

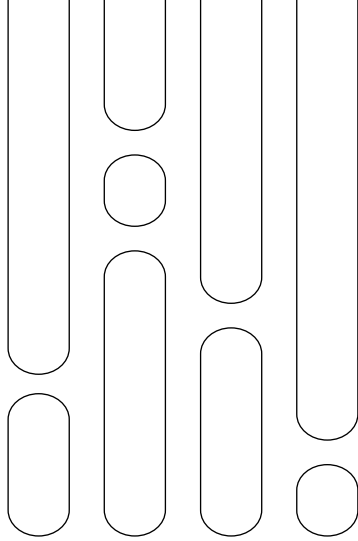
Report

THE UNITED STATES AND THE CHALLENGES FACING THE FORMATION OF AN INTEGRATED DEFENSE ALLIANCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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The Iranian strategy behind Operation Al-Aqsa Flood aimed to halt the burgeoning political and economic alliances led by the United States in the Middle East, safeguarding Iran's interests and those of its affiliated groups in the region. However, recent developments suggest a shift in the balance of power, with the United States seeking to capitalize on recent events to assert its influence and reshape the region according to its own interests. This includes blocking Tehran's gains following the agreement to restore relations with Saudi Arabia and thwarting China's growing influence, particularly after its successful mediation in brokering the agreement. Central to the United States' plans is the formation of a regional security alliance, purportedly led by itself and comprising NATO partners, Arab countries and Israel, aimed at countering Iranian threats, notably [the attacks](#) on Israel in April 2024. While this initiative represents a significant step, its potential formation is preceded by extensive consultations, talks, and joint efforts. However, describing this alliance as fully established would be inaccurate, as its specifics, including its structure, participants and objectives, are still subject to reservations among the involved parties. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states are generally supportive of any efforts that promote de-escalation to serve their interests; a region where stability, security and development prevail. Questions linger regarding the motives driving the United States to establish this alliance, the potential formula it may adopt in the wake of the Iranian attacks, and the challenges it may encounter in becoming an effective framework for regional security.

US Motives Behind the Formation of a Regional Security Alliance

Over the past years, the United States has exerted significant efforts to establish a regional security mechanism to address its waning influence, notably after its decision to withdraw from the region and refocus efforts on addressing risks in Southeast Asia. Discussions surrounding this initiative, initially dubbed the "Arab NATO," began during the Trump administration and have persisted into Biden's presidency. A key objective for Washington has been the integration of Israel into this alliance, following the normalization agreements with certain Gulf states. The alliance has seen [several developments](#) aimed at compensating for the United States' reduced presence, in-

cluding discussions on an integrated security defense system to counter Iran, as well as initiatives such as the Negev Forum meetings, the defense agreement with Bahrain, and the India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Additionally, the quadripartite alliance between Israel, Jordan, the UAE and India underscores Washington's efforts to mitigate the repercussions of its withdrawal and abandonment of former allies.

Despite numerous initiatives, the United States has encountered challenges in establishing an alternative security alliance capable of fulfilling regional security tasks and safeguarding its interests and influence. Nevertheless, recent developments underscore the necessity for the United States to reassess its withdrawal from the region and take a leadership role in forming a security alliance to maintain its regional influence and secure its interests in a sustainable manner. Several factors contribute to this imperative. Firstly, the Russia-Ukraine war has highlighted the enduring strategic importance of the Middle East in the international system. The absence of the United States in the region could pave the way for increased influence from China and Russia, posing a sensitive dilemma for it amidst ongoing international competition. Secondly, the Saudi-Iranian agreement, sponsored by China, signifies Saudi Arabia's desire to de-escalate tensions in the region and diversify its allies. This agreement may negatively impact the United States' regional approach, particularly in dealing with Iran's threats, while also providing China with an opportunity to expand its diplomatic and political influence, potentially undercutting US interests. Thirdly, the Israeli war on Gaza has demonstrated to the United States the existential challenges faced by its ally Israel. This conflict has posed significant hurdles to Israel's plans to expand the Abraham Accords, which had promised to reshape the region and potentially bolster support for President Joe Biden. Additionally, initiatives like IMEC pose a competitive threat to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), further complicating the regional balance of power.

