

# Revisiting the Possibility of a Regional Military Alliance

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**Notwithstanding the signing of the Abraham Accords and the growing prominence of the cooperation between Israel and the Arab Gulf states, including on security matters, the road to the establishment of a joint fighting force with Israel's participation is still long and obstacle-ridden. Moreover, it is hard to see the possibility of any Gulf readiness to agree to such a military alliance without American involvement or leadership. Therefore, if Israel seeks to promote a regional military arrangement – even as a significant and influential participant, if it is not a full member – it must first engage the United States in the move, act with less prominence, and be careful to lay a stable foundation for any broad union, which in addition to many civilian components will include a military element. Presumably playing down the military aspect while stressing civilian cooperation and active American involvement could also increase the likelihood of forming a military alliance.**

In November 2018 we published "[Establishing an 'Arab NATO': Vision versus Reality](#)," examining the feasibility of a Middle Eastern NATO with Israel's participation. The article was written during the presidency of Donald Trump, who was pushing for the formation of such a force, and before the Abraham Accords were signed. The article reviewed the constraints and obstacles facing any regional military alliance, and assessed that in the prevailing circumstances, there was no serious likelihood of its formation. The main reasons were the possible absence of the United States from the alliance; the difficulty for the leaders of the relevant Arab states to join an alliance including Israel, particularly given their concerns about domestic criticism; and the lack of agreement between the Arab states themselves regarding the objectives and leadership of any joint force that might be established.

In the intervening years there have been a number of developments that invite a re-assessment of the possibility of a regional military alliance that would include Israel. The most significant of these is the signing of the Abraham Accords, and the publicly declared commitment of the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain to ties with Israel. In this context, the visit by

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett to Bahrain in February 2022 was particularly noteworthy. Apart from the honor and prestige showered on him, there were extensive reports about strengthening the security ties between Israel and Bahrain and the UAE. These join the criticism expressed by senior Bahraini figures of Iran and its proxies.

Another important development is the rising sense of threat among Gulf states. This sense was heightened on a number of occasions, most recently during the visit by President Herzog to the UAE in late January 2022, when the Houthis, Iranian proxies in Yemen, sent a barrage of missiles and suicide drones toward targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The launches were accompanied by threats and belligerent rhetoric. The sense of threat becomes even more acute while, in the face of Iranian brazenness through its proxies, the United States is distancing itself from the Middle East and losing its influence and credibility in the eyes of local leaders.

It appears that the Gulf states have already crossed the Rubicon in terms of demonstrating their deep ties with Israel. Signed economic and other agreements, widely covered official state visits, active air traffic, and the validation of normalization in its widest sense have been joined by publicity regarding extensive security links. Apart from political and intelligence coordination, there have been official reports of weapons deals and participation in joint exercises. Such prominence is impressive when compared to the nature of the ties with Egypt and Jordan. This important development can be attributed to three main causes: one is the growing sense of the threat from Iran and its proxies, particularly in view of the assessment that any new nuclear agreement will increase Iran's freedom to act aggressively. The second is the ongoing withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East and the sense among many of its regional allies that Washington can no longer be relied upon. The third reason relates to the conceptual and strategic realization among Gulf leaders of the possible contribution of ties with Israel to the advancement of their respective strategic and national interests. Once the Palestinian issue is no longer a strategic burden on the shoulders of these countries and their leaders,

their commitment to the Palestinians shrinks to lip service and their space for maneuver grows.

Another development that changed the balance and could be helpful to the establishment of a regional alliance is Israel's attachment to the United States Central Command (CENTCOM), which in itself facilitates greater operational cooperation, including with American sponsorship, between Israel and the Gulf states, Egypt, and Jordan. In addition, in January 2021 the Gulf states reached a reconciliation agreement with Qatar after a boycott that lasted over three years, thus enabling closer inter-Arab cooperation, at least on paper. For the United States, a regional Arab coalition would enable it to limit US troops on the ground while simultaneously taking steps to preserve vital American interests in the region.

