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Progressive Foreign Policy Debrief

Intel for Advocacy

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SL: **Don't be sold on MENA missile defense**

The Takeaway:

- A U.S.-coordinated missile defense system or “architecture” in the Middle East is a boondoggle in the making for the administration and Congress. The administration is boldly announcing, and Congress is moving to fund, a system with numerous technical and political drawbacks that is, at best, in its R&D phase.
- Missile defense is inherently offensive. States don't like being deterred, and they view adversaries' missile defense systems as an invitation to innovate and expand their own arsenals. This will feed an escalation spiral in the Middle East, as it does elsewhere.
- Resorting to missile defense is a sign that a concerted, de-escalatory diplomatic initiative is well overdue. The best path to cool tensions in the Middle East is not more arms, but more diplomacy.

76 Interceptors Led the Big Parade: Selling Ourselves on Missile Defense in the Middle East

Though President Biden's fistbump with Mohammed bin Salman hasn't [yielded much oil](#) or [protected](#) Saudi human rights defenders, the administration is trying to tout a third, equally illusory [outcome](#) from his midsummer visit to Saudi Arabia: advancing a “more integrated and regionally-networked air and missile defense architecture” to counter missile and drone threats posed by Iran's government and its regional proxies. Congress has responded [enthusiastically](#) to the notion of a MENA missile defense “architecture,” simultaneously mandating a U.S. strategy for its establishment while pushing funds for its development.

MENA missile defense can be sold as smoothly as a [marching band](#) to an unsuspecting midwestern town. Supposedly, it further strengthens ties between Israel and the Gulf monarchies and puts Iran's government on the back foot. Get out of earshot from the music man, and you may realize that the Biden administration and Congress are, arm-in-arm, buying a boondoggle: an expensive and provocative military commitment to address real problems that only painstaking diplomacy can solve. Fortunately, it's not too late to void the purchase.

Light on specifics

As the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation's Sam Hickey has [underscored](#), every administration since the 1990s has tried to develop a missile defense system or “architecture” in the MENA region, only to be held back by regional governments' fundamental mistrust of one

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another. A confluence of developments – including a diplomatic thaw between Israel and the Gulf monarchies, the increasingly sophisticated remote strike capabilities of Iran-supported militias, and the consistent hand wringing of the Gulf monarchies that the U.S. is “[abandoning](#)” them – is putting a little extra verve in the Biden administration’s attempt.

Despite making that post-Saudi trip announcement, the administration has neglected to share any sense of what this missile defense system, or “architecture,” would entail, as has U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). CENTCOM has [convened](#) senior military officials from interested partner governments to “explore” coordinating against missile and drone threats posed by Iran. It is “[developing plans](#)” to open a facility in Saudi Arabia that would “combat the growing threat from unmanned drones [and] develop and test integrated air and missile defense capabilities” — the U.S. “would likely fund about 20% of the price tag and provide about 20% of the personnel, while allies would cover the rest.” More significantly, the Israeli government has already [announced](#) its participation in “a new US-led joint air defense network, known as the Middle East Air Defense Alliance (MEAD),” but with little public corroboration from its purported regional missile defense partners.

Beyond exploratory meetings and a new research facility, the shape of this “architecture” begins to break down. Iran’s government has a ballistic missile arsenal that has, by CENTCOM’s own admission, achieved regional “[overmatch](#).” The Saudi and UAE militaries, relying heavily on U.S.-supplied Patriot and THAAD missiles for (sometimes [porous](#)) spot defense against militia attacks, could increase the interoperability of these platforms while buying more of them. That may help mitigate strikes from militias in Iraq and Yemen; it’s much harder to imagine that “detering” an all-out attack from Iran, horrible as it is to contemplate.

Meanwhile, the United States sinks billions into its own [ground-based midcourse defense \(GMD\) system](#) aimed at stopping a missile barrage from other nuclear powers. Its testing track record, despite years of development and [\\$53 billion](#), is [discouraging](#). When the United States cannot cobble together a reliable system for its own defense, it stretches imagination to think that the region’s governments, which have misused U.S.-made weapons for [human rights abuses](#) and [handed](#) them over to their own proxies, will manage this hardware any more effectively.

Congress should be digging into this as a key oversight challenge, and finding ways to slow its development until someone in the administration can fully articulate what a system would look like. Instead, a bipartisan Senate cohort introduced the [DEFEND Act of 2022](#) in June, asking the Department of Defense (DOD) for a strategy on *how it will*, not *whether it should*, move ahead with establishing a missile defense system. Versions of this bill have been folded into the House and Senate NDAA texts. Their questions about a system’s potential pitfalls and costs are nearly non-existent. In the Senate, appropriators are already telling the State Department that it [should flex](#) Foreign Military Financing dollars to develop this system. The only serious attempt at basic oversight has come from Representative Ro Khanna, who successfully led a [House NDAA](#)

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[amendment](#) asking straightforward, needed questions: how much would this cost? Can U.S. partners operate its components independently? And how does this impact U.S. diplomatic goals in the region?

