

Brief: A Prospective Israeli-Gulf Defense Alliance

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Background: Since last year, when Israel normalized relations with the Gulf states of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates, a Sunni Arab-Israeli alliance has been taking shape. The common theme behind the alliance is a desire to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and to roll back Iranian influence in the Middle East.

What Happened: According to reports from last week, **Israeli officials have been in contact** with their Gulf partners about forming a regional defense alliance – and adding Saudi Arabia to the ranks. A diplomatic whirlwind ensued. On the same day as that report, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke with Bahraini Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, and on Monday, Gabriel Ashkenazi, Israel’s foreign minister, met with his counterparts from the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Ashkenazi also **met with the UAE’s ambassador to Israel**, who will remain in the country for a few days and meet with Netanyahu. Then, on Tuesday, Ashkenazi and his Jordanian counterpart met at the border. There are also **reports** that Israel’s defense minister recently met with Jordanian King Abdullah II.

Bottom Line: The Trump administration encouraged the development of the Israeli-Sunni Arab alliance in order to maintain American influence in the region without committing any more resources. The absence of U.S. participation in the current push for deeper cooperation suggests U.S. attention is elsewhere. Other than a clearly anti-Iran stance, there’s a certain ambiguity regarding what a formal defense alliance between Israel and the Gulf states would look like were it to take shape.

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