to thwart the development of a meaningful, Gulf IAMD system before it begins. Among the most frustrating and confusing incidents for Gulf allies are the US decisions not to grant export licenses for military hardware or software that help maintain and repair the very systems a Gulf country has already purchased from the United States.

4. Absorptive capacity in the Gulf states.

Absorptive capacity is a challenge that has impeded, and will continue to impede, the GCC's ability to enhance member-state military readiness. Quite simply, the amount of training, drilling, and exercising that a nation's military can complete is limited by the size of its military-aged population, which could impact US efforts to enhance Gulf security forces' professionalism and expertise. In the case of the Gulf, two factors may contribute to a decline in absorptive capacity over the next ten to twenty years.

First, there remains cultural hesitancy to include women in the majority of security-service roles. Women currently are not present in significant numbers in the military and security services of Arab states. While in some Gulf countries there is initial change on this topic in a positive direction, the US Armed Forces can set a powerful example. US-sponsored professional development and professional military education (PME) programs in the region, and those institutions in the US hosting regional officers, should ensure that the inclusion of women and the full utilization of the society's talents are emphasized, helping to lead to a larger pool of educated and available trainees for service.¹⁶

Second, the overall population of the Gulf is in decline. For example, a country such as Bahrain cannot provide servicemembers to support a coalition military effort and be expected to do much more than the minimum it already does; it does not have the uniformed personnel to do so. To mitigate this reality, US AFCENT can conduct air-tasking orders featuring the air forces of each Gulf state, and multinational forces, as well. However, the concern in the region is that as the immediacy of a threat subsides, so too will partner willingness to dedicate forces to such a combined effort.

III. Conclusion

The ideas proposed in this report reflect the expertise, information, and best analysis of the members of the Gulf Security Task Force, as informed by extensive research and in-person consultation with their respective Gulf counterparts. The recommendations found within are designed to provide a roadmap for US policymakers that

¹⁶ Madison Clough, "Building a Bigger Role for Women in Saudi Security Services," *Arab News*, October 21, 2018, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1391626>.

addresses the fundamental questions of “why” a regional integrated air and missile, and possibly maritime, defense is necessary, and “how” it can be developed. The task force views IAMD as critical for US, Gulf, and—to some extent—Israeli security, primarily due to the Iranian regime’s ongoing and ever-present threat in the region—both directly and through its proxies. This threat continues to overshadow not only the national security of GCC states, but their economies, energy, and water security, as well as those of the United States.

Despite media speculation about the potential for a near-term regional integrated defense system in the Middle East, even if such efforts began tomorrow, it would probably take thirty-six to sixty months to fully stand up and begin in earnest. As a result, real integration is not going to happen in the immediate future. However, over the long term, if meaningful investments toward IAMD begin now, it will better secure US interests in the region, while reducing the implicit US burden of responsibility for much of the region’s defense. Gulf IAMD led by the United States would keep the United States as GCC states’ primary security partner—minimizing questions about US commitment to the region—but also enable them to take greater direct responsibility for their own defense, relegating the United States to a supporting, coordinating, and training role. Moreover, a regional integrated defense architecture could also potentially help to better integrate Israel into the Gulf and enhance its own security; give the United States a reliable partner for building Gulf regional-defense capabilities; and provide Gulf states additional access to advanced technology to better protect their people and interests from Iran.

To launch an effective Gulf IAMD effort will take a true interagency effort from the United States. It will not occur without challenges and setbacks. However, it also holds the most promise of any proposal to create interdependence between the United States and Gulf states, which, in turn, is the best way to enhance US national and economic security in the Gulf while also enabling all GCC states to better conduct their own defense in the long term.

Annex A: Glossary of Terms

AFCENT: US Air Forces Central. This is the US Air Force headquarters and the Ninth Air Force located in Qatar.

CCIB: Command Control Interoperability Board. This is a board that meets at CENTCOM headquarters in Tampa, Florida, to consider recommendations to the Foreign Military Sales process.

CENTCOM: US Central Command. This is the US geographic Combatant Command responsible for operations in the Middle East.

CJTF: Combined Joint Task Force.

CMF: Combined Maritime Force. A maritime partnership of thirty-four countries under US leadership, focused on security inside and outside of the Gulf, counter-piracy, and maritime security in the Gulf of Aden.

FMS: Foreign Military Sales. This is the program oversight to ensure compliance with regulations, and that concerns over exportation of US technology are taken into consideration.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/us-national-defense-strategy-and-the-future-of-foreign-military-sales/>

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Members include the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain.

