

The Middle East NATO: From Fiction to Fact

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Brief Analysis

In light of increased regional tensions, the idea of a Middle East NATO is becoming more and more realistic, this time with the possibility of Israeli-Arab cooperation.

Although U.S. policies under President Joe Biden have mostly prioritized issues outside of the Middle East—namely, Russia’s actions in Ukraine, relations with China, and other pressing matters—the President’s first visit to the Middle East on July 13, 2022 proved that the rapidly-changing and still-unstable region must continue to be an important facet of U.S. foreign strategy.

From the outset, Biden [maintained \(https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/\)](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/09/joe-biden-saudi-arabia-israel-visit/) that the main objective of his trip was to convince Saudi Arabia and its neighbors of the need to increase global oil supplies in response to the latest energy crisis triggered by the war in Ukraine. Although he faced criticism, he insisted that the trip would respect “fundamental American values.”

What Biden did not make mention of in the justification for his trip was the [secret meeting \(https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802\)](https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-held-secret-meeting-with-israeli-arab-military-chiefs-to-counter-iran-air-threat-11656235802) held in Sharm El Sheikh in March between U.S. military officials and their Israeli, Jordanian, Egyptian, and Gulf counterparts for the purpose of coordinating against Iran’s growing missile capabilities and drone program. Following up on this meeting, could Biden’s visit to the Middle East have included a hidden, alliance-focused agenda ? Is such an anti-Iran alliance even possible?

The Evolution of an “Arab NATO”

In order to answer these questions, it's important to note that the Biden administration’s interest in a regional military alliance is not the first of its kind. More than two years ago, then-U.S. President Donald Trump [announced \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-)

idUSKBN1KH2IK) that a "Middle East Strategic Alliance" would be established, quickly dubbed an "Arab NATO" by observers. Under Washington's leadership, the alliance was intended to protect the region from the dual threat of Iranian-Shiite expansionism and Sunni-based jihadism. In truth, however, the proposal went nowhere, much like other proposals before it.

Going all the way back to the 1955 "**Baghdad Pact (<https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/lw/98683.htm>)**"—a U.S.-led treaty organization that quickly lost all structure and substance—military-focused collaborations throughout recent history have typically struggled to transform into true alliances in the Middle East. In 2011, for example, the aftermath of the Arab Spring reignited the idea of a tighter alliance in the region facilitated by the United States and its pre-existing Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies. Although several GCC monarchies proposed the creation of a "Gulf Shield" organization to do just that, others raised objections to the proposal and a stronger alliance did not come to fruition. In 2015, the rise of the Islamic State, in addition to the Yemeni Civil War, again prompted Saudi Arabia to propose an Arab Sunni coalition that included some 40 states. Although the coalition did eventually form, its intervention in Yemen against the Iran-backed Houthi rebels quickly revealed its own political, military, and operational limits.

In general, the divergent ambitions of regional leaders, the contradictions between Arab regimes, and the overall ambivalence of American foreign policy in the Middle East have caused the numerous alliance initiatives to fail. Nevertheless, with anxiety about Iranian aggression on the rise and the influence of actors such as Russia and China increasingly noticeable in the region, intense diplomatic battles have unfolded in recent months that could lead to major tectonic shifts in the political and military landscape—shifts that could make previously-impossible regional alliances very much possible.

Growing Tensions Lead to Growing Desperation

On several fronts, the increased Iranian threat has driven many players closer to the negotiation table. In recent years, Saudi Arabia has been pushing for more U.S. and regional support in the fight against Iran-allied Houthi militias in Yemen, which have fired more than 200 ballistic missiles and dozens of suicide drones against the Kingdom before the ceasefire came into effect in April 2022. In 2019, Saudi oil fields were even subjected to attacks by drones and cruise missiles largely **believed (<https://www.news.com.au/technology/innovation/military/fresh-doubts-about-what-caused-attack-on-saudi-arabia-oil-plant/news-story/cfe40dbcbaf19e4315990eff348ac8e4>)** to come from Iran's direction. Of course, such attacks have only added fuel to the anti-Iran fire.

In North Africa, there is **evidence (<https://www.express.co.uk/news/world/965883/world-war-3-iran-funds-anti-western-rebel-group-polisario-front-north-africa>)** that Iran is both arming and training the Polisario Front in Algeria in an attempt to destabilize Morocco following the country's normalization with Israel. Iran's involvement in this key issue not only undermines the Sunni Maghreb as a whole, but further exacerbates anti-Iranian sentiment within Morocco, drawing the country closer to its regional allies.

On the part of the United States, slow-moving nuclear deal talks with Iran, in addition to Tehran's acceleration of large-scale uranium enrichment, have similarly put pressure on Washington to come up with alternative policies that would reduce the concerns of its Middle East allies and ensure U.S. military support in the region.

