

Israel and the United Arab Emirates: Strategic Partnership Tested by War

written by Noa Lazimi | 25.06.2026

Executive Summary

- The war against Iran established the United Arab Emirates as one of the principal pillars of the pragmatic camp in the Middle East and as an indispensable strategic partner for Israel and the West.
- Abu Dhabi adopted a firm stance toward Tehran, both publicly and diplomatically, while also taking practical measures aimed at increasing pressure on Iran.
- Security cooperation between Israel and the UAE reached an unprecedented level during the war, particularly in the fields of air defense, intelligence coordination, and joint efforts to counter Iranian missile and UAV attacks.
- Despite the Memorandum of Understanding concluded with Tehran, Abu Dhabi is likely to remain deeply concerned about the continued Iranian threat, the possibility of the regime's recovery, and the risk of renewed direct or proxy attacks.
- Beyond the Iranian arena, Israel and the UAE share strategic interests across the Red Sea, the Horn of Africa, and Yemen, particularly in containing Iran, the Houthis, the Muslim Brotherhood, and other radical Islamist actors.
- Israel should deepen cooperation with the UAE in air defense, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, critical infrastructure, supply chains, and regional initiatives such as IMEC and Pax Silica.
- Strengthening the commercial foundations of the Abraham Accords through investment, trade relations, business delegations, and commercial forums is essential for anchoring the partnership as a long-term strategic asset.

Introduction

When historians look back on the major campaign against Iran, they are likely to identify it as the turning point at which a new regional security architecture emerged in the Middle East. At the heart of this tectonic shift stood not a distant Western power, but the United Arab Emirates. Under the bold and visionary leadership of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, Abu Dhabi abandoned its traditional policy of strategic ambiguity and demonstrated exceptional leadership at a defining regional moment.

The exposure of the UAE's active military role during the conflict, together with its steadfast resilience in the face of unprecedented missile barrages, constitutes not merely evidence of remarkable national fortitude but compelling proof that the Abraham Accords have evolved into a strategic alliance capable of reshaping the future of regional stability and prosperity. Abu Dhabi's determined posture toward Iran fundamentally challenged long-standing Western assumptions regarding reliable partners in the Middle East. While other regional actors opted for hesitation, hedging, or strategic ambiguity, the UAE demonstrated – through actions, sacrifices, and the commitment of significant resources – that it has become Israel's and the West's most reliable, consistent, and effective strategic partner in the Arab world.

The strategic importance of the UAE, however, extends well beyond its role in the confrontation with Iran. It is also reflected in its sustained engagement across multiple regional friction points, including Yemen, Somalia, Somaliland, Libya, and Sudan. In each of these arenas, Abu Dhabi has pursued a strategic vision centered on promoting stability, safeguarding international trade routes, and containing extremist organizations and political Islamist movements as essential pillars of regional security, even where some of these initiatives have not fully achieved their intended objectives.

The significance of these efforts has become even more pronounced in light of the declining American and broader Western engagement in several of these theaters, creating a strategic vacuum increasingly filled by actors whose interests do not necessarily align with those of Israel and its Western partners. In this evolving environment, the UAE has become one of Israel's foremost strategic anchors in regions of growing importance to its national security. Israel should therefore work to deepen cooperation with the UAE across the political, security, economic, and commercial spheres, while consolidating the bilateral relationship as a long-term strategic asset for both countries.

At the same time, the West can no longer regard the UAE merely as a partner of convenience, but rather as one of the principal pillars of the emerging regional order. The war demonstrated that instability in the Middle East no longer remains confined to the region itself. Beyond its impact on global trade routes, energy markets, and international supply chains, the conflict highlighted the expanding range of Iran's military capabilities, which now pose implications for European security as well.

Against this backdrop, American and European support for regional actors committed to promoting stability is no longer simply a regional interest; it has become a clear strategic imperative for the West. The United States and Europe should therefore provide full support for the UAE's broader foreign policy, which is guided by a modern, pragmatic vision of peace and prosperity. Today, this vision constitutes one of the principal forces counterbalancing the trends of instability and extremism in the Middle East, making support for it no less a Western strategic interest than a regional one.

The United Arab Emirates on the Front Line

According to a statement issued by the UAE Ministry of Defence in May, Emirati air defenses intercepted more than 2,800 Iranian missiles and drones since the outbreak of the war. Among the Gulf states, Abu Dhabi distinguished itself by adopting one of the most outspoken public positions against Iran. Emirati officials emphasized that they would not tolerate threats posed by terrorist actors and called for legally binding guarantees to prevent future aggression, as well as compensation for damage inflicted on civilian infrastructure.

Beyond its public statements, the UAE took an active role in the international arena by advancing practical measures aimed at reopening the Strait of Hormuz. According to various reports, in addition to expressing its willingness to participate in a U.S.-led military effort, the UAE engaged in diplomatic initiatives to mobilize international support, including efforts to promote a United Nations Security Council resolution on the matter.

