

ANOTHER BRICK IN THE WALL: THE ISRAELI EXPERIENCE IN MISSILE DEFENSE

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Starting in the 1970s, the Arab states and Iran embarked on ballistic missile programs aimed at overcoming the Israeli military superiority gained through the past decades. At first, Israel kept relying on its traditional offensive doctrines that enabled the launching of preemptive campaigns that would swiftly move the battles to the territory of its enemies. The country did start cooperating with the U.S. administration in the early-1980s as part of President Ronald Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, but it was a decision based on opportunism rather than a sense of urgency. The real trigger for Israel's missile defense efforts was Saddam Hussein's use of ballistic missiles first against Iran (1985-88) and then against the Hebrew State itself (1991). This led to the building of the Arrow system, a highly sophisticated system aimed at intercepting ballistic missiles.

But soon another type of threat emerged: in the 1990s and the following decade, nonstate actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas rapidly acquired rockets and short-range missiles that changed the equation with the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). In particular, Hezbollah's performance during the 2006 war called for a new response. In addition to Arrow, Israel developed Iron Dome. This new system would soon become the most iconic system of Israel's military power as evidenced during Operation PILLARS OF DEFENSE (2012) and Operation PROTECTIVE EDGE (2014).

After having been looked at with scepticism, missile defense was now the object of political passion. This trend transcended Israel as the success of Iron Dome was used by proponents of missile defense in the United States and in North Atlantic

Treaty Organization (NATO) countries. However, this passion frequently misreads the strategic meaning of Israel's enterprise. First, its military never conceived these systems as substitutes to its past offensive posture. Iron Dome and Arrow are mere complementary assets to the IDF. Moreover, there remain significant unknowns on topics such as the effectiveness of the systems in intercepting rockets and missiles and the extent to which they deter neighboring states from investing in new arsenals. As a consequence, the need for a cautious assessment of the Israeli experience and its potential lessons for U.S. and NATO's own efforts.

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