Gulf Cooperation Council POLE: Gulf Cooperation Council International Criminal Police Organization. This organization does not exist; it is a concept of a potential organization and a possible methodology for greater collaboration on law-enforcement issues in the region.

GPC: Great-power competition.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/a-conversation-with-former-us-national-security-advisor-lt-general-h-r-mcmaster/>

Gray zone: “The gray zone encompasses defensive and offensive activities that are above the level of cooperation and below the threshold of armed conflict. Gray zone operations are often but not always clandestine, covert, unofficial, or outside accepted norms of behavior. Gray zone operations

are aimed at undermining the security of the target state but without triggering active armed conflict.”—*Forward Defense*, Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, Atlantic Council.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/scowcroft-center-for-strategy-and-security/forward-defense/adding-color-to-the-gray-zone-establishing-a-strategic-framework-for-hybrid-conflict/>

Integrated Air and Missile Defense systems: Integrated Air and Missile Defense, as defined by one Air Force intelligence expert, is the “structure, equipment, personnel, procedures, and weapons used to counter the enemy’s airborne penetration of one’s own claimed territory...Rather than a single weapon or person, it is an amalgamation of elements, organized to minimize threats in the air domain. Thus, an effective Integrated Air and Missile Defense system performs three functions—air surveillance, battle management, and weapons control.”¹⁷ One recommendation this paper offers is to develop the system requirements to meet the needs of participating countries (manning, training, equipment), but just as necessary is the creation of the military institutions for command and control. Through the institutions, the United States can provide leadership and hands-on exposure to doctrine, processes, and relationship building, which leads to greater trust between countries. For a regional Integrated Air and Missile Defense system, the chain of command must be clearly understood by all involved and supported by the organizational and technical capabilities available. Each country must agree to a set of standards that spells out roles, responsibilities, authorities, asset allocation, transparency to the greatest extent possible, and the creation of a transition plan at some point in the future.

Joint Publication 3-01 Countering Air and Missile Threats (JP 3-01) defines Integrated Air and Missile Defense systems as “the integration of capabilities and overlapping operations to defend the homeland and US national interests, protect the joint force, and enable freedom of action by negating an enemy’s ability to create adverse effects from their air and missile capabilities. Integrated Air and Missile Defense systems incorporate offensive and defensive measures to create a comprehensive joint and combined force capable of preventing an enemy from effectively employing its offensive

17 Peter W. Mattes, “What Is a Modern Integrated Air Defense System,” *Air & Space Forces*, October 1, 2019, <https://www.airandspaceforces.com/article/what-is-a-modern-integrated-air-defense-system/>.

air Introduction and missile weapons. Integrated Air and Missile Defense systems are designed to deter, and failing that, to prevent an enemy from effectively employing air and missile assets.”¹⁸ Theater-level air- and missile-defense responsibility is assigned to COCOMS with STRATCOM oversight. JP 3-01 anticipated the need to create coalition and command structures and provide guidance and recommendations on organizing these headquarters.

IMET: International military education and training. This is the US program through which funding is provided to support training of foreign military officers.

Iranian threat networks/non-state actors/proxies: These terms are used interchangeably to describe groups that receive financial, material, and philosophical support from Tehran. It is worth noting that not all countries in the Gulf view each group the same way and may have official or unofficial relationships with a particular group that would be considered backed by Iran.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/how-to-counter-iran-s-proxies/>

IRIN: Islamic Republic of Iran Navy.

IRGC: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The Iranian security force element responsible for defending the regime, supporting the socio-political values of regime leadership, and executing the extraterritorial mission to advance the Iranian Revolution and support revolutionary proxy forces.

IRGCN: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy.

JCPOA: Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This is the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/the-potential-side-benefits-of-a-revived-jcpoa-for-middle-east-stability/>

NAVCENT: US Navy Central. This is the US Navy headquarters and is also the Fifth Fleet located in Bahrain.

Rift/blockade: “Qatar ‘rift’ started in 2017 with serious policy differences over how the countries of the Gulf should treat the Muslim Brotherhood and groups contending for influence in the Syrian civil war.”¹⁹

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/the-end-of-the-gulf-rift-may-not-signal-the-end-of-turkey-qatar-relations/>

S-300/S-400: Russian-built air-defense systems.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/turkeysource/why-a-new-missile-system-could-solve-turkeys-us-russia-conundrum/>

TF/CTF/JTF + #: Task force/combined task force/joint task force; the number helps identify which task force.