Furthermore, an investigation published by The Wall Street Journal indicated that the UAE took an active military role in the campaign against Iran and reportedly conducted a series of strikes inside Iranian territory. Although Abu Dhabi has not officially acknowledged its involvement, its apparent willingness to bear both the

costs and risks of the conflict underscored the depth of the strategic partnership it has forged with Israel.

At the same time, the UAE intensified administrative measures against Iran, increasing pressure on Tehran through significant restrictions imposed on Iranian nationals, including limitations on entry into and transit through Emirati territory. Reports in March also indicated that the UAE had begun taking action against institutions and assets affiliated with the Iranian regime, including the closure of organizations in Dubai identified with Tehran.

The war marked the highest level of security cooperation between Israel and the UAE since the signing of the Abraham Accords. The most prominent aspect of this cooperation was Israeli assistance in defending the UAE against Iranian attacks, alongside close intelligence sharing and strategic coordination between the two countries. It is reasonable to assume that a significant portion of this cooperation remains classified, and therefore its full scope is not publicly known.

In this context, reports in the Western media, later reinforced by statements from U.S. officials, claimed that Israel deployed an Iron Dome battery, together with personnel to operate it, to the UAE during the conflict in order to help defend against Iranian missile and drone attacks. In addition, as in previous rounds of confrontation with Iran, it is reasonable to assess that the UAE contributed indirectly to regional defense efforts through intelligence sharing and operational coordination with Israel, the United States, and other partners, although these activities have not been publicly confirmed.

Despite the positive statements issued by Abu Dhabi following the digital signing of the Memorandum of Understanding on 17 June, it is likely that behind the diplomatic messaging lies a considerable degree of unease regarding the strategic reality that emerged after the conflict. Publicly, the UAE praised the diplomatic efforts led by U.S. President Donald Trump and the mediating parties, while calling for the full implementation of the understandings reached, including an immediate cessation of hostilities, respect for the sovereignty of regional states, and guarantees for freedom of navigation through the Strait of Hormuz.

Nevertheless, the emerging agreement provides the UAE with ample grounds for concern regarding future developments. These concerns stem both from Abu Dhabi's firm stance toward Iran throughout the conflict and from its geographic

proximity to Iran, which made it the primary target of Iranian attacks during the war. From the Emirati perspective, even if current tensions subside, this does not preclude the possibility of renewed drone strikes, missile attacks, or indirect operations carried out by Iran and its regional proxies.

These concerns are further heightened by the fact that the Iranian regime remains in power, while the emerging agreement may provide it with a pathway toward economic recovery and the restoration of its military capabilities. At the same time, Emirati decision-makers recognize that despite the impressive performance of their advanced air defense systems during the conflict, these systems cannot provide absolute protection. Although interception rates were high, civilian infrastructure was nevertheless damaged, casualties were sustained, and losses occurred as a result of successful penetrations and falling interceptor debris. Consequently, from Abu Dhabi's perspective, while the agreement may contribute to short-term de-escalation, it does not alter the UAE's fundamental assessment of Iran as a long-term strategic threat to its national security and regional stability.

The Convergence of Israeli-Emirati Interests in the Horn of Africa and the Red Sea

Beyond their shared efforts to confront the direct Iranian threat, Israel and the United Arab Emirates also share strategic interests across several key arenas in the Red Sea basin and the Horn of Africa. In these regions, both countries seek to contain the influence of Iran's regional proxies, as well as other radical Islamist actors. In this context, one of the defining characteristics of Emirati foreign policy has been its consistent opposition to political Islam and to the Muslim Brotherhood in all its various manifestations, which Abu Dhabi regards as a principal source of regional instability and as a potential partner of hostile regional coalitions.

Yemen perhaps represents the clearest convergence of Israeli and Emirati strategic interests. While Saudi Arabia has, in recent years, increasingly sought diplomatic arrangements with the Houthis, the UAE has maintained a firmer approach by supporting local anti-Houthi forces in southern Yemen and along the country's western coast, while contributing to military operations around the Bab Al-Mandeb Strait. In doing so, it has helped contain one of Iran's principal regional strongholds while safeguarding freedom of navigation in the Red Sea.

In Somaliland, the UAE has worked to strengthen its local partners through investments in ports, infrastructure, and security cooperation, most notably at the Port of Berbera. Its growing presence along the strategic maritime routes of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden has enhanced its ability to address security threats, including the activities of al-Shabaab, while simultaneously reinforcing its regional influence vis-à-vis competing powers, particularly Turkey, whose presence in Somalia has expanded significantly in recent years.

