UK-ISRAEL AERIAL DEFENCE COLLABORATION: TOWARDS A BRITISH "IRON SHIELD"

LFI POLICY BRIEFING

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Israel has faced a multilayered, consistent threat to its security since its independence. Few other countries have had to defend their population and security infrastructure against domestic terrorism, adjacent threats from short-range missiles, as well as long-range ballistic missile attacks — at times from all sources simultaneously.
- Israel's aerial defence systems have proved effective even under extreme stress. During the 2026 US-Israeli air campaign in Iran, Tehran shot over 600 missiles at Israel. Ninety percent of the Iranian missiles that entered Israel's airspace were intercepted by air defences, marking an improved interception rate of at least five percent over last summer's 12-day war, when Iran fired 550 missiles.
- Unlike Israel, British defence investment and planning for decades has been focused largely on expeditionary priorities. Despite direct attacks on UK assets and on its allies — as well as Russia's leadership having intimated a desire to launch direct attacks against the UK and Europe — there remain significant gaps in Britain's ability to defend itself against aerial attacks.
- The British defence establishment has rightly focused on ameliorating the UK's domestic aerial defence capabilities as it contemplates a potential peer-to-peer conflict with a rival power. Similarly threatened by allied authoritarian regimes, Israel's extraordinary defence of its homeland offers important lessons for Britain.
- As Finland and Germany have already recognised, Israel has a tested ability to defend its people from aerial threats. The Labour government should therefore put in place channels to learn from, and where appropriate adopt, Israeli strategies and technology to protect the homeland:
    - The bilateral defence relationship should be formalised as the "UK-Israel Defence Dialogue" with a dialogue chaired at ministerial level focused on technology and workstreams established to share best practises across domains.
    - The restoration and expansion of professional military exchanges, including the return of Israel Defence Forces personnel to UK training courses and institutions.
    - As part of the UK-Israel Defence Dialogue, the UK and Israel should establish a specific "Aerial Defence Dialogue" with the Ministry of Defence liaising directly with Israel's Missile Defence Organisation.
    - The UK should explore which assets used and tested by Israel to defend the state and its civilians offer best practise consideration by UK armed forces.

This is an updated and revised version of a paper originally published by LFI in November 2024. It includes a new introduction by Air Vice-Marshal Philip Lester CBE.

INTRODUCTION: TIME TO LEARN FROM ISRAEL

"No matter how clearly one thinks, it is impossible to anticipate precisely the character of future conflict. The key is to not be so far off the mark that one cannot adapt when the moment comes."

"You don't get to choose your wars; they have a way of choosing you."

Predicting future war and conflict, as identified in the quotes above attributed to the late Professor Sir Michael Howard, is an unpredictable and uncertain beast. For many years the UK has talked about the growing threat from Russia and other revisionist states — Iran included. Yet little has materially been delivered that significantly increases the breadth and depth of the UK's defence and security apparatus over the last 30 plus years.

Both the war in Ukraine and the conflict in the Middle East have showed, beyond doubt, that our potential adversaries have the technology to strike at our interests. What we lack is a robust and integrated system or systems that allow us to prioritise and protect our interests on, below and above the surface of the earth. And this evolution needs to take place speedily if we are to be prepared for the type of threats that are likely to confront us in the years and decades to come. The reality is that the delivery of our Carrier Strike Capability, as useful as its constituent elements are (with two aircraft carriers and F35B stealth jets at its core), does not manifestly increase the security of UK defence and security interests at home and abroad, especially in the context of the current crises that we face.

"[Israel's] capabilities are not merely technical achievements; they represent the convergence of political will, public demand and support all aligned with considerable strategic foresight."

Since its founding in 1948, Israel has faced a succession of existential challenges: physical, ideological and cultural. These have profoundly shaped its national identity and its posture on the global stage: an identity that is poorly understood on one extreme, to one that it is actively manipulated and misrepresented on the other.

From the earliest days of statehood, when survival depended upon resilience and ingenuity, to the complex and evolving threats of the present, Israel has demonstrated a consistent capacity to adapt under pressure. This experience has forged not only a formidable defence ecosystem but also a wider societal understanding that security, innovation and national cohesion are both inseparable and symbiotic. The Israeli defence-industry ecosystem epitomises the very approach that NATO has advocated for many years.

