

Why the Middle East Needs a New Collective Defense Arrangement After the Iran War

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The Iran War may eventually end through a ceasefire, an interim agreement, or a broader diplomatic settlement. Regardless of how the fighting stops, one thing has become impossible to ignore. The Middle East's existing security architecture has failed. For decades, the region operated under a series of overlapping assumptions. Gulf states [relied heavily](#) on American military protection. Israel maintained its own formidable deterrent capabilities. Arab governments pursued bilateral relationships with Washington while attempting to manage tensions with Tehran through diplomacy, economic engagement, or strategic hedging. The war exposed the limitations of that model.

Despite decades of military investment, Gulf states found themselves [vulnerable to missile and drone attacks](#). Critical energy infrastructure, shipping routes, and economic hubs became targets. Even where air and missile defenses performed effectively, the conflict demonstrated that no country can indefinitely defend itself against sustained missile salvos without deeper regional cooperation.

The lesson from the war is not simply that Iran remains a challenge. The deeper lesson is that the region lacks [a credible collective defense structure](#) capable of deterring aggression before it escalates into major conflict. If the objective is to prevent future missile attacks, deter nuclear coercion, reassure regional partners, and avoid a destabilizing nuclear arms race, then the Middle East requires a new collective defense arrangement, not a direct replica of NATO, but instead an alliance inspired by some of its most successful features.

The Collapse of the Old Model

For many years, the Gulf security order rested on a simple bargain. The United States would provide military protection and extended deterrence while regional states focused on economic development and internal stability. The Iran War exposed the weaknesses of that approach. Even with a significant American military presence, missile and drone attacks reached the Gulf territory. Air defense systems intercepted many threats, but the sheer volume of attacks highlighted the vulnerability of individual states acting largely on their own. At the same time, regional governments discovered that they often had limited influence over strategic decisions that could profoundly affect their security. They faced the consequences of escalation without necessarily controlling it. The result is a growing recognition that future security arrangements cannot return to the status quo.

Why Collective Security Is No Longer Enough

For decades, [regional cooperation](#) has largely focused on collective security rather than collective defense. Collective security emphasizes diplomacy, dialogue, intelligence sharing, and crisis management. It helps states coordinate responses to threats but does not necessarily guarantee military support if a member is attacked. The Iran War demonstrated the limitations of that model. Missile attacks, drone strikes, maritime threats, and the possibility of nuclear coercion [require more than consultation mechanisms](#). It requires credible defense that deters.

Deterrence depends on an adversary believing that aggression against one state will trigger a broader regional response from others that is not worth the aggressive action. This is the essence of collective defense. The challenge facing the Middle East is therefore not simply to cooperate more effectively. It is how to [build a framework capable of convincing potential adversaries](#) that aggression against one participant risks confrontation with all.

What a New Collective Defense Framework Would Look Like

Rather than each country operating independently, a common air and missile defense network would provide a shared operational framework and faster response times. This is arguably the easiest and most practical first step because many of the required systems already exist.

A successful post-war defense architecture would likely rest on five pillars. Each pillar supports the others in creating a collection of capabilities that can be brought to bear on an aggressor.

Pillar 1, Integrated Missile Defense: The Iran war demonstrates that missile defense is no longer a national challenge; it is a regional one. A future framework should [connect the radar, sensor, and interceptor networks](#) of, Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Jordan, and the United States.

Pillar 2, Integrated Intelligence: No missile defense system can function effectively without intelligence. A [regional integrated intelligence network](#) would combine missile warning systems, satellite surveillance, maritime monitoring, counter-terrorism intelligence, and track proxy groups. Israel's intelligence capabilities would be particularly valuable, while Gulf states could contribute geographic reach, local networks, and regional expertise.

Pillar 3, Conventional Military Integration: Deterrence works best when adversaries believe aggression will trigger an unacceptable coordinated response. Regional militaries should develop joint planning mechanisms, common operating procedures, maritime security coordination, air force interoperability, and shared exercises. The goal would not be to create a supranational military force but rather to ensure that any attack on one member triggers [a coordinated defensive response](#).

Pillar 4, A Credible Nuclear Umbrella: This concept is likely to be the most controversial component, yet it may also be the most important. Extended deterrence has historically been one of the most successful tools available for limiting nuclear proliferation among allies while maintaining strategic stability. However, the greatest long-term danger following the Iran War may not be Iran itself. It may be the possibility that multiple regional powers conclude they require their own nuclear weapons. If Saudi Arabia were to pursue an independent nuclear arsenal, others could eventually follow. The result could be a highly unstable multipolar nuclear Middle East.

A more sustainable alternative would be a regional extended-deterrence framework similar in principle to NATO's nuclear umbrella. Under such an arrangement, American nuclear weapons would [remain under exclusive United States control](#) but would be integrated into a broader deterrence architecture protecting key regional partners. Potential participants could include Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, and Jordan. The purpose would

not be to spread nuclear weapons across the Middle East. Instead, it would be to prevent their spread.

Pillar 5, Strategic Consultation: Military capability alone is insufficient to deter. One of NATO's greatest strengths is not its military hardware but its [institutionalized political consultation](#). This model reveals that regional leaders require standing mechanisms to discuss emerging threats, nuclear developments, crisis management, escalation risks, and collective responses. Security cannot be improvised during a crisis. It must be built before one occurs.

Israel's Role in Defense

A future collective defense framework will be impossible without Israel.

That reality may remain politically uncomfortable in parts of the region, but the war [reinforced Israel's position](#) as one of the Middle East's most capable military and intelligence powers. Israel could serve many roles to include strategic intelligence partner, A missile-defense leader, advanced defense technology provider, and a contributor to regional deterrence. Rather than replacing American leadership, Israel would complement it.

Not a Middle Eastern NATO

Critics will inevitably describe this collective defense as a Middle Eastern NATO. That comparison is understandable, but incomplete. NATO emerged as a formal treaty alliance among largely like-minded democratic states facing a common Soviet threat. The Middle East presents a far more complex environment. Any future defense arrangement would likely involve monarchies, democracies, and other political systems with differing strategic priorities. Participation would almost certainly occur at distinct levels, with some states becoming core members while others cooperate selectively. Turkey and Pakistan, for example, could contribute through intelligence cooperation, military exercises, defense-industrial partnerships, and strategic dialogue without necessarily becoming full members.

Instead of NATO, a collective defense would be more like the [Triple Alliance](#), but more complex. These arrangements would provide a flexible and regionally tailored framework with multiple state interests. Yet it would share one crucial characteristic with NATO. It would be a collective defense. Its central message would be simple. Aggression against one participant risks a coordinated response from all. That principle, backed by integrated conventional and nuclear deterrence, would form the foundation of regional stability.

Not a Perfect Solution, But the Alternative Is Worse

Critics will argue that such a framework risks provoking Iran. This may do just this. However, the alternative may be far more dangerous. Without a credible collective defense architecture, the region could otherwise face, persistent missile wars, Iranian coercion, expansion of nuclear weapons programs, strategic fragmentation, and increased great-power competition involving the United States, China, and Russia.

The purpose of a collective defense arrangement is not to prepare for another war. It is to make another war less likely. The Iran War exposed the weaknesses of the Middle East's existing security order. The challenge now is whether regional leaders can transform that painful lesson into a durable defense framework that deters aggression, reassures partners, prevents proliferation, and creates the foundations for a more stable peace.

History shows that major wars often reshape regional security systems. The question facing Middle Eastern leaders today is whether they will build a new order after this conflict or wait for the next crisis to force one upon them.

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