

Israel's Missile Defense Performance: Views from the Gulf

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights), [Elizabeth Dent \(/experts/elizabeth-dent\)](/experts/elizabeth-dent)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](/experts/michael-knights)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and cofounder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to Iran-backed militias.



[Elizabeth Dent \(/experts/elizabeth-dent\)](/experts/elizabeth-dent)

Elizabeth Dent is a Senior Fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, where she focuses on U.S. foreign and defense policy toward the Gulf states, Iraq, and Syria.



Brief Analysis

In discussing missile defense cooperation with risk-averse Gulf partners, Washington needs to realistically address the specifics of Iran's latest attack on Israel, including the degree to which defenses were penetrated.

On October 1, Iran fired a wave of around 200 medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBMs) at Israel, targeting air bases, radar facilities, and security elements that Tehran deems responsible for the recent killings of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah in Beirut and Hamas political chief Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. Absent an Israeli government statement on the attack's precise impact, open-source estimates indicate that 181 of the fired missiles launched successfully, and around three-quarters of these were intercepted en route—primarily by Israeli air defenses, with help from the U.S. Navy destroyers *Cole* and *Bulkeley*. The attack killed one Palestinian in the West Bank; the only known casualties in Israel were two people injured by missile fragments in Tel Aviv.

With so few casualties and minimal reported damage, the attack provides useful lessons for integrated air and missile defense (IAMD) initiatives in the Middle East. Yet some of Iran's munitions were able to penetrate, and America's vulnerable regional partners may not view the widespread imagery of Iranian missile impacts in the same terms as Washington.

A New Test for Missile Defense Cooperation

According to a [Pentagon release \(https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3923123/us-](https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/3923123/us-)

[assets-in-mediterranean-again-helped-defend-israel-against-iranian-missiles/](#) immediately after the October 1 attack, the strike was “nearly twice the scope” of Iran’s [April 13 attack](#) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/risks-and-opportunities-post-april-13-middle-east>) on Israel—an assessment that seemingly referred to the number of MRBMs used and the number of sites hit. The release concluded that “while most of the missiles were destroyed before reaching their target, some did impact and cause minimal damage.”

The April 13 attack used more overall munitions than October 1 (320, including drones), but all 200 missiles used on October 1 were MRBMs compared to around 120 MRBMs in April. Ballistic missiles can reach Israel much faster than other munitions (about 9 to 12 minutes depending on type), providing a much shorter lead time for defensive actions. Iran also appeared to target four or five sites this time, versus a reported three in April.

Furthermore, the latest attack included only Iranian launches, while April 13 included a smattering of drone, Katyusha, and cruise missile launches by Iranian partners in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. U.S., British, and French assets intercepted a significant proportion of the April 13 munitions, [aided](#) (<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/hezbollah-naim-qassem-exclusive-interview-war-escalation-rcna148332>) by Jordan and likely other Arab partners. Yet many of those intercepts were against slower-moving proxy drones and cruise missiles. In contrast, last week’s all-MRBM attack greatly limited the number of defense partners who could feasibly intercept Iran’s fire. The only interceptors in the area capable of effectively blocking these missiles are Israel’s Arrow system and U.S. ship-based SM-2/3 ballistic missile defense systems. Lower-level Israeli interceptors like David’s Sling and Iron Dome are unlikely to hit MRBMs.

Based on open-source analysis, around fifty of Iran’s missiles wound up hitting Israel, including as many as thirty-three at Nevatim Air Base alone. Although some of these impacts could be debris from interceptions, most of the impact videos and visible craters indicate explosive missile impacts. It is unclear if any of the missiles were simply let through—Israel has previously used this tactic to preserve defense munitions when it calculates that weapons will land on open ground, but such fine distinctions may not have been possible during last week’s intense barrage (see below for more on this issue).

The very low number of casualties is a testament to Israel’s civil defense capabilities and readiness. Moreover, Iran may have aimed most of its missiles at hardened military facilities in order to minimize civilian casualties and limit Israel’s response; the fact that most impacts occurred at air bases could support this conclusion. Yet one might also argue that Israel let a high proportion of air base strikes land and focused its interception efforts on urban targets.

The View from the Gulf

Regardless of what Washington and other observers conclude about the October 1 attack, U.S. partners in the region may not view it as a successful defense of Israel. Generations of war and civil defense training have accustomed Israelis to being fired on, but Iranian missile barrages look a lot different in the Gulf states, where societies are not hardened to war, and vital expatriate professionals and investors come and go based on threat perceptions. Vivid imagery of Iranian missiles hitting Israeli territory may have more psychological impact there than Washington realizes, and “minimal damage” may be unacceptable.