Nevertheless, there are still obstacles to the initiative of a regional military alliance. Past experience shows that many attempts to establish inter-Arab military cooperation failed. In 2015 the Arab League decided to set up a combined military force of 40,000 troops. Egypt was supposed to provide the main fighting force, while Gulf states would finance the venture. In 2016, Saudi Arabia announced the establishment of a military alliance consisting of 34 Islamic countries, to combat sub-state organizations such as the Islamic State. None of these ambitious plans has so far been realized. Apart from the UAE, Saudi Arabia also found it hard to recruit long-term committed partners for the coalition it set up to fight in Yemen.

Another difficulty is the difference between how the various countries perceive the threat. For the Gulf states, Iran is the central threat. Important Muslim countries, such as Pakistan, the Maghreb countries, and Egypt, do not put the Iranian threat at the center, partly to avoid casting a shadow over their relations with Tehran. It is doubtful whether Arab countries will be prepared to commit to the kind of mutual aid that is the foundation of any significant military alliance, such as Article 5 of the NATO treaty.

Yet another difficulty is linked to inter-Arab disputes. Sometimes even a common enemy is not a sufficiently solid basis for a coalition. Unity among Arab states was always hard to achieve. Tribal, family, and interpersonal rivalries, territorial disputes, competing interests, and differing attitudes toward Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood have tainted relations. Each country develops its own specific responses to a given threat and the perception of its severity. This situation is expected to cause disputes, for example, over the leadership of any future force. In this context there will probably be disputes between Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which have the largest armies of all the potential partners, or even among the UAE, which has the most advanced and highly trained Arab army and shows ambitions to lead and have influence in the Arab world.

### **Might Israel be Included in the Alliance?**

Israel has an interest, certainly in the short to medium range, in the establishment of an inter-Arab alliance that sees Israel as a reliable, involved, and influential associate, and perhaps later even a full partner, that will focus on the struggle against Iran's involvement in Middle East countries and its growing influence in the region. If such an alliance becomes a reality, it will emphasize that the threat from Iran not only concerns its efforts to achieve nuclear weapons, but also its unending and violent struggle, including with the use of proxies, for regional hegemony.

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the Abraham Accords and the growing prominence given to cooperation, including on security matters, between Israel and the Gulf states, the road to the establishment of a joint fighting force that includes Israel is still long and obstacle-ridden. Although the Gulf states could derive many advantages from a military alliance with Israel, including a significant intelligence and military contribution, they could find themselves exposed to even more pressing Iranian threats. Any further rapprochement with Israel could be damaging for them. Moreover, it is hard to see the possibility of any Gulf readiness for such a military alliance without substantial American involvement or leadership, which means joining an American initiative as a coalition led by the United States.

For its part, Israel has no interest in restricting itself through obligations deriving from a military alliance in the classical sense, that is, committing to take part in conflicts that do not concern it. Furthermore, the establishment of a military alliance will affect the intimacy necessary for cooperation of this kind and likely lead to an Iranian response that Israel and the Gulf states wish to avoid.

Therefore, if Israel wishes to promote a regional military alliance – even without its full participation, but with its meaningful and influential cooperation – it must first enlist the United States, act with less prominence, and be careful to lay a stable foundation for any broad union that apart from many civilian components will also include a military element. The first moves in this context should focus on establishing cooperation below the radar, for example by frustrating the smuggling of Iranian weapons or creating an integrated aerial picture for handling common threats, such as the construction and operation of Iranian ground-to-ground missile and drone capabilities, whether by Iran itself or by its proxies.

Alongside these efforts, participation in regional maneuvers should be continued, technological collaborations promoted, and above all efforts made to supplement the military components with civilian components – cooperation on economic, infrastructure, culture, and ecological matters. Since many of these components are already on the agenda of relations between the countries and a means for establishing the infrastructure for regional cooperation, it will be easier for the Gulf leadership to establish a civilian regional alliance that can develop into military cooperation. Playing down the military aspect while stressing civilian cooperation and active American involvement would presumably increase the likelihood of the formation of a military alliance between Israel and Arab countries.

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