Heavy on consequences

This last question from Rep. Khanna is key. The efficacy and cost concerns surrounding any MENA missile defense system [pale in comparison](#) to its possible diplomatic consequences, including derailing a set of delicate dialogues intended to prevent a larger conflagration with Iran's government.

In reality, missile defense is dangerous, because it raises a government's confidence in fighting a war of choice and encourages arms races. Countries that can't compete with the United States' massive military spending but fear attack from the U.S. or its allies have invested in comparatively low-cost methods for deterring attack. Among the most popular of those methods are missiles, which governments like Iran's see as being [essential deterrents](#) against aggression by the U.S. and regional rivals employing U.S.-made weapons. Missile defense seeks to defang that deterrent, which begins a vicious cycle. When missile defenses are installed, they make defended countries more likely to attack, since they have less fear of a retaliatory missile volley. That potential aggression makes their foes more worried, which leads them to invest in missile innovations to beat the missile defense systems. New missile developments lead, in turn, to new missile defense systems, and the cycle begins anew. In the end, even if these countries manage to avoid a war, the only winners are the weapons companies and their pitch men.

This is a shame, because a diplomatic breakthrough between Iran and its neighbors is desperately needed. The Iran nuclear deal, despite months of wrangling, may not materialize — and if it doesn't, a nuclear arms race in the region could commence that no U.S.-supported missile defense system could contain. And while enmity between the Israeli and Iranian governments runs deep, the Gulf monarchies are opening lines of dialogue and restoring ambassador-level contacts with Iran. Taken together, a [restored](#) Iran nuclear deal, [Yemen's truce](#), Saudi-Iran bilateral [discussions](#) via Baghdad, and the return of [Kuwaiti](#) and [Emirati](#) ambassadors to Tehran are real steps away from the precipice of all-out war. But moves towards an ill-conceived missile defense system are already pushing hawks to the kind of [bluster](#) that spoils good faith negotiations.

Conclusion: "Ya Got Trouble"

U.S. policymakers are again trying to stage a missile-defense [fiction](#) they've sold themselves for decades: that it's an unalloyed good that will make the world safer. Missile defense sounds like something dreamed up by the military-industrial complex's [Harold Hill](#). It's a weapon, very technologically advanced and expensive, and it doesn't hurt anyone, it just defends against dangerous missiles — and for the right money, we'll make it happen for you. This narrative is as enticing in the Middle East as it is on the [west coast](#), and just as misleading.

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The problem that MENA missile defense seeks to contain can be addressed by a process that, while difficult and unprofitable for weapons manufacturers, is much cheaper and safer: concerted, consistent diplomatic engagement over resolvable tensions. Negotiate to put Iran's nuclear program back in a box. Negotiate to wind down Yemen's conflict. Meet in third-party countries to figure out how to navigate the region's lucrative and sensitive waterways. It is in the strategic interest of the United States to encourage regional detente. Our problem moving forward is that it is not in the strategic interest of the weapons manufacturers.

BURIED LEDES

With more than 1,300 people dead from flooding in Pakistan, and one-third of the country underwater, the need for [climate reparations](#) is paramount. We too believe in fighting for "the dignity of life over corporate greed."

Speaking of climate, 6 months into the Russia-Ukraine war and the energy crisis that erupted from it, there's a lot to be learned from how sanctions have impacted the movement for global decarbonization. **Spoiler alert: If we're to avoid climate disaster, our economic policy is going to have to get a lot more [creative](#).**

As even Israel now admits its culpability in the death of Palestinian-American journalist Shireen Abu Akleh, her family and Sen. Van Hollen are [calling](#) for a U.S. investigation. Given all the lies and deception around Abu Akleh's death, we'd say an investigation is long overdue.

And another thing — **after repeated attacks on Palestinian civil society in recent years, we continue to stand with the organizations that have been penalized for fighting for human rights throughout Israel and Palestine.** Read this letter from us and our partners calling on the Biden administration to [adopt](#) a stronger response.

Nearly 2 decades after the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the impact of that invasion is still affecting Iraq's political stability today. As the country clashes in attempts to form a new government, this author [reminds](#) his readers that "conflict does not actually end when the fighting stops...It is a perpetual war for an impossible peace, let alone a peace of mind."

That's not the only U.S. invasion with current-day consequences. **One year after the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Afghans seeking refuge in the U.S. are still [facing](#) uncertainty around their immigration status.** The U.S. can do more to help them, and it should.

August recess came to an end, and **some Senators marked the occasion by [sharing](#) that they actively plan to prevent the U.S. government from responding to COVID-19 and**

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monkeypox outbreaks. Why neglect one public health crisis when you can neglect two? This is not public service. Do your jobs!

The Biden administration's student loans forgiveness plan isn't perfect, but it's a massive step in the right direction, and a testament to the relentless activism of debt forgiveness advocates.

Read [here](#) about how forgiving student debt interrupts some of the predatory aspects of U.S. military recruitment.

And finally, Peppa Pig [introduces](#) a new family.