Over the decades, Israel has deservedly earned its reputation as a "start-up nation" and a whole-of-society approach that pushes the boundaries of technological design, testing and operational deployment. Nowhere is this more evident than in its approach to integrated air and missile defence (IAMD). Systems, such as Iron Dome and the emerging Iron Beam, exemplify how necessity can drive

innovation across government, industry and civil society at considerable pace. These capabilities are not merely technical achievements; they represent the convergence of political will, public demand and support all aligned with considerable strategic foresight. In Israel's case, this convergence has delivered tangible dividends: the protection of civilian populations, the preservation of economic activity and the reinforcement of national morale under sustained threat.

The development of such systems underscores a broader lesson: that effective defence policy cannot be siloed. It must draw upon a whole-of-society approach, integrating research institutions, private enterprise, military expertise and democratic accountability. In Israel, this integration has been achieved through sustained investment, close civil-military cooperation and an acceptance among the public that security innovation is both necessary and beneficial — diplomatically, economically and, of course, militarily. The result is a dynamic ecosystem in which ideas are rapidly translated into operational capability, and where lessons learned in conflict are quickly fed back into design and doctrine. This ecosystem does not exist in the UK and, for it to be effective, would likely require considerable socio-political adaptations. These would include a legislative requirement to conduct defence and security reviews within six months of a change of government that formally links foreign and domestic policy objectives, with prioritised defence and security requirements, based upon independently corroborated evidence and one that lays out the financial envelope. This would form the basis of a funded national defence and security strategy.

For the United Kingdom, these developments carry important implications. The character of warfare is changing rapidly. The proliferation of autonomous systems, the increasing use of stand-off platforms, and the rapid advancement of long-range missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles are reshaping the strategic environment. Conflicts are no longer confined to traditional battlefields; they are increasingly fought across multiple domains, with speed, precision and technological superiority determining outcomes and where the UK homebase is considered a legitimate military target by our adversaries.

This reality has been recognised in the UK's 2025 strategic defence review, which identified the growing importance of integrated air and missile defence as a cornerstone of national security. Yet despite this acknowledgement, progress has been limited. Key capabilities remain underdeveloped; there is no funded programme and implementation of niche component capabilities has lagged behind strategic aspiration. The forthcoming defence investment plan is expected to address some of these gaps, but the pace of change raises a fundamental question: can the UK afford to wait? As threats evolve in real time, delay carries risk; not only to military effectiveness but also to the protection of critical national infrastructure and civilian populations.

Recent operational experience underscores both the urgency of the challenge and the potential for success. The Royal Air Force has demonstrated notable tactical effectiveness in countering drone threats in the Middle East, including during periods of heightened tension involving Iranian-backed attacks. These operations highlight the professionalism and adaptability of UK forces, as well as the value of targeted investment in counter-unmanned aerial systems.

However, they also illustrate the limits of current capabilities when faced with large-scale, coordinated threats of the kind that Israel confronts routinely. In this context, the UK faces a clear and pressing challenge. While it retains world-class capabilities in many areas, there are notable gaps in IAMD, counter-drone technologies and the rapid fielding of innovative systems. Addressing these gaps will require not only investment but also a willingness to learn from those who have already confronted

similar threats. Israel, with its unparalleled experience in defending against a spectrum of aerial threats, offers a valuable partner in this endeavour.

The historic relationship between the United Kingdom and Israel provides a strong foundation upon which to build. Over many years, the two countries have collaborated in intelligence sharing, technological development and defence innovation. This partnership has delivered mutual benefits, enhancing the security of both nations while fostering a deeper understanding of shared challenges. Yet in recent years, this relationship has not always been leveraged to its full potential, particularly in the defence and security sphere. Re-energising the UK–Israel defence dialogue is therefore essential. This should include a renewed focus on lesson-learning, ensuring that insights from Israel's operational experience are systematically incorporated into UK doctrine and planning. It should also involve the restoration and expansion of professional military exchanges, including the return of Israel Defence Forces personnel to UK training courses and institutions. Such exchanges are invaluable in building trust, shared understanding and practical expertise.

"There is a strong case for ensuring that collaboration in critical areas such as air defence, intelligence and capability development is not unduly constrained."

