

Security Cooperation in a Changed Region: How to Advance the U.S.-GCC Defense Working Groups

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May 21, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Part of a series: [Risks and Opportunities in the Post-April 13 Middle East](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east)(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east>)

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From aligning weapons acquisition strategies and improving intelligence sharing to getting the diplomatic framing right, U.S. officials can do more to advance regional air defense and maritime security through this week's working groups and beyond.

On May 22, civilian and military leaders from the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries will gather at GCC headquarters in Riyadh for two working groups: one focused on integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) and the other on maritime security. The two groups have been meeting for years, first following [the 2015 Camp David summit](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-implementation-us-gulf-cooperation-council-strategic) (<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-implementation-us-gulf-cooperation-council-strategic>) with GCC partners and most recently in [2022](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2962508/readout-of-the-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integrated-air-and/#:~:text=The%20Working%20Groups%20affirmed%20the,the%20GCC%2DU.S.%20Strategic%20Partnership.) (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2962508/readout-of-the-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integrated-air-and/#:~:text=The%20Working%20Groups%20affirmed%20the,the%20GCC%2DU.S.%20Strategic%20Partnership.>) and [2023](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3298553/readout-of-the-new-round-of-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integ/#:~:text=Senior%20officials%20of%20the%20United,Arabia%20on%20February%2013%2C%202023.) (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3298553/readout-of-the-new-round-of-us-gulf-cooperation-council-working-groups-on-integ/#:~:text=Senior%20officials%20of%20the%20United,Arabia%20on%20February%2013%2C%202023.>).

Their organizing concept is plain: true regional security requires multilateral cooperation. Although Washington maintains robust bilateral security partnerships across the Middle East, the need to widen the aperture has become increasingly apparent given the evolving nature of shared threats that transcend borders, sovereign airspace, and maritime boundaries. Successive U.S.-GCC gatherings have focused on Iran as the most pressing threat, discussing

steps to advance their collective defense by increasing information sharing, synchronizing military purchases, and building confidence among political and military decisionmakers.

Yet these efforts need to be accelerated given the dramatically different strategic environment surrounding the current meeting, which takes place in the wake of Iran's April 13 assault on Israel. The complex operation involved launching hundreds of one-way attack drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles across the sovereign airspace of other countries in order to reach Israel. Iran's decision to borrow the Russian playbook against Ukraine is a strategic game changer—indeed, U.S. officials **have been warning**

(<https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3324148/secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-holds-a-joint-press-conference-with-isr/>) about the implications of deepening Iranian-Russian defense cooperation since 2022, including the risk that Moscow's increasingly lethal tactics will **migrate to the Middle East**

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/russian-iranian-cooperation-and-threats-us-interests>).

Not only did Tehran discard its decades-long strategy of projecting force through proxies and terrorists by launching a state-on-state attack, it also publicly claimed responsibility. With the bar seemingly lowered for large-scale Iranian aggression, U.S. and GCC officials need to infuse new energy into their multilateral defense discussions.

Fortunately, Iran's attack also delivered proof of concept that multilateral security cooperation works. Nearly all of the drones and missiles were intercepted by a coalition of U.S., Arab, European, and Israeli forces, while other countries reportedly **provided early warning** (**<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-gulf-states-including-saudi-arabia-provided-intelligence-on-iran-attack/>**) and other intelligence on Iran's actions. This multinational effort was possible because the United States has been working for years to organize allies and partners to take confidence-building steps such as sharing intelligence and conducting military exercises together. Given this milestone, the U.S. and GCC militaries should seize the strategic moment by issuing a joint statement of continued commitment to multilateral security, and by announcing follow-on steps to increase information sharing and align equipment purchases.

Washington should also make clear to these partners that they can expect the same level of defensive support if Iran attacks them directly.

Building a Regional Security Architecture

Advancing multilateral security cooperation has been a longstanding U.S. objective for the Middle East, prompting a recent paradigm shift in America's role from "security guarantor" to "**security integrator**

(<https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/3406446/assistant-secretary-of-defense-for-strategy-plans-and-capabilities-dr-mara-karl/>)." In practice, this has been implemented through defense diplomacy (to build coalitions), military exercises (to improve partner interoperability), and reformed military sales (to meet partner needs more quickly). Three factors accelerated this integration: (1) rapidly advancing technology made sharing information and investing in hardware faster and cheaper, (2) the Abraham Accords and Israel's move into U.S. Central Command's portfolio facilitated formal and informal interaction across the region, and (3) more governments came to the shared conclusion that Iran is the region's most pressing threat.

Accordingly, both of the working groups convening this week are starting from a strong foundation of cooperation. At the same time, they **should not let their successes obscure** (**<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/how-sustainable-are-defense-and-deterrence-methods-light-irans-attack>**) the urgent need for more progress. In the air domain, Iran's expansion of its drone and missile capabilities and willingness to transfer these weapons to nonstate actors have eroded allied dominance over the region's airspace. At sea, the ongoing aggression by the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen has disrupted maritime traffic, threatened freedom of navigation at a geostrategic chokepoint, and damaged the economies of many Middle Eastern countries.

