

Alliances Without Commitment: Collective Security in the Arab World

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The cumulative experience of Arab states in advancing collective security reveals a persistent gap between the proliferation of alliances, coalitions, and joint organizations and the depth of the security commitments they generate. Regional states are willing to declare solidarity, but their willingness to act on behalf of their partners and bear the resulting costs depends on how closely their threat perceptions align, the relevance of the issue to their particular national interests, and the cost of taking action. The current regional war has illustrated this vividly: even when all six Gulf states were attacked by Iran, the pledge of collective defense did not translate into substantive military cooperation, let alone a joint response. A further finding is the proliferation of parallel political and security frameworks. This suggests that the purpose of joining such alliances is not necessarily to forge military commitments, but rather to signal, hedge, gain status, and expand room for maneuver. Rather than entrusting their security to a single binding alliance, states in the region prefer to build layers of partnerships. In doing so, they hope to benefit from the advantages of alliance without forfeiting their freedom of action. In this sense, the proliferation of alliances reflects the weakness of mutual commitment.

The Arab arena is characterized by a proliferation of security frameworks, coalitions, and joint forces. Since the mid-twentieth century, attempts have been made to institutionalize the principle of collective security: an attack on one state is supposed to be considered a threat to the others, and political cooperation is intended to translate, when necessary, into a commitment to collective defense. Over the years, however, a gap has emerged between declared solidarity and the actual willingness to bear the costs entailed in its realization. This article examines the prominent attempts to establish collective security in the Arab arena, from longstanding frameworks to coalitions formed in recent years. It analyzes the gap between declared commitments and objectives and their actual implementation: whether and under what circumstances states have been willing to translate formal solidarity into operational security and military commitments, and what conditions have enabled joint action or, conversely, led to its paralysis. On this basis, it identifies the conditions for the success or failure

of Arab collective security and examines their implications for the regional frameworks now taking shape.

For the purposes of this discussion and beyond, it is important to distinguish among different forms of security alignment. An alliance is an arrangement, usually formal and enduring, centered on a commitment by member states to assist one another in the face of an external threat, at times extending to mutual defense in the event of an attack. What distinguishes an alliance is that it involves more than a shared interest: it entails an ongoing commitment that carries costs and limits its members' freedom of action. A state enters an alliance to enhance its security, deter adversaries, and improve its prospects of receiving assistance during a crisis. Yet the commitment itself generates risks. [As Glenn Snyder argued in his classic analysis of the "alliance security dilemma," alliance members face an enduring tension between two opposing risks](#): abandonment—the fear that an ally will fail to stand by them when put to the test—and entrapment—the fear that the alliance commitment will draw them into a conflict that does not serve their interests. This tension helps explain why states seek to benefit from the deterrence and security an alliance provides, while concurrently preserving their autonomy and avoiding automatic military commitments. It appears particularly acute in the Middle East, where states may share certain interests, yet differ greatly in their threat perceptions and priorities. A formal framework can reduce the fear of abandonment, but the more binding it is, the greater the risk of entrapment.

A coalition is a flexible, temporary grouping established to address a specific mission, threat, or campaign, without a broader security commitment. A security framework or partnership is a looser category, which may encompass coordination, intelligence, training, capacity building, or consultation mechanisms, without an obligation to employ force on behalf of another member. By contrast, a regional or international organization is a permanent, multifaceted institution—such as the Arab League or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—within which security and defense constitute only one domain of activity. The boundaries between these categories are not always rigid and, in practice, frameworks can combine features from several of them. Therefore, [this article places less emphasis on the formal title assigned by states to a specific framework, focusing instead on the commitment it actually generates, especially whether members are obligated to assist one another in a crisis, and what that obligation means in practice](#).

Inter-Arab Collective Security in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century

The failure of the Arab states in the 1948 war against Israel accelerated efforts to transform the Arab League from a political framework into a mechanism for collective security. In 1950, the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation was signed, proving far more ambitious than the League's original 1945 charter. Article 2 effectively established a principle that, in some respects, paralleled Article 5 of the NATO treaty: [armed aggression against any member state or its forces would be considered an aggression against all, with member states pledging to come to its aid "without delay," including through the use of military force](#). The treaty also established a Joint Defense Council comprising foreign and defense ministers, as well as a

Permanent Military Commission composed of representatives of the general staffs. The commission was tasked with formulating joint defense plans, determining national force contributions, promoting standardization of equipment and training, and planning joint exercises. Yet this institutional structure failed to overcome the fundamental political problem: the member states sought shared security but refused to compromise their sovereignty and freedom of action, differing in their threat perceptions and struggling for leadership of the Arab world. Efforts in the 1960s to establish a unified Arab command also failed to produce an effective military mechanism. Even then, the gap that would plague numerous subsequent inter-Arab initiatives became apparent: far-reaching commitments on paper, alongside limited willingness to place national interests and military forces at the alliance's disposal when put to the test. Moreover, sometimes the threat comes not from outside the alliance but from one of its members, as demonstrated by Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait; at other times, members find themselves on opposite sides of a conflict, as with Libya and Yemen. In such instances, the joint organization shifts from an arena generating security into one reflecting the rivalries among its constituents.