Crucially, defence cooperation must be approached in a pragmatic and forward-looking manner. While broader political considerations will always play a role in international relations, there is a strong case for ensuring that collaboration in critical areas such as air defence, intelligence and capability development is not unduly constrained. The challenges posed by emerging threats are too significant and too immediate to allow opportunities for partnership to be missed. In particular, the UK stands to benefit from closer engagement with Israel's leadership in key technological domains. These include not only air and missile defence but also intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, digital systems and the rapidly evolving field of autonomous and counter-autonomous capabilities. Israel's experience in integrating these technologies into a coherent operational framework offers valuable insights for the UK as it seeks to modernise its own forces. At the same time, any renewed partnership must be rooted in a clear understanding of shared values and mutual interests. Both the UK and Israel are democratic societies committed to the rule of law, innovation and the protection of their citizens. By working together, they can strengthen not only their own security but also their contribution to wider regional and global stability.

This paper argues that the time has come for a renewed and revitalised approach to UK–Israel defence cooperation. By drawing on Israel's experience, embracing a whole-of-society approach to security innovation, and committing to deeper collaboration across key areas, the UK can better position itself to meet the challenges of a rapidly changing world. In doing so, it will not only enhance its own resilience but also reaffirm a longstanding partnership that has delivered significant benefits in the past and holds even greater promise for the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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TOWARDS A BRITISH "IRON SHIELD"

Since the end of the cold war and the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the UK's defence priorities have been largely expeditionary; time-limited missions well beyond its borders to stabilise conflicts, support peace and defeat threats, such as terrorism. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, British and European security is now facing a direct and urgent threat from an advanced military power. As a result of attention elsewhere, the UK's homeland defensive capabilities are now being forced to play catch up.

Since its creation, Israel's security threats have come from its immediate neighbours and directly outside its borders, necessitating a very different defensive posture than that taken by Britain and many of its allies in recent decades. Israel's military is almost entirely organised to defend its population and territory, to counter terrorism within and adjacent to its borders, and to respond to medium and long-range threats from within the Middle East.

In a new era of heightened geopolitical competition, the UK and Israel have shared interests and threats. The US-Israel war with Iran has featured direct attacks by Iran and its proxies on UK interests as well as a devastating retaliation against its closest allies in the region. Russia has played a direct role in supporting its ally Iran during this war, and it remains the UK's primary strategic threat as its invasion of Ukraine enters its fifth year. Finally, Russia, China and Iran are strategically and militarily aligned, representing an adversarial alliance that endangers both the UK and Israel. Given the changing threats facing the UK, is Britain making the most of its ties to Israel and is it learning the right lessons when it comes to defence?

In recent times, the UK has been one of Israel's closest defence allies. As demonstrated by the war in Ukraine, the nature of warfare is changing and there are few better countries from which the UK can draw unique lessons on how to protect its people and fight a modern defensive war. As the UK explores new technologies and approaches to threats from Russia and Iran, this policy paper briefly outlines the longstanding, multifaceted and multi-front threats Israel and its people have faced and how the country's defences have evolved to counter them; it looks at the UK's current defence posture with particular attention to homeland defence against aerial threats; and it considers areas from which Britain can both learn and share best practise with Israel.

Britain's Ministry of Defence and defence establishment have closely observed Ukraine's defence against Russian aggression, both with a view to supporting Kyiv but also assessing how a future major war will be fought. The UK should be similarly observing closely Israel's approach to defending its citizens from hostile forces.

THE "SHIELD OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL: DEFENCE SYSTEMS DESIGNED TO SAVE LIVES

Within a week of the State of Israel's declaration of independence in 1948, it was attacked by six neighbouring countries. Over the subsequent seven decades, Israel has remained under a constant threat of attack. It has been attacked by conventional state and non-state actors and been forced to fight more than a half dozen major wars with its neighbours. All the while, it has faced an unrelenting threat from terrorism. Israel has been attacked and threatened with assault by a range of actors: from the conventional armies of Arab states in the 20th century, to Iran following the 1979 revolution; from

Palestinian terrorism within its borders, to terrorist organisations like Hamas and Hezbollah adjacent to it. No other modern state has faced such as range of threats, nor so persistent a threat, to its security.

For this reason, Israel's defensive systems have become more advanced and sophisticated, as well as more varied, as the nature of the threats have changed over the decades. Unlike its adversaries, Israel is committed to international law and the defence of its citizens — values shared by the UK — and this has inevitably had an impact on its defence posture. Given the fact that most incoming missiles are unguided or are aimed to target civilian areas, aerial defence systems are primarily operationalised to defend civilians as well as military assets. While outside the scope of this paper, Israel's offensive capabilities are equally sophisticated and aimed at causing maximum damage while minimising the impact on civilians.