Annex B: Findings of the Gulf Security Task Force

National Strategic Interests

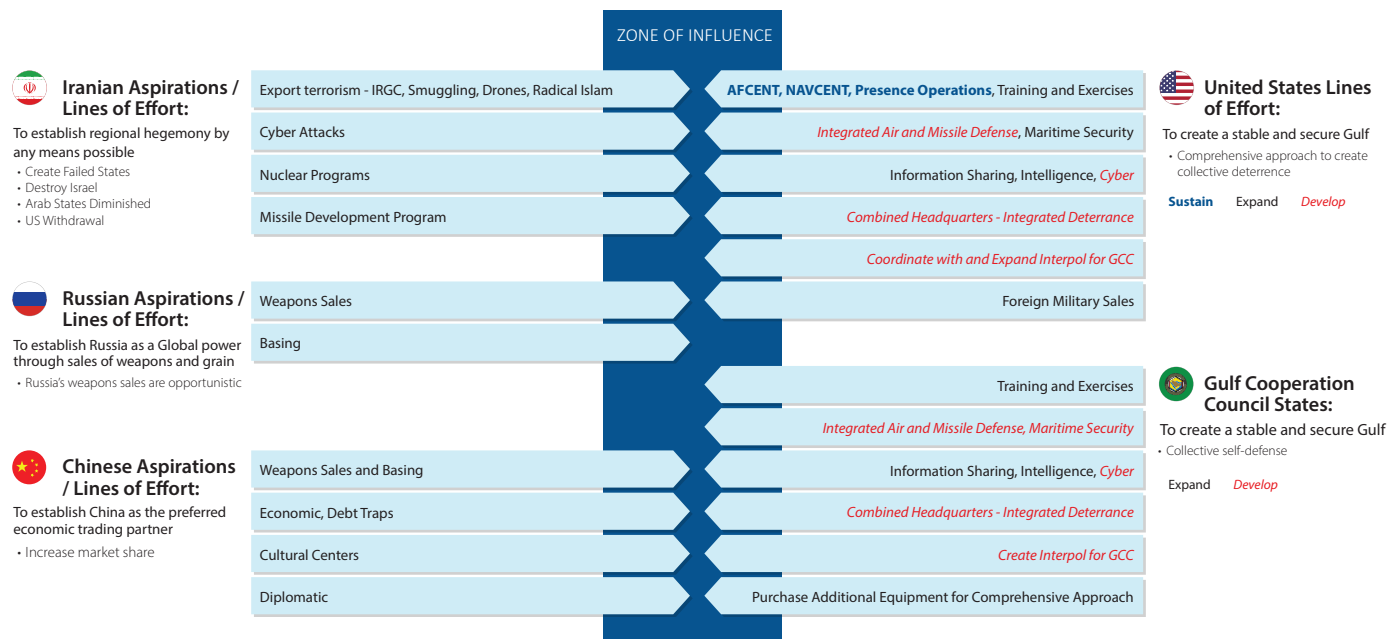
- A stable and secure Gulf is in the national security interest of the United States. US leaders must acknowledge that continued economic, political, and social progress in the Gulf in particular is closely tied to conditions of security and peace across the region.²⁰
- The Iranian threat drives Arab countries to reconsider their relationships with each other and fuels a desire to work together if the United States is the facilitator. A number of Gulf Cooperation Council states advise that they do not need a permanent, significant US presence, but rather desire clear US commitments. Strengthening partners will reduce US costs.
- To achieve the desired end state and implement integrated deterrence in the Middle East, a blueprint is needed to define the requirements and responsibilities of each party.
- Gulf Cooperation Council states are looking at ways to bring together and strengthen relationships with other partners that have

¹⁸ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats,” Air University, March 23, 2012, https://www.doctrine.af.mil/Portals/61/documents/doctrine_updates/du_12_06.pdf.

¹⁹ Experts React: *The US Brokers Another Deal to End the Gulf Rift*, Atlantic Council, January 4, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/experts-react-the-us-brokers-another-deal-to-end-the-gulf-rift/>.

²⁰ On enduring US interests in the Middle East, see: Michael S. Bell, *We Didn’t Start the Fire...: U.S. Interests and Policy Choices in the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, December 22, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/united-states-interests-and-policy-choices-in-the-middle-east-we-didnt-start-the-fire/>.