Therefore, it can be argued that the United States' aspiration to form a regional security alliance has become increasingly critical, underscored by several key considerations, including the following:

■ **Undermining growing Sino-Russo clout in the Middle East:** The significance of the security alliance that the United States seeks to establish lies in its ability to curb the expanding influence of com-

peting powers, notably China and Russia, in the Middle East. This alliance aims to prevent these countries from filling the void left by the United States and from deepening their security and military ties with regional countries, which have expanded substantially in the absence of the US security umbrella.

■ **Recalibrating strategic balances in the Middle East:** The establishment of an integrated security alliance in the region is part of the United States' broader strategy to reconfigure regional dynamics, aiming to reshape strategic balances in favor of its regional and global influence. Concurrently, this alliance serves as one component of the United States' efforts to integrate Israel into a broader regional alliance comprising multiple countries.

■ **Providing a security protection umbrella that satisfies the region's countries and measures up to the United States' redeployment aspirations:** Following the region's concerns over the United States' behavior, particularly its perceived inadequate response to Iranian attacks on Saudi oil facilities, the United States witnessed a decline in its traditional influence with the Gulf states. This raised fears that US policies could lead to a broader loss of regional influence. In response, the United States reassessed its position and demonstrated a renewed commitment to providing an effective security mechanism. This move aimed to address the concerns of regional countries disturbed by the perceived US withdrawal and abandonment of security responsibilities toward its allies. Additionally, the United States sought to reformulate relations, create new frameworks for cooperation, and integrate regional allies into its broader international alliances. This shift also aimed to counteract the growing trend of regional independence.

■ **Putting an End to Tehran's Threats and Coordinated Efforts With Its Paramilitaries:** The integrated security alliance serves to counter Iran's expanding regional influence, particularly in light of the Saudi-Iranian agreement that created a gap in coordination between the United States and the Gulf states toward Iran. By forming this alliance, Washington gains an opportunity to reinstate pressure on Iran, compelling it to reconsider its policies. Moreover, the broad alliance offers an effective mechanism for confronting Iran's coordinated efforts across multiple arenas, including through proxy groups

in the region, under its strategy of the “[unification of the arenas campaign](#)” which aims to undermine the interests of the United States and its allies.

■ **Ensuring the flow of US economic interests from the East to West via the Middle East:** This alliance aims to ensure a secure environment essential for the realization of the United States’ vision of facilitating the flow of economic interests from East to West. Specifically, it secures the success of the IMEC project, positioned by the United States as a rival or alternative to China’s BRI, and as a novel approach to shaping economic relations. At the international level, the security alliance, coupled with economic cooperation, serves as an initiative to align regional countries with the United States and its Western allies, deterring their involvement in alternative initiatives proposed by China.

Iranian Attacks and the Opportunity to Form an Integrated Security Alliance

Prior to Iran’s recent attacks against Israel, there was no formal announcement of a regional security structure. While there may have been some coordination in certain defense areas, discussions conducted by the United States aimed to find an integrated formula to safeguard the region from threats and prevent it from descending into chaos. It was anticipated that such an announcement would eventually be made as part of broader arrangements, including the development of the Abraham Accords and IMEC, which traverses through the region, including Israel. Additionally, the United States has been addressing Saudi Arabia’s conditions within this framework, notably through a joint defense agreement aimed at elevating security relations between the two countries. Efforts have also been made to find a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The US response to the recent Iranian attacks, orchestrated in coordination with European allies and some regional countries including Israel, has prompted speculation that this operation served as a test of the security formula or alliance that the United States aims to establish in the region. Such speculation suggests that the new formula would be aligned with the broader New Middle East project framework.

