

*INSS Insight* No. 1107, November 15, 2018

**Establishing an Arab NATO: Vision versus Reality**

**Yoel Guzansky and Kobi Michael**

**The Trump administration is reportedly working to create a joint Arab military force. This force, which the administration refers to as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), has already been dubbed an Arab NATO. From the perspective of the United States, a regional Arab coalition could reduce or prevent the need for the deployment of American troops in the Middle East, as such an alliance could, in principle, fight Iranian subversion and support for terrorism, as well as take action to curb Iranian weapons smuggling to Iranian proxies. The attempt to establish an Arab military alliance is not new, and the history of such efforts does not bode well for the future of the Arab NATO, which at this point appears to harbor overly ambitious objectives. In the short and medium terms, Israel has an interest in an inter-Arab alliance meant to focus on Iran's mounting involvement in the region. However, in the long term, this alliance, if it is established, could have additional significance that is not all positive for Israel. Regime changes within member states, for example, which could be accompanied by changes in priorities, could generate renewed anti-Israel hostility in an Arab region that possesses greater unity and military capability than today.**

Along with Iran's increasing influence in the Middle East, which is a cause for concern in Israel, the Arab countries, and the United States alike, reports in recent months have indicated that the Trump administration is working to create a joint Arab military force. This force, which the administration refers to as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), has already been dubbed an Arab NATO. According to official American and Arab sources, the force is intended inter alia to curb the expansionist tendencies of Iran and radical Islam. In addition to the United States, the force will reportedly consist of the six Arab Gulf countries, Jordan, and Egypt, and is to be launched in 2019. Military forces from the designated countries recently completed two weeks of maneuvers in the first exercise of its kind. Known as Arab Shield 1, the exercise was conducted in Egypt, without the participation of Qatar and Oman but including observers from Lebanon and Morocco, and has been described as the opening shot of a joint Arab military force.

**Previous Arab Models for Military Cooperation**

The attempt to establish an Arab military alliance is not new, and the history of such efforts does not bode well for the future of the Arab NATO, which at this point appears to

harbor overly ambitious objectives. In the 1950s, the United States had already failed in its effort to establish such a framework in the Baghdad Pact, and since then efforts to use the Arab League, the oldest inter-Arab framework, to create closer inter-Arab military cooperation have also failed. In 2015, the Arab League decided to establish a joint military force of 40,000 soldiers, designed to respond to mounting Iranian influence and radical Islam. Egypt was supposed to provide the bulk of the fighting force, and the Gulf states were supposed to provide the funding. The same year, Saudi Arabia announced the establishment of a military alliance consisting of 34 Islamic states to fight sub-state groups such as the Islamic State. In practice, none of these ambitious projects has thus far been realized.

Although Saudi Arabia has succeeded in creating a limited military coalition with other Arab countries for the war in Yemen, now in its fourth year, against the Iranian-supported Houthi rebels, only the United Arab Emirates has taken an active and meaningful part in the fighting. Meanwhile, the war continues without decision, and the coalition is charged with responsibility for inflicting significant harm on civilians and creating a severe humanitarian crisis in Yemen. In the Arab world, and perhaps especially in Egypt, this failure has revived memories of Egyptian intervention in the civil war in Yemen in the early 1960s, and deters most Arab countries from investing heavily in the effort. Indeed, with the exception of symbolic support, Saudi Arabia has failed to bring the Egyptian army – the strongest Arab army – into the campaign, despite the massive financial support it provides to Egypt. The largest Sunni military force, that of Pakistan, also did not mobilize for the undertaking, given Islamabad's desire to maintain good relations with Iran and to avoid involvement in an Iranian-Saudi confrontation. In addition, Pakistan is averse to participation in measures promoted by Mohammed bin Salman, due to doubts regarding his judgment.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) is perhaps the most successful example of institutionalized inter-Arab cooperation encompassing a joint military force. Under the flag of its military force, known as the Peninsula Shield, Saudi and UAE forces entered Bahrain in 2011 to ensure that the Shiite rebellion would not topple the Sunni monarchy. The GCC also constitutes a relatively successful model of inter-Arab cooperation in comparison to other regional organizations and even to state frameworks, such as the United Arab Republic (UAR), which was established in 1958 and did not last long; or the Arab Maghreb Union, which was established in 1989, though disagreement regarding the Western Sahara caused its paralysis. Within the framework of the GCC, joint economic and energy projects were launched, along with a gradual removal of the trade barriers between the countries. Coordination is also conducted with regard to issues of state and economy, as well as issues of border control, crime, and the war on terrorism. Evidence of the relative success of this body is reflected in the fact that GCC institutions still

function today, despite the crisis with Qatar. On the other hand, throughout its history, members of the GCC have remained divided on almost all issues on the agenda. According to its critics, the organization is no more than a stage for demonstrating Arab-Gulf unity, and its very establishment added to the division with disputes over its objectives, structure, and role. The public camaraderie and solidarity among the leaders of the Gulf states conceals competing interests, mistrust, inter-tribal competition, and territorial disputes. The same goes for the Arab League, which in many ways has become an empty vessel after declining in influence due to years of Arab tumult and deepening political and ideological divisions among its members.