In Sudan, Abu Dhabi has sought to weaken political and military actors associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and with remnants of the Omar al-Bashir regime, viewing these forces as a major source of regional instability that could draw Sudan back into a hostile regional axis and facilitate renewed cooperation with Iran. Against this backdrop, the UAE has pursued a policy designed to curb the influence of these actors within Sudan's political and security institutions.

Implications and Policy Recommendations

The war against Iran demonstrated the strategic value of the partnership between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, while highlighting the considerable potential for expanding this relationship beyond its current scope – both in times of crisis and in periods of relative stability. It has also created a window of opportunity for advancing long-term initiatives that would strengthen the security and economic resilience of both countries while contributing to the construction of a regional architecture built upon states committed to stability, security, and economic development. Such an architecture would reinforce the region's pragmatic camp and help contain the influence of actors seeking to undermine the regional order.

The importance of this partnership becomes even greater in light of the possibility of a reduced American presence in the Middle East. Under such circumstances, strengthening ties with the UAE enables Israel to rely on an increasingly influential regional partner that shares its core strategic interests in countering Iran, confronting political Islam, and balancing the growing influence of a regional bloc led by Turkey and its allies, which seeks to promote a regional order rooted in movements affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. For Abu Dhabi, continued cooperation with Israel also complements its national vision of establishing itself as a regional hub for technological innovation, advanced defense industries, and strategic infrastructure.

The United States can play a central role in transforming the Israeli-Emirati partnership into one of the cornerstones of the emerging regional security architecture. Beyond operational cooperation against Iran, there is substantial potential for joint development of defense technologies, critical infrastructure, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, and advanced supply chains – areas that lie at the heart of the UAE’s strategy for economic diversification and technological leadership.

1. Expanding Cooperation in Air Defense

Over recent years, Israel and the UAE have concluded a series of agreements covering air defense, sensor technologies, intelligence cooperation, and unmanned systems between their respective defense industries. Building on this foundation, the two countries, with U.S. support, should establish a permanent framework for joint research and development, testing, and procurement.

Such a framework could focus on developing advanced early-warning, detection, and interception systems, including artificial intelligence-based solutions, laser technologies, and cost-effective capabilities for countering large-scale drone swarms. Beyond strengthening the security of both countries, such an initiative would support the UAE’s ambition to evolve from a purchaser of defense systems into a developer and exporter of advanced defense technologies, further consolidating its position as a regional hub for defense innovation.

2. Realizing the Israeli-Emirati Potential in Pax Silica

Israel and the United Arab Emirates are already partners in the U.S.-led Pax Silica initiative, yet the full potential arising from the complementary strengths of the two countries has not yet been realized. With American backing, both countries should pursue flagship joint projects in artificial intelligence, cloud infrastructure, semiconductor technologies, and advanced computing.

While Israel contributes world-class research capabilities, technological innovation, and entrepreneurial expertise, the UAE offers substantial investment capital, advanced physical and digital infrastructure, and privileged access to global commercial networks. Such cooperation would advance the UAE’s ambition to become a global hub for artificial intelligence and data centers while supporting its broader strategy of reducing dependence on oil and gas revenues. At the same time, it would firmly anchor both countries within the core American

effort to build a Western technological ecosystem independent of China.

3. Expanding Israeli-Emirati Cooperation through IMEC

The recent war underscored the urgent need to develop alternatives to existing maritime trade routes, particularly given the strategic vulnerability of critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Suez Canal, both of which remain susceptible to disruption, blockade, or coercion by hostile states and non-state actors.

Against this backdrop, Israel and the UAE, with U.S. support, should work to transform the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) into an integrated corridor for trade, energy, data, and innovation. Beyond the development of transportation infrastructure, the two countries should jointly promote projects involving smart ports, data centers, supply chain resilience, and cybersecurity infrastructure.

For the UAE, IMEC's strategic value extends well beyond facilitating trade. It offers an opportunity to integrate more deeply into the Western technological ecosystem in fields such as artificial intelligence, data infrastructure, and advanced industries. Compared with its participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative, IMEC could position the UAE as a more influential partner in shaping the digital and technological infrastructure linking India, the Middle East, and Europe, thereby reinforcing its ambition to become a global center for innovation, data, and artificial intelligence.

4. Strengthening the Civilian and Commercial Foundations of the Abraham Accords

Alongside expanding strategic and security cooperation, Israel should also work to strengthen the civilian and commercial foundations of its relationship with the UAE. Economic ties, private investment, and commercial partnerships have proven to be among the principal engines driving the success of the Abraham Accords. Israel should therefore encourage greater Emirati investment, promote reciprocal delegations of entrepreneurs and investors, and expand the activities of existing frameworks such as the UAE-Israel Business Council.

The more the bilateral relationship is rooted in direct engagement between business leaders, entrepreneurs, investors, and citizens on both sides, the more

resilient and enduring the strategic partnership will become for decades to come.

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