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In recent years, the most consistent threat facing Israel from outside its borders has come from Iran and its "axis of resistance", evident in the missiles fired at the Jewish state by Tehran-backed terrorist groups, such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Air defence systems became a priority for Israel during the 1991 Gulf war, when Saddam Hussein sought to bring Israel into the conflict through ballistic Scud missile attacks. Shortly afterwards, Israel established the Israel Missile Defence Organisation (IMDO) to develop missile defence capabilities. The IMDO continues to manage Israel's active defence systems. The Gulf war was followed by increased aerial threats from non-state actors, with Hezbollah first attacking Israel with rocket fire in 1996 and Hamas in 2001. Progress toward establishing the Iron Dome system accelerated following Israel's conflict with Hezbollah in 2006.

The logic of Israel's air defence system consists of a three-stage progression, from detection to disabling. The first is radar, which identify and track incoming projectiles and assess whether they are a threat. While missile speeds vary, the Iron Dome system may have as little as one minute to repel a missile attack from Gaza or Lebanon before it makes impact.

The second aspect is the battle control centre. This is the decision-making stage which determines the appropriate response to a confirmed threat – it decides from where an interceptor should be fired and how many missiles are required to bring down an incoming projectile. The Iron Dome is not fully automated and IDF operatives assess the type of threat and determine whether to deploy an interceptor missile.

Finally, the interceptor missile is deployed to intercept and destroy the incoming missile before it can make impact. The Iron Dome, for instance, uses hypersonic missiles with heat-seeking sensors, providing in-flight trajectory updates allowing it to adjust its course toward interception. It uses a proximity fuse activated by a radar to explode close to the incoming missile rather than relying on a direct hit.

Israel's aerial defence system is multilayered, owing to the diverse range of threats — from rudimentary, unguided, Qassam rockets, to ballistic missiles, which Israel fears may someday contain a nuclear warhead. This tiered system encompasses the Iron Dome, David's Sling, Arrow-2 and Arrow-3 and development of a Tactical High-Energy Laser.

Israel's renowned Iron Dome has been in operation since 2011 and is designed to intercept lower-tier, shorter-range threats. Developed by Israel's state-owned Rafael Advanced Defence Systems with US support, the system is designed to destroy a range of different incoming threats including large calibre rockets and short-range ballistic missiles. Its range of effectiveness is between 2.5 to 43.5 miles. The US has been a critical backer of the system since its inception, contributing $1.6bn in funding between 2011 and 2021. Israel operates at least 10 mobile Iron Dome batteries. Each battery includes 3-4 launchers containing up to 20 interceptors each, with an effectiveness rate of as much as 90 percent.

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The second layer of Israel's aerial defence architecture is David's Sling, which began development with support from the US in 2006 and was activated in 2017. Like the US' own Patriot system, which was first deployed in Israel in 1991 to counter Saddam's Scud attacks, its primary targets are cruise missiles and lower-tier ballistic missiles fired from 100km to 200km away. The threat of missiles fired from hostile countries such as Syria and Lebanon was the primary risk leading to the development of David's Sling. Unlike the mobile Iron Dome systems, David's Sling is stationary and can protect the entirety of Israel. David's Sling has been sold to Finland.

The top tier of Israel's multilayered air defences is the Arrow Weapon System (AWS), which is the world's first operational, national, stand-alone Anti Tactical Ballistic Missile defence system. The Arrow modular air defence systems detect, track, intercept and destroy incoming TBMs carrying a range of warheads over a large territory. Unlike David's Sling, the long-range Arrow-2 and Arrow-3 system was developed to intercept ballistic missiles outside the earth's atmosphere. The Arrow 2 is designed to explode near a missile to bring down an incoming missile, but the Arrow 3 is a hit-to-kill missile.

Integrated to complement the existing AWS, Arrow-3 is designed to intercept the newest, longer-range threats, including those carrying weapons of mass destruction. Operational since 2017, the Arrow-3's first combat inception brought down a threat over the Rea Sea in November 2023, likely fired by the Iranian-backed, Yemen-based Houthi movement.