Over the past seven months, the United States has grappled with a multifaceted conflict involving Iran and its militias, yet it has struggled to rally regional countries to its side in this confrontation. There have been reservations regarding the United States' stance on the ongoing conflict in Gaza, particularly its criticism of Israel's actions which some perceive as violating international norms. Notably, the Gulf states refrained from participating in [Operation Prosperity Guardian](#), led by Washington, to safeguard navigation in the Red Sea from Houthi threats. However, Iran's direct involvement altered the dynamics significantly. This intervention provided the United States with an opportunity to test its security approach in the region, prompting a shift in the positions of some countries. Iran's attacks were perceived as encroaching on sovereignty, exacerbating chaos and instability, and diverting attention from the Palestinian cause.

Following the successful leadership of a European-Middle Eastern coalition by the United States in [countering Iranian attacks](#) on Israel, with 99% of these attacks intercepted outside Israel's borders, there has been growing discussion about a significant shift toward the formation of an expanded and unprecedented security alliance in the Middle East. The efficacy demonstrated by this alliance in repelling attacks has propelled Israel to stand alongside other Arab nations in a publicly acknowledged defensive coalition for the first time. Such developments have sparked speculation about the potential formation of a new security alliance in the Middle East akin to NATO.

While the defensive alliance showcased its effectiveness, its official announcement is still pending, likely due to preceding pivotal developments and stipulations from the United States and Israel. However, it is important to distinguish proposed security frameworks from actuality which can be broadly classified according to three distinct formulas. The trajectory of Israel's conflict in Gaza will heavily influence the prominence of each. These formulas entail:

■ **A proposed integrated security defense structure:** During his February 2022 regional tour, General McKenzie, commander of the US Central Command, hinted at such a structure, driven more by Israeli aspirations than US ones. This framework is anticipated to materialize within broader political accords and resolutions, potentially involving several regional countries, notably the Gulf states and Isra-

el. Resembling NATO in Europe, it may emerge as ongoing US-Gulf efforts conclude, culminating in halting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, achieving a just settlement, and addressing the Gulf states' demands for enduring bilateral defense pacts. Such agreements aim to secure strategic, sustainable protection from US policy fluctuations, incorporating a new paradigm reflective of evolving Gulf dynamics in regional and global power balances.

■ **A multilevel security structure coordinated by the United States:** This structure will involve multiple parties with diverse interests and conflicting positions, yet intersecting interests with the United States on various fronts. The United States is poised to serve as a mediator among these parties to safeguard regional security and facilitate the flow of economic interests across borders, akin to its response to recent Iranian provocations. However, integrating Israel into security frameworks with the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, remains challenging. Israel's hardline policies, perceived arrogance, and treatment of Palestinians, alongside its rejection of regional initiatives, including the Arab peace plan, pose significant hurdles. Moreover, the Gulf's reluctance to join alliances, risking a regional cold war with Iran or engaging in confrontations on behalf of the United States and Israel, further complicates the alliance's formation.

■ **Bilateral security partnerships with the United States:** This marks a resurgence of US partnerships and strategic alliances with several regional countries, potentially evolving into deeper bilateral collaborations. There is a possibility of signing joint defense agreements, particularly with nations like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, signifying a return to the US protection framework. However, it will entail a revamped approach considering the escalating geopolitics in the region involving both international and regional powers. This approach aims to address the Gulf states' discontent with the unpredictable, two-faced nature of US policy, offering a new framework that accommodates their concerns.

Challenges and Limits of Effectiveness

The push for security alliances gains momentum amid ongoing regional chaos, hindering economic plans for regional countries, particularly given security threats facing critical shipping routes like

the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab al-Mandab Strait. With Iran's unchanged regional behavior, the United States seeks to leverage current circumstances for a significant shift in regional relations. A broad security alliance is envisioned, potentially incorporating Israel if relations with Saudi Arabia normalize, contingent on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, there is a drive to integrate the Middle East into the United States' geo-economic strategies globally. This involves connecting allies within a system that bolsters US hegemony while dissuading regional countries from pursuing alternative corridors, projects, or blocs. Such alternatives, like the BRI or BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, could diminish US global influence and potentially challenge the dominance of the dollar.

