Iran War Grew UAE–Israel Security Ties: Normalisation’s Peril, Promise

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The UAE has emerged as Israel’s most operationally significant Arab partner. But, for now, the relationship is no guarantee of wider regional integration.

Last week’s revelation that Israel had moved advanced air defence assets and personnel to the United Arab Emirates during the war with Iran brought into the open a level of strategic cooperation both sides had previously kept more opaque. It was reported that Israel provided the UAE with an Iron Dome air defence system, as well as a surveillance system ‘Spectro’ and a version of the Iron Beam laser defence system, designed to intercept short-range rockets and drones. Iran targeted the UAE more than any other regional state, including Israel. Since the start of the war until the 8 April ceasefire, the UAE came under intense pressure, sustaining an estimated 550 ballistic missiles and 2,200 drone strikes, according to the Emirati defence ministry. This prompted the UAE to harden its stance against the Islamic Republic of Iran, extending farther than any other Gulf state in its criticism of Tehran’s retaliatory strategy.

On 4 May, an Israeli-operated Iron Dome system was reported to have intercepted an Iranian missile over the UAE, reportedly marking the first operational use of Israeli-manned hardware on Emirati soil and, during an active conflict, the first deployment of Iron Dome outside Israel or the US. Iran’s response the following evening was also telling: the spokesperson for Iran’s Khatam al-Anbiya Central Headquarters said that no such operations had been conducted, adding that any action would have been ‘clearly and officially announced’ and describing the accusations by the UAE Defence Ministry as ‘baseless.’

Israel–UAE security cooperation has developed steadily, building step by step over time since the 2020 Abrham Accords. The wider enabling context was Israel’s integration in January 2021 into US Central Command (CENTCOM) after being partUS European Command (EUCOM). The impact of this shift was substantial and facilitated the operational infrastructure for closer intelligence and coordination between Israel and the Gulf states.

"The UAE-Israel alignment carries both clear and more opaque risks for both sides"

Following Yemen-based Houthi attacks on the UAE in 2022, Israel reportedly transferred advanced air defence systems such as the Rafael Advanced Defense Systems-made SPYDER mobile interceptors and Barak systems to Abu Dhabi. These transfers were widely seen as among the first significant defence deals between Israel and a Gulf country after normalisation. Rather than replacing the UAE’s existing Western-provided systems, such as Patriot and THAAD, they were intended to strengthen a layered air defence architecture and reflected a deepening pattern of bilateral security cooperation. Seen this way, the latest step points to the continuation and increasing visibility of an already established pattern of security coordination.

Understanding the Emirati Security Approach

The UAE’s limited personnel depth and its resulting difficulty in sustaining prolonged ground operations have pushed it towards a model that blends national forces with auxiliary support. In

parallel, Abu Dhabi has pursued a selective, interest-driven defence strategy designed to diversify its security partnerships and avoid over dependence on any single defence provider. That push for greater strategic autonomy rests in part on an expanding web of commercial and investment ties across Asia-Pacific and Europe. The February 2026 EDGE–EM&E agreement to explore a UAE-based joint venture, supported by a commercial pipeline of roughly $1.5 billion, is a case in point. It also reflects a broader Emirati effort: a planned UAE-based joint venture with Italy's Leonardo to design and produce advanced defence systems for the UAE and selected export markets; the launch of AD NAVAL with France's CMN NAVAL, supported by an existing €7 billion non-NATO order pipeline; and an agreement with Korea's Hanwha in November 2025 to explore cooperation in air and missile defence, long-range strike and unmanned systems. Taken together, these agreements suggest that Abu Dhabi seeks a more diversified, co-development-oriented and domestically anchored defence-industrial strategy.

In practice, however, the Iran campaign has accelerated a US–Israel–UAE alignment. In early April, Anwar Gargash, advisor to the UAE president and a staunch critic of Iran's actions, said that Iran's attacks on its Gulf Arab neighbours are likely to 'concretize' the US role in the Gulf, 'not reduce it,' and "We will also see Israeli influence become more prominent in the Gulf, not less." In a somewhat defiant tone, and underscoring the continued primacy of US security power in the region, he added, 'Our main security partner is the United States. We will double down on our relationship with the United States.'