Later in 2023, the AWS shot down a ballistic missile over the Rea Sea targeting the Israeli city of Eilat. Again, this was likely launched by the Houthis. In early October 2024, the AWS also brought down a surface-to-surface ballistic missile fired from Yemen. With Israel now planning work on an Arrow-4 system, it recently sold the Arrow-3 system to Germany to counter the threat from Russia. This was the largest security deal in Israel's history and marks the first time Israel will export a missile system.

The Israeli navy also plays an important role in Israel's aerial defence systems. In August 2024, alongside the Directorate of Defence Research and Development, a joint Ministry of Defence-IDF body, and Israel Aerospace Industries, it completed an interception test using a long-range interceptor (LRAD). Israel's Sa'ar class corvette ships are equipped with wide aerial defence layers, including the Barak Magen system and the LRAD, to manage aerial threats. Barak Magen is an advanced aerial defence system which has the ability to deal with a range of threats including ballistic, cruise missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and more.

A significant test of Israel's aerial defence system came in 2024 when it intercepted two, unprecedented barrages of missile-fire from Iran and its proxies. A ballistic missile from Iran can reach Israel in 12 minutes. In April 2024, over 300 missiles of many varieties — including some 170 drones, 30 cruise missiles and 120 ballistic missiles — were fired by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah and Iran's other regional proxies. Along with Israel's defence systems, interception was assisted by Israeli allies including the US, UK, France and regional partners. In October 2024, a further 180 ballistic missiles were fired from Iran, resulting in the death of a Palestinian man in the West Bank town of Jericho, but minimal damage to defence infrastructure.

To date during the US-Israeli air campaign in Iran, Tehran has shot over 600 missiles at Israel. Ninety percent of the Iranian missiles that have entered Israel's airspace were intercepted by air defences, marking an improved interception rate of at least five percent over last summer's 12-day war, when Iran fired 550 missiles. Iran's lower-speed drone attacks have been handicapped by the distance between Iran and Israel. In the 12-day war, Israel eliminated 99 percent of the 500 Iranian drones that made it to its borders.

However, since beginning its assaults on 8 October 2023, Lebanon's Hezbollah has sought to exploit its geographical proximity to Israel by launching more than 650 separate drone attacks. Israel initially struggled to find a solution for detecting and targeting the vast number of small and short-range drones. However, amid continuing fighting, Israel has apparently discovered more efficient ways of countering the drone threat, now intercepting 90 percent of Hezbollah's drones.

Hezbollah has also sought to stress Israeli air defences through its use of short- and medium-range missiles. By the time of the November 2024 Lebanon-Israel ceasefire agreement, these missiles comprised a significant portion of the nearly 17,500 projectiles launched from Lebanese territory since 8 October 2023, as part of the more than 4,000 total attacks conducted by Hezbollah.

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Israel's adversaries can currently inflict damage through barrages of inexpensive rockets, coupled with more sophisticated, long-range missiles. While Iron Dome interceptor missiles cost about $60,000 each, Hamas' less sophisticated missiles can cost as little as $600. A newly introduced system, the Iron Beam is aimed at intercepting incoming threats at a fraction of the cost of Israel's existing systems.

However, Israel's air defence systems are not impervious, as demonstrated by Hamas' attack on 7 October, when the terrorist group fired thousands of missiles and overwhelmed the Iron Dome.

By 8 November, Hamas had fired 9,500 rockets at Israel. The importance of a coalition response to defend Israel against massive attacks from Iran and its allies was demonstrated in April 2024 and again in October 2024. While Israel is better defended against a uniquely diverse array of threats than most states, solidarity on the part of the UK and other regional and international allies offers critical additional defence capability, vital deterrence and sends a signal that the west will stand together against threats to peace.

UK-ISRAEL DEFENCE COLLABORATION: LEARNING FROM SHARED CHALLENGES

Britain's military leadership has been outspoken on the immediate threat facing the UK from Russia and Iran. These threats come in the form of both direct attacks by Iran on UK interests, as well as the potential for Russian aggression in the Baltics and Eastern Europe and direct attacks against western and central European countries by ballistic missiles.

Since the start of the US-Israeli conflict with Iran, UK interests have been targeted on several occasions and Tehran has threatened direct attacks against the UK. A one-way attack drone, which is believed to have been launched from Lebanon by Hezbollah, hit RAF Akrotiri just before midnight on 1 March. The UK has since reinforced its defences for the base, including with additional fighter jets and ground-based air defences. On 20 March, the IRGC carried out a limited long-range ballistic missile attack on the US-UK joint base on Diego Garcia, using two missiles with an operational range of 2,500 miles. One missile fell short while the other was intercepted by the US. Erbil base in Iraq, which houses British and American troops, has been attacked several times by Iran, including one incident where Britain's Rapid Sentry system brought down 14 drones in one night.