Beyond Iran, the United States is also wary of the impact that the war in Ukraine may have on American interests in the Middle East. Moscow's efforts to convince Gulf Arab states to keep oil prices high and not join Western sanctions against it have created a new political reality that can only stoke the tensions between the regional power players. Uncertain of Russia's next move and already contending with the increased influence of China in the region through the Belt and Road Initiative, the United States needs true allies in the Middle East now more than ever.

Indeed, for the last decade China has multiplied financial and political investments in the Maghreb with the aim of

outdoing European and U.S. influences in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. This move has made Western nations nervous, but they have yet to do anything substantial to curb China's imperialism in the region—a reality they hope to change.

Another important factor in this changing landscape is the political and economic dynamics between Israel and its regional neighbors. Although previously considered a pariah in the Arab world, Israel has gradually developed key relationships in recent years that have shifted the rhetoric in the Middle East. Beginning in 2020, Israel has signed normalization agreements—collectively called the Abraham Accords—with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, Oman, and Sudan, adding to the country's previous normalization successes with Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994. After steadily ramping up their communications with Israel in the past year, Turkey similarly agreed to restore full diplomatic relations with Israel this August.

In Morocco, Israel is getting an important foothold through an alliance that covers several strategic areas. While Israel shores up the Moroccan military with state-of-art hardware, Morocco helps Israel make their economic and political foray into Africa, getting Israel an observer status in the African Union. Moreover, it's important to mention the dynamics between Israel and North African countries within NATO's "[Mediterranean Dialogue \(https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52927.htm\)](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52927.htm)" as evidence of building cooperation, even if it were not a strong undertaking. Undoubtedly, Israel has long been seen as a bulwark against Iranian hegemony in the MENA region.

Of course, the prospect of a regional military alliance that includes both Israel and Arab countries is far from guaranteed. Despite the peace treaties and normalized diplomatic relations, no formal military cooperation or joint defense program has been established. Moreover, the icy relationship between Saudi Arabia and Israel remains a major regional obstacle on the path toward an alliance. Nevertheless, the fact that Israel and its Arab neighbors are even considering such a cooperation suggests that a Middle East NATO—not just an "Arab NATO"—could be on the horizon.

The Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD)

Until recently, the only cause that militarily united most Middle Eastern countries was anti-Israeli sentiment. Now, it seems that the threat posed by Iran, in addition to the threat of outside players, may outweigh [\(https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg781af.13#metadata_info_tab_contents\)](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg781af.13#metadata_info_tab_contents) the hatred these nations have felt toward Israel in the past. Iran is the world's leading sponsor of radical Islamic terrorism, it exports thousands of drones and missiles to its proxies in the region, and the country is close to obtaining nuclear weapons—a threat that effects every Middle Eastern nation. With this in mind, it's no wonder that many in the Middle East are eager to create an air defense alliance.

In June, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz announced [\(https://breakingdefense.com/2022/06/israel-announces-regional-air-defense-network-with-middle-east-partners-us/\)](https://breakingdefense.com/2022/06/israel-announces-regional-air-defense-network-with-middle-east-partners-us/) that such an alliance may already be in effect. Gantz stated that Israel had joined what he called the Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD), a U.S.-led regional air defense network that includes some Arab countries. Although Gantz did not name the Arab countries, many observers speculate that MEAD would likely include the UAE, Bahrain, Qatar, Egypt, and/or Jordan, especially following the secret military meeting in March.

Although the existence of MEAD is not yet confirmed, [\(https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/06/29/wait-is-there-really-a-new-u-s-led-air-defense-alliance-in-the-middle-east/\)](https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/06/29/wait-is-there-really-a-new-u-s-led-air-defense-alliance-in-the-middle-east/) there is already evidence of support for the alliance from regional entities. After his trip to the United Arab Emirates on June 23, King Abdullah of Jordan said in an interview [\(https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/jordans-king-says-he-would-support-a-middle-east-version-of-nato.html\)](https://www.cnbc.com/2022/06/24/jordans-king-says-he-would-support-a-middle-east-version-of-nato.html) with the U.S. channel *CNBC* that his country would participate in a NATO-like military alliance

between allied countries in the Middle East. Claiming that he would be "one of the first to support the launch of a NATO in the Middle East," he stressed the need for such an alliance to have a "very clear mission" to avoid "confusion."

While the "Arab NATO" moment may have already passed, continued regional threats and changing dynamics suggest that the "Middle East NATO" moment is now. Rather than uniting against Israel, Arab countries appear to be uniting with Israel. The question now is not whether a Middle East NATO is possible, but whether there is a threat big enough to cause it? Considering the aggression of Iran and its proxies, the answer has to be yes. The stability of the entire MENA region is at stake, now more than ever. ❖

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