The formation of an integrated security alliance faces a significant obstacle: varying aspirations among its potential members. These differences can be outlined as follows:

■ **The divergent positions between the United States and the Gulf states on Chinese and Russian influence:** According to the United States' vision, the desired formula for an integrated security alliance serves to redefine its regional influence while curbing the rising influence of China and Russia. However, the countries in the region maintain strategic partnerships with Beijing and are fostering closer ties with Moscow. Their preference is to maintain a balanced relationship, avoiding alignment with any particular power bloc. Internationally, this reflects a strategy aimed at diversifying partnerships, safeguarding decision-making independence, and avoiding undue influence from external forces. These nations perceive the current global balance as an opportunity to assert their autonomy, resist external pressures, and leverage their position to strengthen their interests and gains.

■ **Complexities in the relationship with Iran:** The Saudi-Iranian agreement in March 2023 marked a significant milestone in ending longstanding disputes between Saudi Arabia, Iran, and other Arab nations. While it succeeded in easing tensions to some extent, its full objectives were hindered by Iran's ideological stance and economic sanctions. Nonetheless, the agreement remains a crucial element for regional security and stability, particularly for the involved parties. Despite the United States' emphasis on countering Iran as the prima-

ry focus of its regional security strategy, the perspective of regional countries diverges significantly from Washington's approach. Consequently, these nations are reluctant to engage in direct confrontation with Iran. This was evident when some Gulf states declined to join efforts to counter Iranian attacks on Israel and opted out of Operation Prosperity Guardian in the Red Sea.

■ **Regional countries prioritizing stability:** The countries in the region are striving to achieve security and stability to facilitate development and the realization of ambitious projects. However, the creation of security alliances may potentially lead the region back toward polarization and confrontation, diverting resources away from development projects and toward defense spending. This vision stands in stark contrast to the prevailing orientations of the region's decision-makers at the current stage. On the other hand, the interests of regional powers, including those of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, cannot be neatly bundled together, as these powers hold differing positions on numerous regional issues and conflicts, as well as in their relationships with competing powers such as Israel, Iran, and Turkey. It appears challenging for any single security formula to effectively reconcile the diverse interests of these parties. Moreover, the region has experimented with various formulas over the decades, with limited success, compounded by internal differences within some of these countries.

■ **Israel's problematic integration:** Any alliance that incorporates Israel into the region would likely be precarious, particularly considering Israel's perceived failure to adequately address the Palestinian issue despite regional and international pressure for a just and comprehensive resolution. In the event of a conflict similar to the ongoing Gaza war, the effectiveness of such a coalition would be severely compromised, potentially leaving member countries to contend with significant internal challenges. Furthermore, participating in a joint confrontation with the United States or Israel against Iran, or even standing aside, could make certain regional countries vulnerable to Iranian reprisals. There is no assurance that the response from the United States and its Western allies would mirror the reaction to Iran's April 13, 2024 attack on Israel. Consequently, establishing an integrated security framework with Israeli involvement presents numerous challenges with few tangible benefits.

Conclusion

While the United States aims to establish a security framework that reassures its Gulf allies, reasserts its regional influence and provides an alternative mechanism for supporting security and stability while deterring Iran, China and Russia, including hindering projects like the BRI from passing through the region, numerous challenges indicate that any coalition led by it will confront a vastly different reality from the past. The region has undergone irreversible changes, meaning that the United States' return will result in substantial costs and divergent regional dynamics, interests and trends that may not align with its priorities. Therefore, achieving a security arrangement that serves both the United States' interests and those of regional countries demands a significant shift in approach. This entails moving away from imposing predetermined solutions and instead adopting a realistic approach that considers the interests of regional nations and their populations. This includes fostering stable relations with Iran and navigating a dynamic and complex environment cautiously, as competitors stand ready to fill any void left by missteps.



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