"Despite direct attacks from Iran, the government is right to maintain that Russia continues to pose the most significant security threat to the UK."

The aerial threat facing the UK and its allies from Iran and its proxies has been on full view since Iran began retaliating across the region, striking 14 countries including UK allies such as Jordan, Israel, Bahrain, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. It has fired more than 1,000 missiles and nearly 4,000 UAVs. US and Israeli strikes on Iran have targeted missile launch sites, manufacturing facilities and military leaders. While it has inflicted significant damage, Iran continues to possess a substantial arsenal. Prior to the beginning of hostilities in late February, Iran was believed to possess some 2,500 ballistic missiles. Volleys of missiles fired by Iran include the Khorramshahr cluster bomb (2,000-2,000km), the Kheibar Shekan (1,450km) and Emad (1,800km). Cluster bombs have caused many of the civilian casualties in Israel, while the hundreds of UAVs launched every week, including the Shahed 139 UAV (2,700km), have wreaked havoc across the Gulf. Israel's military has warned that Iran is able to strike the UK homeland as well as other European allies.[1]

Despite direct attacks from Iran, the government is right to maintain that Russia continues to pose the most significant security threat to the UK. Last year, Dr Fiona Hill, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and former deputy assistant to the president and senior director for Europe and Russia at the US National Security Council, was clear that Russia is at war with the UK. Since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin has frequently threatened the UK and Europe with direct attacks. In February 2026, Dimitry Medvedev, deputy chair of Russia's Security Council, once again threatened nuclear retaliation against the UK. The government's 2025 strategic defence review described Russia as the most acute threat the UK is facing, while, as a 2024 House of Commons

[1] The attacks on UK interests parallel a significant increase in the Iranian domestic threat to the UK, with attacks against Jewish community targets potentially including the arson attack in north London on four ambulances owned by a Jewish community organisation. A series of arrests of Iranian operatives and increased activity in the charitable sector this year follow an MI5 report in late 2025 that 20 Iran-backed plots had been tracked in the year to date.

defence select committee report argued starkly, Russia has both "the capability and intent to prosecute a war in Europe".

The Kremlin has consistently threatened a wider war against Europe. Reports on secret files indicate Russia has been mapping potential European targets, including the UK, using conventional and nuclear warheads. Attacks on the UK and its allies could come from Russia's Northern Fleet against military-industrial targets. Moreover, the challenge to UK aerial defence may not only be from Russia itself, with Vladimir Putin musing in June 2024 about supplying "Britain's enemies" with weapons to attack Britain in the same fashion as the UK's support for Ukraine.

Russia is a direct threat to the UK, possessing a range of short to long-range assets capable of striking forward operating troops in battlefield scenarios as well as direct attacks against European capitals. These include: air-launched missiles, such as the Kh-31; short-range ballistic missiles, like the Iskander and Tochka-U; supersonic/hypersonic cruise missiles, 9M729/SSC-8; and ground-launched cruise missiles. With Russia possessing one of the world's largest stockpiles of nuclear and non-nuclear ballistic missiles, the threat from Moscow requires the rapid acceleration of a UK and Europe-wide aerial defence umbrella.

Iran and Russia are part of a coordinated axis of anti-western powers, and their alliance has been on full display during the war in Iran. Moscow has reportedly been providing drones to Iran, and the Kremlin has been sharing intelligence, including imagery of US targets in the region, with Tehran. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, accelerating collaboration between the two capitals is leading to the development of a wider range of threats: from low-end loitering munitions, a type of drone that can be used to attack targets with explosives, to cruise and quasi-ballistic missiles. With Iran's support, Russia launched more than 50,000 Shahed-type UAVs in 2025 alone at Ukraine — with Iran's technology representing one of the most widespread threats facing Ukrainians. In January 2025, Putin and the Iranian president, Masoud Pezeshkian, signed a long-forecast Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in Moscow. The agreement is aimed at strengthening bilateral relations over the next 20 years.

"For the last 30 years, Russia has supported Iran on a range of military interests."