Israel's Emirati Strategy

For Israel, the attraction is clear. The UAE offers a valuable Arab gateway into a wider network of trade, energy and logistics at a time when attacks in the Red Sea and threats to the Strait of Hormuz have pushed maritime security and supply-chain resilience back to the top of the global agenda. It also gives Israel a stake in a broader geography – stretching from the Gulf to the Horn of Africa – in which ports, corridors, finance and infrastructure increasingly shape influence as much as formal alliances do. Various concepts were built around this logic, such as: the India-Israel-UAE-US grouping, or I2U2; the Negev Forum; the N7 initiative; and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, or IMEC. Different in form and ambition, each of these frameworks rest on the assumption that the UAE could function as a regional hub through which Israel might deepen its Arab-facing integration without waiting indefinitely for a Saudi breakthrough.

For some Israeli planners, the stubbornly ongoing crisis in the Strait of Hormuz, and the latent Houthi threat over the Bab al-Mandeb and the Red Sea is a blessing in disguise. The argument is that, if Gulf exporters are forced to rely more heavily on routes that reduce exposure to Iranian-controlled chokepoints, Saudi Arabia (through the East-West Pipeline) and the UAE (through Fujairah) may come to regard Israel as an increasingly useful, if politically awkward, partner. In Israeli thinking, this could also bolster the country's value to Europe by reinforcing its role in onward energy transit. That ambition, however, still runs up against a formidable list of political, logistical and strategic constraints.

A 2023 Baker Institute study estimated that leaving OPEC could generate up to $50 billion in additional annual revenue for the UAE, based on an assessment of its then-current spare capacity and the expected completion of ongoing capital investment. Now, with the UAE officially out of the cartel, Israel also sees an opportunity for bilateral long-term supply agreements directly with the UAE, without the complications of other OPEC members.

But none of this is straightforward. The central question is whether UAE–Israel military cooperation

strengthens a new regional order, or whether it exposes both states to the liabilities of each other's wars. The UAE-Israel alignment carries both clear and more opaque risks for both sides. For Abu Dhabi, the risks are clearer: deeper military cooperation with Israel increases reputational costs in the Arab world, sharpens its exposure to Iranian retaliation, and ties the UAE more closely to Israel's regional military campaigns. For Israel, a closer embrace of the UAE also means deeper association with Abu Dhabi's controversial regional footprint – including its past backing for Khalifa Haftar in Libya, its support for the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen, and allegations, denied by the UAE, that it has supported the RSF in Sudan. The result is a paradox: the UAE offers Israel its most viable Arab security bridge but also imports into that partnership the political liabilities of Emirati interventionism.

Why the UAE Remains an Outlier

For Israel, this is where expectations may collide with regional reality. Israel appears to view the UAE as the most viable test case for whether the Abraham Accords can be translated into a wider regional security architecture. Israeli optimists still believe Saudi normalisation is not off the table, and that the UAE's experience can demonstrate the benefits of structured cooperation against Iran.

For now, however, scant appetite exists across the Gulf for such a shift, especially in the context of Israel's multi-front military operations in Lebanon and the ongoing war and instability in Gaza and the West Bank. Bahrain may also be an Abraham Accords signatory, but it does not carry the same geopolitical weight. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, remains in a different category altogether. Riyadh continues to tie normalisation to a credible political horizon for Palestinian statehood, and more broadly remains wary of being drawn into an openly Israeli-defined regional security agenda. In other words, what Israel sees as a proof of concept, Riyadh likely reads as a cautionary example.

Iran, for its part, is unlikely to distinguish neatly between Emirati self-defence and Emirati participation in a broader anti-Iran security architecture. From Tehran's vantage point, the UAE is not just another Gulf state. It is a crucial logistical, financial and energy hub whose deeper integration with Israel threatens to consolidate precisely the kind of regional alignment Iran seeks to disrupt. Combined with the UAE's already contested image in parts of the Arab world, and particularly as Israel is deeply unpopular across the Arab world, this goes some way towards explaining Tehran's decision to target Emirati territory.

The issue is not simply missiles or air defence in hard military logic, rather, it is whether Iran allows the emergence of a more overt Israel-Gulf axis on its southern flank without imposing costs, without which Iranian deterrence restoration falters.

For the UAE, Israel offers advanced capabilities, intelligence value and a stronger deterrent posture against Iran. Yet neither side can escape the political costs of making that relationship more visible. The more public the alignment becomes, the harder it will be to present it as merely pragmatic, technical or defensive. It will increasingly be judged for what it represents: not just cooperation, but a particular vision of regional order.

And that is the deeper question. Is UAE-Israel military cooperation the foundation of a new Middle Eastern security architecture, or is it the high-water mark of a narrower coalition built around shared threat perceptions but lacking broader regional legitimacy? For now, it is undoubtedly a milestone. But it is not yet a model that others in the Gulf appear ready to follow.

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