Improving Gulf Security: A Framework to Enhance Air, Missile, and Maritime Defenses



Note: This graphic depicts lines of effort each entity is pursuing in the Middle East, and where each believes it has the greatest advantage. Specifically for the United States, color-coded lines of effort depicted in blue are ongoing and should be sustained; efforts in white need to be reinforced and expanded, and in red are where new lines of effort need to be created. Gulf Cooperation Council partners share common interests and need to apply effort with the help of the United States.

good relationships with the United States. The United States is the preferred partner, but Gulf Cooperation Council states are concerned about what comes next. Fears of the United States leaving the region are influenced by the departure of the United Kingdom last century and the United States' approach to departing Afghanistan. If the United States is to be a trusted partner, it needs to recognize and engage with partners' concerns.²¹

Note: This graphic depicts lines of effort each entity is pursuing in the Middle East, and where each believes it has the greatest advantage. Specifically for the United States, color-coded lines of effort depicted in blue are ongoing and should be sustained; efforts in white need to be reinforced and expanded, and in red are where new lines of effort need to be created. Gulf Cooperation Council partners share common interests and need to apply effort with the help of the United States.

Regional Partner Findings

- While the Gulf states are unwilling to integrate their defensive capabilities on their own, they regularly state a desire to work together through the United States. The United States can set standards for incorporating capabilities,

technology, and training, thus maintaining influence and preventing Chinese, Russian, or Iranian advancement. Additionally, Gulf states believe they have the option to work with Russia, China, or, if forced, a negotiated path with Iran. However, interlocutors in each state repeatedly stated a preferred desire to work with the United States.

- Gulf Cooperation Council states want the United States to be more forceful and pull parties together to create a partnership. However, they need clarity on the United States' vision for its role in the region. There is a lack of understanding of the direction of US foreign policy in the region.
- The Qatar rift/blockade continues to cloud relationships within the Gulf Cooperation Council. It will take years and deliberate trust-building measures to overcome the pain.
- There is a desire among some for a Middle East regional body resembling the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to exchange ideas. This could provide an opportunity to chart a path together. Tracks to pursue could include diplomatic, strategy, security, think tanks, and commercial. Such

²¹ On trust and security cooperation, see: R. Clarke Cooper, *American Security Cooperation Needs An Integrity Check*, Atlantic Council, September 3, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/american-security-cooperation-needs-an-integrity-check/>.

a regional effort could allow discussions to happen without legal commitments.

- Gulf Cooperation Council states are working to professionalize their security services. The Center for Strategic Studies in Qatar, and the Transformation Command in Saudi Arabia develop new processes and train the workforce to modernize. This effort is a significant start and provides an opportunity for the United States to provide additional support.
- Internal security services are challenged by trans-regional crime. Gulf states need organizations that help provide an understanding of trends to allow security forces to react and adapt to changes, while reinforcing international standards for law enforcement. One suggestion the task force heard is to create an Interpol-like organization, Gulf Cooperation Council POLE to bring entities together to discuss international security, terrorism, crime, and policing standards.

Collective Self-Defense/Integrated Deterrence Strategy Findings

- Intelligence sharing is desired, and a requirement for integration. The Gulf Cooperation Council states and Israel are willing to increase intelligence sharing if the United States is the coordinator or technical hub. CENTCOM needs more authorities to share information to provide actionable intelligence, but this is uncharted water and requires additional study. The United States needs to create the capability to share actionable intelligence across partners. Currently, AFCENT is the vehicle for sharing information.
- Cyber affects all domains. From a US perspective, the issue concerning its partners is defining the US duty to warn in cyberspace. Currently, the US duty to warn in cyber is not comparable to practice in the air domain. If the United States provides warning, it does not have the ability to protect sources and methods. Gulf Cooperation Council states recognize the need to advance cyber capability, reach standards equal to those of NATO, and defend against the threat. Still, a lack of understanding of achieving that goal prevents significant development. This presents an opportunity for the United States

to help enhance regional security and provide additional capabilities.

- Maritime security needs to be expanded to include confronting the asymmetric threat and coordinated across the region. Gulf Cooperation Council states need to invest in capabilities to address maritime smuggling as well.
- Much of the Integrated Air and Missile Defense equipment is already in theater; developing a security agreement to build a regional deterrence is ripe for progress. Gulf Cooperation Council states like flying Defensive Counter Air Missions. AFCENT is working on growing air lanes of approach to create interoperability and build a combined partner air-tasking order.