This Moscow-Tehran axis long predates the war in Ukraine and Russia's assistance to Iran during the 2026 conflict. Both authoritarian powers have been targeted by the US and the west through economic sanctions and are key pillars of the geopolitical rivalry with the west and the international, rules-based order. For the last 30 years, Russia has supported Iran on a range of military interests, including its nuclear programme, tanks, armoured vehicles, combat aircraft and surface-to-air missiles. Russia is also supporting Iran's space programme, electronic warfare and may assist in expanding Iran's long-range ballistic missile threat. Russia has also confirmed the export of training aircraft to Iran, a key step in helping Tehran upgrade its antiquated 1970s inventory of US aircraft, which were purchased by the Shah. There is evidence too that Russia has also increased its support for Iran's proxy allies, including supplying Hezbollah with arms.

Like the UK, European governments are also grappling with the fact that the US' historic commitment to the continent's security is no longer assured. In his speech to the Munich Security Conference last year, Vice President JD Vance dismissed the Russian threat to Europe and called into question the rationale for continued US support for Europe. The recent US national security strategy codified the Trump

administration's scepticism towards Europe and downplayed the threat posed by Russia. US threats against NATO member Denmark over Greenland has further eroded trust. With a clear and present Russian and Iranian threat, along with the need for a more independent defence posture, the UK and its allies should look closely at battle-tested defence systems to prepare for what was once considered unthinkable.

DEFENDING THE UK AGAINST ATTACK: THE ISRAELI APPROACH

Despite the perilous nature of this evolving threat, the last government left the UK seriously underprepared to defend the homeland.

Much has been made of the British army being smaller than at any other time since the Napoleonic era and facing "significant capability deficiencies", with similar reservations expressed about the capabilities of the RAF and Royal Navy. Former members of the armed forces leadership and other defence experts and analysts have warned that the UK is underprepared and ill-equipped to fight a "peer-on-peer" direct conflict or to defend itself from attack.

In his comments to a defence select committee inquiry, Professor Michael Clarke noted: "British forces over the past 30 years have done a great deal of operating, but have not prepared for war fighting." The former director of the Ministry of Defence's Office of Net Assessment and Challenge, Robert Johnson, noted that Britain "cannot defend the British homelands properly" and that air defences were "insufficient" to stop long-range missile strikes. An earlier defence select committee report found that the UK has "inadequate domestic air and missile defence capabilities". The RAF does not have kinetic ground-based air defence systems or an antiballistic missile capability, with observers arguing the UK would be unable "to defend its skies against the level of missile and drone strikes that Ukraine is enduring".

The UK does not have a ballistic missile defence capability akin to Israel's. The Royal Navy is the only service that operates a ballistic missile defence capability. Recognising and facing down these threats, the UK's defence establishment operates a "deterrence by denial" approach which seeks to make action by an aggressor unlikely or unable to succeed.

While there remain significant gaps in the UK's capacity to defend against missile attacks on the homeland from an aggressor, it does have a number of assets capable of mounting a response. The British army's Sky Sabre medium-range, ground-based, mobile air defence system entered service in 2021 and can engage fighter aircraft, attack helicopters, drones, and-laser guided smart bombs and can communicate with ships and aircraft of the Royal Navy and RAF as well as allies. The Starstreak High Velocity Missile, in service with the British army, is designed for short-range air defence, while the Royal Navy's six Type 45 destroyers are equipped with ballistic missile defence systems, known as the Sea Viper system. The Sea Viper is capable of intercepting ballistic missiles, which was demonstrated most recently in the Red Sea when HMS Diamond intercepted a Houthi missile targeting commercial shipping.

The UK is also part of NATO's Integrated Air and Missile Defence, which is aimed at ensuring a desired level of control of the air, so that the alliance is able to conduct the full range of its operations and missions in peacetime, crisis and conflict. With a view to enhancing Europe's air defence architecture, Germany has proposed the Sky Shield programme, in part employing US-Israeli developed technology.

"[The UK] should closely review Israel's aerial defence architecture – which has been battle-tested for nearly two decades against every type of conventional attack."

To address the gap in Britain's aerial defences, the British army has initiated a ground-based air defence programme aimed at delivering short-range air defence, medium-range air defence, counter-small aerial target, and counter-small uncrewed aerial system capabilities to protect the UK's deployed forces and to potentially contribute to the defence of bases in the homeland. The 2023 defence command paper committed the Ministry of Defence to increasing efforts to deliver integrated air and missile defence promoting the use of "advanced ground-based, airborne, at sea and space-based sensors, and an extensive range of air and missile capabilities, including counter-UAS [drones], to detect, protect and defend the UK". The ministry also announced it would examine the missile "detection and interception technologies of the future". The paper further committed the UK to modernising its "approach to air and missile defence, both for our own forces and through integration with Allies".

