

Tehran Heightens the Pressure as it Strives to Thwart a Regional Air Defense System

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For many weeks, Tehran has exerted pressure on the Gulf states, accompanied by threats, to prevent them from cooperating with Israel on air defense. President Biden's visit to the region and the extensive public discussion on the issue are fundamentally incompatible with Iran's effort to improve its relations with the Gulf states, which also prefer to ease the tension between them and Tehran – even though Iranian policy, carried out mainly by proxies, threatens their interests. For Israel, it is preferable to continue conducting its sensitive security ties with the Gulf states below the radar, thereby avoiding embarrassment to these states and the need on their part to deny their cooperation with Israel. Indeed, many difficulties – both political and technological – stand in the way of any such cooperation.

The talk about organizing regional defense against missiles and drones launched by Iran and its proxies has gained momentum in recent weeks, mainly because of President Biden's visit to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The issue, which has been discussed for many months in secret meetings, is now aired in public with increasing frequency. In this context, a singular meeting was reported to have taken place in Egypt last March between chiefs of staff from Arab countries (among them Saudi Arabia) and Israel. Before Biden's visit, Admiral (ret.) John Kirby, US National Security Council Coordinator for Strategic Communications, confirmed that the US administration was conducting a dialogue with parties in the region about closer cooperation on air defense against threats from Iran. Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz also said that he had held several talks with the Pentagon and the administration aimed at strengthening the cooperation between Israel and countries in the region, and stated that these plans were already being implemented. As an example, Gantz mentioned an event from early this year – the interception by US forces above Iraqi territory of two Iranian drones launched at Israel.

The question of defense against air attacks from Iran and its importance was highlighted by the dozens of missile and drone attacks launched by

Iran and its proxies against critical strategic military and infrastructure targets in the region in recent years. The most prominent of these was in September 2019 against facilities of the Aramco oil company in Saudi Arabia. The Houthis in Yemen conducted another drone attack on an oil facility in Saudi Arabia this year, together with an attack from Yemen against the airport in Abu Dhabi and dozens of attacks in Iraq on targets held by the United States-led coalition.

In face of the developments and the discourse, the threats from both military agencies and officials close to Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have mounted. Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's political advisor who was Iran's Minister of Foreign Affairs for many years, asserted explicitly: "The closer the Gulf states move toward Israel, the further they move away from Iran." An Iranian military spokesman warned the United States and Israel, insisting they were aware of the price of using the word "force" against Iran. Commenting on Biden's visit, an Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman said that as long as Washington's primary objective was strengthening the security and supremacy of the "fake state" called Israel, the peoples and states of the region would not attain stability and peace.

The issues of maritime arms smuggling and freedom of navigation have also been on the agenda during the past year. Washington recently announced the creation of Combined Task Force 153, which will focus on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, and the northern Arabian Sea. A joint declaration by the United States and Saudi Arabia at the end of Biden's visit also stated that cooperation between the Saudi fleet and Task Force 153 would focus on a regional staff cooperation framework located in the headquarters of the US Fifth Fleet in Bahrain.

In this context, the commander of the Revolutionary Guards navy warned the Gulf states not to forge relations with Israel and threatened that the security of the entire region would be damaged if they did so. At the same time, the Iranian military announced in recent days the establishment of a new drone unit in the Indian Ocean. No details were disclosed about the number of ships in this new force, except that each ship would have 50 drones, some for intelligence gathering and others for attack.

Some of the Iranian responses emphasize that reinforcing Israel's military supremacy is also likely to be directed against Arab and Islamic groups other than Iran. Tehran is thereby trying to embarrass regimes in the region by appealing to their respective publics and taking advantage of the fact that many do not necessarily share their governments' views on rapprochement with Israel.

Israel's joining the US Central Command (CENTCOM) in September 2021 constituted an important turning point in connecting Israel to the region through the US. Since then, several large scale naval exercises have been held with Israeli participation, and Defense Minister Gantz met with the US Fifth Fleet commander during his visit to Bahrain. These important steps pave the way for the continuation of regional cooperation. CENTCOM's main responsibility, however, is defense of its soldiers and combating terrorism. These defense elements of CENTCOM are already at work, and excessive discussion of cooperation with Israel is liable to jeopardize the force's freedom of action.

Furthermore, the capability and desire of all the involved parties to establish a common defense system connecting interceptors to a transfer of intelligence information from radar and satellites in real time is questionable, at least at this stage. This challenge is compounded by difference in systems: Israel operates domestically-produced interceptor systems – Iron Dome, David's Sling, and others – while other countries in the region operate an assortment of American systems, as well as Russian and Chinese systems. Furthermore, the Gulf states are under an immediate concrete Iranian threat: their oil infrastructure is exposed to an Iranian threat and their shipping lanes are controlled by Iran, and it is clear they will not take the risk of publicly cooperating with Israel.

Indeed, following the excessive public discussion of region-wide air defense involving Israel, the United States, and other countries in the region, the mood was sobered during Biden's visit to the Gulf. Anwar Gargash, political advisor to the President of the United Arab Emirates, announced that his country did not support the creation of a regional alliance against any country in the region, and of course not against Iran; the UAE is currently building bridges with Tehran and dispatching an ambassador there. The Saudi Foreign Minister also stated that no option for military or technical

cooperation with Israel had been presented during the summit with President Biden.

These developments and statements are a typical expression of the regional complexity vis-à-vis Iran. On the one hand, the Gulf states share a perception of a threat from Iran and its proxies. The Iranian willingness to use missiles and drones has proven to be an effective deterrent, and the warnings issued by senior Iranian officials to the Gulf states were explicit and blunt. On the other hand, even when the Gulf states were attacked, they refrained from responding in kind, confining themselves to mere protests, which mainly reflected anger and disappointment that Washington did not respond. Iran's decision to prioritize improved relations with its neighbors therefore fell on fertile ground. A series of high-level meetings were held by Iran and the UAE, and Iran held five rounds of talks with Saudi Arabia. It is clear to all parties that their clashing interests are not about to change, but both Iran and the Gulf states prefer reaching understandings to the continuation and escalation of the clashes between them.

The principal message that Iran delivered to its neighbors in the Gulf is sharp and clear, and includes an explicit threat to respond if progress in military cooperation with Israel takes place. Iran's direct and indirect military pressure relies above all on its array of cruise and ballistic missiles that it has amassed in recent decades, and on its extensive array of drones. The plans that emerged of joint regional measures for countering Iran's main advantage over its neighbors and against the American deployment in the region has led Iran to respond with aggressive threats. The possibility of Tehran taking kinetic steps to show the seriousness of its intentions if it learns or believes that covert measures are underway should therefore be taken into consideration.

In assessing President Biden's visits to the region, several questions arise in this context. Has Israel's deterrence against Iran been strengthened or weakened? Has the abundance of talk about a regional system that was never likely to materialize in large scale, and whose prospects are now receding, proved a help or a hinderance in its promotion? Perhaps it is best to revert to past below-the-radar methods of operation that focus on

furthering security interests shared by Israel and other countries in the region.

And on another but no less important level: the discourse in Israel, whereby the Palestinian issue is portrayed as no longer important to countries in the region and therefore no longer delays normalization between Israel and Arab countries, reinforces the "treason narrative" disseminated by the Palestinian Authority as a criticism of the Abraham Accords countries. This narrative is gaining traction among the public in the region, and certainly does not contribute to an atmosphere conducive to bringing relations with Israel to the surface.

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Judith Rosen