Annex C: Command-Structure Options and Lessons Learned

Command-Structure Options

This report recommends that a two- or three-star flag officer command the headquarters, with appropriate staff to create space for process development, planning, and Multinational Force counterparts to begin the process required to synchronize intelligence, coordinate assets, and direct operations across the region. Just as importantly, this report recommends that a senior US diplomat be posted to the new headquarters with an explicit requirement to participate in operational and strategic decision-making related to the development of the command. The politics associated with integrating multiple nations into such a structure is sufficiently challenging that diplomatic support would not only be helpful, but critical.

Two Potential Command Approaches: Multinational Force and Joint Interagency Task Force-South

Multinational Force

In Multinational Force operations, according to the JP 3-01, “understanding the agreed-upon command relationships and the related command authorities is key to developing the desired unity of effort for countering air and missile threats.”²² The publication recommends five considerations when structuring a

²² “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

Multinational Force for an Integrated Air and Missile Defense system.

- “Each nation typically establishes a national center or cell as a focal point to ensure effective support and control of its forces, including counterair forces.”²³
- “National intelligence systems should be integrated to ensure responsiveness to counter-air operational needs,” with processes and agreements for release of intelligence between nations determined early in the integration of the headquarters.²⁴
- States have varying methods and priorities when it comes to force-protection measures. These differences should be “coordinated ahead of time, and agreements must be continually updated as situations warrant.”²⁵
- Some partners may be restricted to defensive roles based on, “the types of targets they are permitted to attack, and the level of risk they are willing to accept due to domestic politics, arms limitation agreements, or their capabilities.” Those potential challenges need to also be prioritized, and roles clarified, at the onset.²⁶
- “The Area Air Defense Commander should ensure Multi-National Force Rules of Engagement, engagement authorities, and procedures are consistent with the combined Area Air Defense Plan.” Moreover, the commander should ensure clear processes to ensure joint air forces are not subject to friendly fire.²⁷

Joint Interagency Task Force-South Approach:

Joint Interagency Task Force-South’s mission is a counter-drug operation. It has had overwhelming success in incorporating interagency support and developing processes to coordinate and transfer authorities in each situation, while including international partners.

In 2011, the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University conducted a study to understand and explain why Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JITF-South) was successful. The report findings suggest the success of Joint Interagency Task Force-South is found in its structure, coordination through boards and cells, and integration of all military branches, law enforcement, intelligence agencies, and representatives from thirteen countries into teams to achieve the mission of the organization. The JITF-South structure could be applied when building the new Integrated Air and Missile Defense effort, if a similar structure is preferred. As a rear admiral of the US Navy explains:

“A typical case starts with JITF-South receiving actionable law enforcement information from the Drug Enforcement Administration. This prompts the deployment of a Customs and Border Protection P-3 or Coast Guard C-130. These aircraft subsequently detect and monitor foreign-flagged suspect vessels until Joint Interagency Task Force-South can sortie a Coast Guard cutter or US Navy or allied surface ship with an embarked Law Enforcement Detachment to intercept. When the ship arrives on the scene there is a shift of tactical control from Joint Interagency Task Force-South to the Coast Guard. For a foreign flag vessel,

²³ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

²⁴ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

²⁵ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

²⁶ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

²⁷ “Doctrine Update for JP 3-01, Countering Air and Missile Threats.”

the Coast Guard tactical commander implements a bilateral agreement or arrangement with the vessel's flag state to confirm registry and stop, board, and search the vessel for drugs.

If drugs are found, jurisdiction and disposition over the vessel, drugs, and crew are coordinated with the State Department, Department of Justice, and the flag state.”²⁸

This same approach can be applied to the mission to counter Iranian threat networks supported by regional partners. An Integrated Air and Missile Defense system controlled by a combined headquarters in the region will enable partner nations to create environments in which they can project their forces against Iran while under a defensive umbrella. Over time, this will lessen dependency on the United States and create a stable environment managed by regional allies and partners, creating commerce security.

²⁸ “Testimony of Rear Admiral Wayne E. Justice, Assistant Commandant for Capabilities, Before the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation: ‘Overview of Coast Guard Drug and Migrant Interdiction,’” US Department of Homeland Security, March 18, 2009, <https://www.dhs.gov/news/2009/03/18/testimony-us-coast-guard-drug-and-migrant-interdiction>.

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