As part of the 2025 strategic defence review, the government announced that £1bn would be invested in integrated air and missile defence. The defence secretary, John Healey, said the government has "boosted spending on counter-drone systems fivefold ... and spending on ground-based air defence systems by 50 percent".

The comparative threats faced by Israel and the UK is not an exact parallel, but both countries face aerial threats to their armed forces in the field, as well as to homeland military and civilian infrastructure from the same rival states. As the UK assesses its options to strengthen its aerial defences, it should closely review Israel's aerial defence architecture — which has been battle-tested for nearly two decades against every type of conventional attack.

UK-ISRAEL DEFENCE AND BUILDING A BRITISH "IRON SHIELD"

The 2023 roadmap for UK-Israel bilateral relations includes cooperation in defence and security as a priority area for growing collaboration and the two countries signed a defence cooperation agreement in 2020. At the time of the 2023 roadmap, the UK government suggested areas of cooperation would include defence medical training, organisational design and concepts, and defence education — as well as counter-terrorism and countering Iran. The 2023 roadmap committed both countries to conducting joint research and development "to identify transformational defence and security capabilities". However, given strained bilateral relations over the past two years, it is not clear that the UK is fully availing itself of opportunities to cooperate further with Israel in respect of homeland defence.

From a comparative standpoint, arms sales from the UK to Israel, which were partially suspended in 2024, are limited, representing only one percent of Israel's imports in this sector. However, Israeli defence subsidiaries provide significant advanced support for the UK's defence sector, with Israel being the UK's third-largest defence supplier. UK imports have included the Hermes-450 UAV, the Watchkeeper UAV, anti-tank guided missiles and protective body armour. Unlike other UK strategic defence partners, Israel has faced a range of asymmetric threats such as limited-range attacks from Gaza and counter-insurgency operations, as well as major exchanges with Hezbollah and Iran.

As with the war in Ukraine, a future major direct conflict for the UK will resemble those scenarios facing Israel today.

With a view to enhancing defence collaboration and familiarising itself with Israeli aerial defence technology — as well as other areas of Israeli expertise — the UK government could take a number of steps:

- The bilateral defence relationship should be formalised with a dialogue chaired at ministerial level focused on technology and sharing best practise. The "UK-Israel Defence Dialogue" could be led at the official level by respective chiefs of staff and underpinned by the Ministry of Defence's chief scientific adviser and Israel's Directorate of Defence Research and Development. The dialogue should establish dedicated workstreams to share best practises across domains and technologies including land, air and naval war, as well as cybersecurity. In addition to engaging in joint war-gaming and scenario-mapping, the dialogue should involve regular delegations and field visits.
- The restoration and expansion of professional military exchanges, including the return of Israel Defence Forces personnel to UK training courses and institutions.
- As part of the UK-Israel Defence Dialogue, the UK and Israel should establish a specific "Aerial Defence Dialogue" with the Ministry of Defence liaising directly with Israel's Missile Defence Organisation. In the first instance, its objective should be to allow the UK to learn lessons from the Israeli perspective, with a particular focus on the multi-layered, multi-front threat currently facing Israel both before and after the 7 October atrocities and subsequent conflicts. This platform could operate in parallel, or be integrated into, wider European approaches to aerial defence such as the Sky Shield initiative.
- Finally, the UK should explore which assets used and tested by Israel to defend the state and its civilians offer potential for acquisition and deployment by UK armed forces. While the UK has developed — and is in the process of enhancing — some of the world's most advanced aerial defence systems, the rapidly degrading threat picture may necessitate swifter steps to ensure the UK's security. Where opportunities allow, Ministry of Defence officials should arrange a delegation to view Israel's aerial defence architecture in operation.

As the government looks to structure and reset the bilateral relationship, collaboration to secure Britain's skies should be a priority. As Germany and Finland have already correctly recognised, Israel's multilayered aerial defence architecture, which, encompassing the Iron Dome, David's Sling, the Arrow System and its emerging Iron Beam, represent infrastructure ideally suited to the UK's critical need to address the increasing range of threats it faces.

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