### **Operational Difficulties and Political Obstacles**

From the perspective of the United States, a regional Arab coalition could reduce or prevent the need for the deployment of American troops on the ground, as such an alliance could, in principle, fight Iranian subversion and support for terrorism, as well as take action to curb Iranian weapons smuggling to Iranian proxies in the Middle East. In this way, the so called alliance – in the international arena and in the context of tension with Russia in the US domestic arena – could significantly lower the political costs of direct intervention. This will be true even if the regional Arab coalition involves financial costs for the United States stemming from increased military assistance to the alliance.

At the same time, a common enemy is sometimes not a solid enough basis for the establishment of an alliance. Unity among the Arab states has always been difficult to achieve. Longstanding tribal, familial, and interpersonal rivalries; territorial conflicts; and different positions regarding Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood have tainted relations among some of the countries. The countries designated for the future joint military force have different interests and conceptions regarding the existing threat. For example, the Sinai Peninsula and the Libyan arena are of central importance to Egypt, whereas the Yemeni arena is of central importance to Saudi Arabia and a region that consumes vast resources. Therefore, Egypt plays a primarily negligible and symbolic role in the Saudi and UAE-led Arab coalition operating in Yemen.

The chances of establishing an effective joint Arab military force are slim not only due to the different threat perceptions and priorities and the intense disagreements between some members, but also because of the modest military capabilities enjoyed by most participants. Moreover, all military alliances have a leading power, as reflected in the roles played by the United States in NATO and the former Soviet Union in the Warsaw Pact. In the case of the Arab world, the struggle over leadership will be between Egypt and Saudi Arabia – the countries with the largest and strongest armies of all the potential partners. In addition, this military force, which reports indicate is also meant to be sent to Syria, will need air cover and American logistical and intelligence support in order to be

effective and withstand possible aggression by the Syrian regime, supported by Russian or Iranian aid. Therefore, the Trump administration will need to take into account practical considerations regarding the actual abilities of its allies in the Middle East and encourage them to train in a way that will enable them to carry out joint operations when necessary.

However, it is currently unrealistic to ask these countries to project significant military power far from their own borders. Moreover, they cannot be expected to come to the aid of others in a manner similar to Article 5 of NATO. Like political unity, the Arab world still lacks the military capabilities required to imbue public commitments with credibility and practical meaning. Political and operative problems are likely to make it difficult for the inter-Arab force to become a meaningful component in the security of its member states, and for this reason its importance, if it is ultimately established, is liable to be largely symbolic. However, this too will be no trivial achievement in light of the inter-Arab divisions and disagreements that will need to be settled before it will be possible to progress with the initiative. Given the deep rifts among the Gulf states, is the administration's overall approach – of building a joint Arab military force that will be more than just a symbol of Arab unity and will relieve the United States of responsibility for the Middle East – a realistic prospect, or simply a pipedream? Indeed, it is likely that the project will remain on paper alone.

### **Israeli Interest or Cause for Concern?**

Certainly in the short and medium terms, Israel has an interest in an inter-Arab alliance meant to focus on Iran's mounting involvement in the region. This would highlight that the threat from Iran stems not only from its efforts to acquire nuclear weapons but also from its blatant attempts to become the leading regional power. The alliance is also supposed to fight the threats posed by the Salafi jihadist movement and political Islam. The establishment of this alliance could help deepen the ties between Israel and the different countries in the region, and open a door to quiet Israel cooperation with the alliance (for example, in the provision of intelligence support).

However, in the long term, this alliance, if it is established, could hold additional significance that is not all positive for Israel. Regime changes within member states, for example, which could be accompanied by changes in priorities, could generate renewed anti-Israel hostility in an Arab region that possesses greater unity and military capability than today. Therefore, it would be prudent for Israel to refrain from relating publicly to the effort, and to increase its coordination with the United States on the issue as it evolves. Israel should ensure that it has an updated picture regarding MESA-related developments and reach understandings with the US regarding the neutralization of aspects that could be problematic for Israel.