In general, Gulf leaders believe that layered air defenses and IAMD are critical to intercepting potential future attacks—a view shaped by the drone and cruise missile strikes that hit Saudi Arabia’s Abqaiq and Khurais refineries in September 2019, and by the drones and missiles that the Yemeni Houthis and Iran-backed Iraqi militias launched against Abu Dhabi in January-February 2022. Prior to last week, their confidence in Israel’s defensive record against long-range strikes had been growing. Yet the imagery of missiles penetrating these defenses on October 1 could give them doubts about intercepting a high proportion of Iranian projectiles during a potential future conflict in the Gulf,

even with ample investment and partnerships via the United States and Israel.

Statements by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) play into this fear, threatening that any U.S. involvement in a strike on Iran will spur attacks on American bases near major Gulf cities such as Abu Dhabi, Dhahran, Doha, Dubai, and Manama. The Iraqi militia [Kataib Hezbollah](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/profile-kataib-hezbollah>) added that any strike on Iranian oil targets will spur attacks on Gulf oil targets. Moreover, Gulf littoral cities are much closer to Iran than Israeli cities, so leaders fear they could be effectively targeted by larger swarms of short-range missiles and drones in addition to MRBMs.

Since last week's attack—most notably on October 9, when Saudi crown prince Muhammad bin Salman [met with](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-meets-iran-foreign-minister-riyadh-saudi-agency-says-2024-10-09/) (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/saudi-crown-prince-meets-iran-foreign-minister-riyadh-saudi-agency-says-2024-10-09/>) Iran's foreign minister in Riyadh—Gulf officials have signaled that they view their previous [Chinese-brokered detente](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/closing-washingtons-china-gap-middle-east-partners) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/closing-washingtons-china-gap-middle-east-partners>) with Tehran as the best defense against Iran's arsenal. As such, they may decide to focus on rapprochement and de-escalation with Iran, which could make them hesitant to accelerate U.S.-led IAMD initiatives.

Policy Recommendations

Whenever Iran and its proxies demonstrate that they can hit foreign targets without suffering heavy costs, the Gulf states will look to deepen their pursuit of rapprochement with Tehran. To ensure that this pursuit does not come at the expense of Gulf IAMD efforts, the United States should do the following:

Support an Israeli deterrent response. Gulf leaders need to see that some effort is being made to keep Iran from feeling more confident and free to act after the October 1 salvo. If hostilities between Iran and Israel escalate further, Washington should consider enabling more effective and precisely targeted Israeli strikes against Iran's missile industries to hinder the regime from resupplying and modernizing its arsenal.

Explain Israel's missile defense performance. U.S. officials should not try to sugarcoat the reality that several Iranian missiles did penetrate Israel's defenses on October 1. Instead, they should convene the U.S.-GCC working groups to discuss the operational specifics just like they did [shortly after](https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3784572/) (<https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3784572/>) the April 13 attack, addressing the missile interception rate, whether Israel purposefully allowed any munitions to hit open land, and where missiles penetrated so that defenses can be improved. For its part, Israel must take control of the messaging after such attacks, clearly and publicly countering Tehran's narrative by noting instances where expensive interceptors were preserved and munitions were let through because they posed no threat of casualties.

Pursue joint R&D on ballistic missile defense. The above point about expense raises another key conclusion from the attack: Washington, Israel, and the Gulf states should consider [jointly researching and developing](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east>) cheaper (and thus more numerous) defenses against ballistic missiles of all ranges. A cheaper version of the Arrow system is badly needed, perhaps related to the SkySonic interception system under development by the Israeli corporation Rafael. Moreover, land-based ballistic missile defenses may need to be made more agile and difficult to track, while shipborne defenses may need to operate at greater distances from land to avoid the growing antishipping threats from Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis. Regional officials should also push toward an invasive boost-phase defense system that can knock out Iranian missiles over Iranian territory.

Exchange tactical lessons learned. Iran's ability to fire accurate long-range salvos should drive further deliberation about the U.S. force posture in the Middle East. Bases in the Gulf, Jordan, Turkey, and western Saudi Arabia may

require further hardening. Washington should also arrange for Israeli officials to give Gulf partners tactical briefings on these issues at a neutral location, including conversations about improving Gulf civil defense measures (e.g., warning sirens and bomb shelters).

Be prepared to move up the escalation ladder. The next time Iran kills or injures U.S. personnel or is caught resupplying proxies with missile components or other weapons, Washington must demonstrate that it is prepared to protect its interests by imposing heavier costs on Iranian proxies and/or imposing costs on Iranian interests directly. The United States and its partners should consider a range of options, including accelerated efforts to sabotage Iran's missile industry.

Emphasize that Gulf diplomacy with Iran and regional initiatives on IAMD are not mutually exclusive.

Washington should tell Gulf partners that they need to pursue a dual strategy, knitting together their joint early-warning and defensive measures even as they pursue rapprochement with Tehran. The October 1 attack presents U.S. and Israeli officials with an important opportunity to deepen cooperation with these partners, share lessons learned, and demonstrate their ironclad commitment to supporting regional IAMD.

Michael Knights is the Bernstein Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and co-creator of its [Militia Spotlight platform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/militia-spotlight). Elizabeth Dent is a senior fellow at the Institute and former director for the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula at the Pentagon. ❖

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