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Lessons from the Establishment of an Integrated Air Defense System among the United States, Israel, and Arab Countries: Common Threat Perception

Jang Ji-Hyang, Principal Fellow
Lee Heesu, Research Associate
The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
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Iran's First-Ever Missile Attack on Israel and Israel's Retaliatory Attack on Iran

In April 2024, Iran launched approximately 330 missiles and drones at the Israeli mainland for the first time in its history. In response, Israel retaliated with a direct attack on Iranian territory. Previously, the two countries had engaged in a 'shadow war' through proxies or covert operations, but this conflict has now escalated to an unprecedented direct confrontation. The strategic landscape of the Middle East has changed dramatically. Above all, Iran demonstrated its military power by launching a direct attack on Israel from its own territory, despite severe and long-standing sanctions.

In the initial clash, both Iran and Israel inflicted significant damage on each other. However, both countries exercised caution to prevent the conflict from escalating into an all-out war, successfully implementing exit strategies while appeasing their domestic audiences. The United States, an ally that had been blocking Iran's unprecedented attack, pressured Israel to refrain from a counterattack to avoid further escalation. The United States also made it clear that it would not support Israel if it launched a large-scale counterattack. The United States is already struggling with the 'two wars'—the Ukraine war and the Israel-Hamas war. The United Kingdom, France, Jordan, and the Arab Gulf states, which have been actively participating in the U.S.-led operation to intercept Iranian missiles and drones, also attempted to dissuade Israel from engaging in an all-out war.

The Establishment and Operation of the Integrated U.S.-Israeli-Arab Air Defense System

The primary reason the conflict between Iran and Israel did not escalate into an all-out war was the successful activation of the integrated air defense system, which was driven by cooperation between the United States, Israel, and Arab countries. In fact, 99 percent of Iranian missiles were intercepted, preventing any significant damage to Israel. The establishment of this integrated air defense system was built on a shared interest in curbing Iranian expansionism and preventing escalation. It was also the result of the Sunni Arab countries and the Jewish state of Israel sharing a common threat perception. In 2020, they achieved a historic détente to prepare for the United States' planned

withdrawal from the Middle East and to counter Shiite Iran's military adventurism. This cooperation ultimately led to the signing of the Abraham Accords.

Israel was originally excluded from the U.S. Central Command, which oversees the Middle East before the Abraham Accords were signed because of opposition from Arab countries. Instead, it was placed under the U.S. European Command's area of responsibility. However, the United Arab Emirates persuaded other Arab countries to allow Israel to join the U.S. Central Command, and Israel finally became a partner in 2021. The United States also welcomed Israel's entry into the U.S. Central Command after the Abraham Accords, evaluating it as an opportunity to maximize security interests among allies in the region.

There were no opportunities for proper joint training after Israel was incorporated into the U.S. Central Command. The only meeting that took place was in March 2022, when then-U.S. Central Command Commander Frank McKenzie held a secret meeting in Egypt with high-ranking Israeli and Arab officers to discuss cooperative measures to counter Iran's missile and drone threats. Nevertheless, the initial teamwork demonstrated great success. The air defense system among Arab countries began full-scale integration, led by Gulf oil-rich countries, immediately after the Houthi rebels in Yemen—a proxy for Iran—attacked Saudi Aramco's major oil facilities with missiles and drones in 2019. In 2022, the U.S. Central Command took the lead in jointly developing and integrating a radar detection system.

Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were able to quickly share radar tracking information on Iranian missiles through the U.S. Central Command's integrated defense system since Israel was a new partner. Jordan opened its airspace to the United States, the United Kingdom, French, and even Israeli fighter jets and directly participated in interception operations. Despite severe public antipathy toward Israel due to the humanitarian disaster in the Gaza Strip, these Arab countries chose a strategic alliance with Israel in the face of the Iranian threat, setting aside political concerns about the potential damage to the status of Arab Muslim countries.