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The U.S. Navy has used its convening role from its headquarters in Bahrain to counter these threats. Last year, in response to Houthi attacks involving suicide drones, sea drones, and antiship ballistic missiles, Washington began organizing multinational strikes to degrade the group's capabilities. (For an up-to-date list of Houthi attacks, see The

Washington Institute's [maritime incident tracker \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tracking-maritime-attacks-middle-east-2019).) It also formed a new task force focused on Red Sea security. And two weeks ago, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates conducted a [joint military exercise \(https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3765436/exercise-native-fury-24-begins-in-saudi-arabia/\)](https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/3765436/exercise-native-fury-24-begins-in-saudi-arabia/) to improve naval and ground logistics across the Gulf. Such exercises are critical, allowing militaries to test their cooperation in real time, identify areas for improvement, and send a signal of resolve to adversaries.

To continue improving multilateral security cooperation, Washington should take the following steps:

Get the messaging right. To ensure continued Arab commitment, policymakers must consistently present the coalition as defensive in nature. Following Iran's April 13 attack, many observers framed the multilateral response as pro-Israel and anti-Iran. Israel went so far as to propose a [formal regional alliance \(https://www.jns.org/gallant-iranian-attack-creates-opportunity-for-anti-iran-alliance/\)](https://www.jns.org/gallant-iranian-attack-creates-opportunity-for-anti-iran-alliance/) against Iran, with [one war cabinet member \(https://www.jns.org/gantz-israel-will-exact-a-price-from-iran-at-time-of-our-choosing/\)](https://www.jns.org/gantz-israel-will-exact-a-price-from-iran-at-time-of-our-choosing/) suggesting that this coalition should keep offensive action on the table if necessary. Such rhetoric will only diminish Arab partners' interest in taking further steps. Nearly all GCC members maintain diplomatic ties with Iran and have repeatedly called for regional de-escalation. They will not support statements, policies, or actions perceived as escalatory—in part due to concerns that Iran might launch cyberattacks, proxy militia attacks, or other forms of direct or indirect retaliation against them.

Address the crisis in confidence. Although April 13 demonstrated what is possible with U.S. military capabilities and intelligence sharing, GCC partners still question whether Washington is prepared to invest similar resources and leadership toward their defense. In response, U.S. officials should point to recent demonstrations of commitment, particularly [Operation Prosperity Guardian \(https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/\)](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3621110/statement-from-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-ensuring-freedom-of-n/), the U.S.-led multinational mission in the Red Sea that is intended to provide monitoring and share information while highlighting international strategic resolve to uphold freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce in the region. Another example is the Biden administration's [public commitment \(https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-november-2-2022/#post-393633-SAUDIARABIA\)](https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-november-2-2022/#post-393633-SAUDIARABIA) to use [military assets \(https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/01/politics/us-saudi-arabia-iran-energy-infrastructure-middle-east/index.html\)](https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/01/politics/us-saudi-arabia-iran-energy-infrastructure-middle-east/index.html) to defend Saudi Arabia when intelligence indicated that Iran was planning a missile attack against the kingdom in November 2022. Still, given ongoing doubts about America's willingness to support the defense of partners beyond Israel, Washington should issue a clear statement reaffirming its commitments to Arab governments and underscoring that it will continue investing resources and political will in support of their defense. At the same time, those partners who are intent on deterring Iranian aggression must be prepared to actively contribute.

Align acquisition strategies. Many Arab defense ministries continue to purchase military systems from a mix of U.S., European, Chinese, and other vendors. Yet Washington has drawn a clear line against integrating Chinese or Russian air defense systems with U.S. equipment. Hence, if GCC militaries want to pursue IAMD, they must commit to “buying American” or purchasing systems from other trusted sources. Moreover, each GCC member currently maintains its own defense acquisition strategy with varying levels of commitment to air defense. To advance a regional security architecture, the United States should form a sub-working group with them to assess their existing capabilities, make recommendations on a regional acquisition strategy to level the playing field, produce recommendations for sensor placement to ensure maximum regional coverage, and develop a multiyear procurement and funding plan. Washington should also be prepared to streamline any Foreign Military Sales that advance this collective security architecture.

Improve information sharing. Currently, the U.S. provides warnings and data about air threats and other military

intelligence to its Middle East partners through facilities such as the Combined Air Operations Center at al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. The next step is to share this information in real time. To reach that goal, GCC members need to align their bilateral and multilateral intelligence sharing agreements—not just with the United States, but also with each other. In addition, they need to invest in secure communications systems that can enable real-time multilateral information sharing, while ensuring that adversaries cannot compromise the network. These steps are **technically feasible now** (<https://breakingdefense.com/2023/02/us-gulf-cooperation-council-eyeing-path-ahead-on-integrated-air-defense/>)—the decision to take them requires GCC policymakers to authorize such sharing with the United States and each other.

Support incremental progress. The most operationally effective security architecture would be a fully integrated region in which the United States, Israel, and Arab partners share defense responsibilities and capabilities with other like-minded allies such as Britain and France. Israel’s effective layered air defense and long history of cooperation with the U.S. Missile Defense Agency offers an important foundation for this wider IAMD effort. In the current environment of Israeli operations in Gaza, however, not all Arab capitals are willing to normalize with Jerusalem or even work with its military behind the scenes. Therefore, the U.S.-GCC working groups are a critical mechanism to maintain focus on air defense and maritime security even amid regional crises. U.S. officials should continue meeting under the auspices of these groups, while concurrently convening partners within and outside the GCC who are willing to work with Israel in other venues. Partners who do not have diplomatic ties can still be invited to observe multinational exercises that include Israel. They should also be offered briefings on the success of the April 13 defensive coalition.

Dana Stroul is the Kassen Senior Fellow and director of research at The Washington Institute, where she returned after serving as the Pentagon’s deputy assistant secretary for the Middle East in 2021-23. ❖

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