The Future of U.S.-Israel-Arab Security Cooperation

Despite not having established diplomatic relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia has decided to cooperate with Israel due to military and security needs amid threats from Iranian missiles and drones, playing an active role in the integrated U.S.-Israel-Arab air defense system. Although Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, made a conciliatory gesture in his late August state of the nation address by stating there were 'no barriers' to engaging with its 'enemy,' it is unlikely that Iran's hardline ruling coalition has given up its pursuit of hegemony. This pursuit includes exporting the anti-American and anti-Israeli Islamic Revolution, nuclear development, and support for its regional proxies. While Saudi Arabia normalized relations with Iran, the leading Shiite country, through Chinese mediation in 2023, it has never lowered its guard against attacks on Saudi Aramco oil facilities and oil tankers by Iran's proxy, the Yemeni Houthi rebels. With the threat of Iranian expansionism growing by the day and the

United States' declaration to reduce its role in the region, Saudi Arabia has been actively considering establishing diplomatic relations and a strategic alliance with Israel while demanding an ironclad defense commitment from the United States.

Upon his visit to Jordan shortly after Iran's attack on Israel, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated, "This attack highlights the acute and growing threat from Iran, but also the imperative that we work together on integrated [air] defense." At a meeting of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Working Groups in Saudi Arabia in May, attendees agreed that multilateral efforts, including intelligence cooperation for all participating states, are more urgent than ever. In June, Israeli Army Chief of Staff General, Herzi Halevi, reportedly met with Arab military officials to discuss regional security cooperation. The meeting, arranged by the U.S. Central Command, was held behind closed doors. The presence of Israeli and Arab military officials in one place was highly unusual and showed that military dialogue and cooperation between these countries are ongoing.

In mid-August, Iran's new moderate president, Masoud Pezeshkian, announced the formation of his cabinet; however, numerous conservative figures were appointed, leading many to believe that his appointments were made to please Supreme Leader Khamenei and the hardline-conservative ruling coalition. This assessment was further reinforced when former Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, a key figure in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and a symbol of the moderate-reformist faction, abruptly resigned just 11 days after being appointed as the new vice president. Iran's military adventurism and expansionist policies are likely to continue, maintaining the common threat perception between Sunni Arab countries and Israel. In particular, Arab countries will actively utilize the U.S. Central Command's integrated air defense system, which offers early warning and effective interception capabilities. Moreover, they will further enhance information sharing and build trust with Israel, a fellow participant in the system.

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Jang Ji-Hyang

Center for Regional Studies

Dr. JANG Ji-Hyang is a Principal Fellow and director of the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Dr. Jang served as a policy advisor on Middle East issues to South Korea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2012-2018). Previously, Dr. Jang taught comparative and Middle East politics at Seoul National University, Yonsei University, Ewha Woman's University, and the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include political economy of the Middle East and North Africa, political Islam, comparative democratization, terrorism, and state-building. Dr. Jang is the author of numerous books and articles, including *The Essential Guide to the Middle East* (Sigongsa 2023 in Korean), *The Arab Spring: Will It Lead to Democratic Transitions?* (with Clement M. Henry (eds.), Palgrave Macmillan 2013), "Disaggregated ISIS and the New Normal of Terrorism" (Asan Issue Brief 2016), "Islamic Fundamentalism" (International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences 2008) and a Korean translation of Fawaz Gerges' *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Asan Institute 2011). Dr. Jang received a B.A. in Turkish studies and M.A. in political science from the Hankuk University of Foreign Studies and her Ph.D. in political science from the University of Texas at Austin.



Lee Heesu

Center for Regional Studies

Ms. Lee Heesu is a research associate in the Center for Regional Studies at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies. Her research focuses on U.S. alliances in the Indo-Pacific, South Korean defense policy, and territorial disputes in East Asia. Previously, she was a legislative secretary on the National Defense Committee at the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea where she covered ROK-U.S. security cooperation, and maritime and aerial surveillance. She has also been an assistant director at MBC, a major South Korean broadcaster, reporting on social policy. Ms. Lee received her Master of International Relations from Seoul National University, a Bachelor at International Studies from Kyunghee University, and has studied abroad at Stanford University and Fudan University.