Roughly three decades later, the six Arab monarchies of the Gulf attempted to address the same challenge within a narrower framework. The founding of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in 1981 seemed to offer favorable initial conditions for collective security: all six members shared similar characteristics, formed a contiguous geographic space, faced comparable security challenges, and articulated a "shared destiny and unity of purpose" in their founding charter. The Islamic Revolution and the Iran–Iraq War, which served as catalysts for the organization's creation, also spurred the formation of a joint military force, the Peninsula Shield Force. In 1983, the member states held a joint military exercise in the United Arab Emirates; in 1984, the force was formalized as a joint rapid deployment mechanism. Yet its establishment also highlighted a gap that would persist within the organization: consensus on the need for shared security was broader than the willingness to transfer authority, align threat perceptions, and rely on a joint military force rather than on national militaries and the American security umbrella.

The establishment of the Peninsula Shield Force represented the most advanced attempt to translate Arab states' shared sense of vulnerability into a collective security mechanism. From the outset, however, security cooperation struggled to overcome a fundamental tension between security and autonomy. The member states sought to enjoy the protection provided by the joint framework without relinquishing sovereignty, subordinating their forces to a regional command, or entrusting their security to the largest and most powerful among them—Saudi Arabia, which had spearheaded the force's creation and hosted its headquarters. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 exposed this limitation starkly: when a member needed protection against an existential threat, the joint force was incapable of providing it, necessitating American and international intervention. Conversely, the 2011 popular uprising in Bahrain presented a different dynamic: the threat was perceived in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi as an acute danger to their own stability, while the costs of intervention were relatively limited. The contrast between Kuwait in 1990 and Bahrain in 2011 illustrated that the mere existence of an alliance does not determine the level of commitment; instead, it hinges on the degree of

alignment among members' interests and the cost of acting upon them. Paradoxically, the smaller GCC states, which ostensibly required greater protection, leveraged alternative ties, first and foremost with Iran, avoided full commitment, and used the threat of distancing themselves to preserve their autonomy and bargaining power vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia.

Another key milestone was the GCC's Joint Defense Agreement of December 2000, which gave the Council's security framework a more binding dimension: an attack on one member state was to be regarded as a threat to all. However, the full text of the agreement was never made public, leaving both the scope of the commitment and the mechanisms for invoking it ambiguous. This ambiguity is not incidental: it reflects the tension that has accompanied the GCC since its inception, between the desire to cultivate deterrence and collective solidarity, and member states' reluctance to adopt an automatic commitment that could oblige them to act and limit their freedom of maneuver.

Thus, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 exposed the limitations of the Peninsula Shield Force: it did not deter Iraq and could not defend Kuwait on its own. This should not, however, be regarded as a complete failure of the framework. Force units later took part in combat alongside the coalition to liberate Kuwait, including in the Battle of Khafji, and GCC forces initially participated in the coalition in Yemen beginning in 2015. Bahrain in 2011 was therefore not the sole instance in which the framework was activated, but it was the most salient case in which a regional commitment was swiftly translated into joint, relatively autonomous military action, precisely because the threat was perceived as shared and the anticipated costs were limited.

Another example of the limitations of Arab integration is the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), established in 1989 by Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania. Its charter was ambitious, encompassing economic integration, political coordination, and even a clause stipulating that aggression against one member would be considered aggression against the others. Following an initial burst of momentum, however, the Union effectively became dormant, and its Council of Heads of State has not convened since 1994. The primary reason for this was the rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, particularly the dispute over Western Sahara and their competition for leadership in the Maghreb. This was compounded by weak shared economic interests and each state's preference to cultivate its bilateral ties with Europe independently. This case underscored that cultural and geographic proximity, alongside shared institutions, are insufficient to produce regional commitment when the framework's key members see one another as competitors.

Inter-Arab Collective Security Since the 2000s

The cumulative experience of the Arab League, the GCC, and the Arab Maghreb Union illustrates an enduring gap between the vision of collective security and its practical realization. Yet these failures have not put an end to efforts to form such alliances. Over the past decade, there has been renewed momentum to establish security frameworks, many of them initiated or led by Saudi Arabia. Examining these frameworks raises the question of whether they repeat familiar

patterns or whether the region's new conditions offer the potential for more substantial security commitments.

The military intervention in Bahrain was a rare instance of the principle of collective security being put into practice. The circumstances of the intervention, however, clarify why a tangible commitment manifested specifically there. At the height of the Arab Spring, following the fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt and amid uncertainty regarding how far the wave of protests would spread, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi viewed the events in Bahrain not merely as a threat to the al-Khalifa family. They feared a domino effect—a destabilization of the Gulf monarchical order and the possibility that they themselves would be next in line. In other words, an unusual overlap emerged between defending an ally and defending themselves. Furthermore, the military cost was relatively low: Bahrain is small, connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway, and the intervention did not necessitate a war against the military of a rival state, but rather action against social unrest. The case therefore points to three key conditions that increase the likelihood of a security commitment being realized: substantial convergence in threat perception, a direct link between the ally's fate and the assisting state's own security, and low military and political cost.

One of the frameworks established over the past decade is the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), whose formation Riyadh announced in December 2015. It initially included 34 Muslim states and later expanded to 43, with its headquarters established in Riyadh. The initiative was designed to showcase Muslim states assuming shared responsibility in the fight against terrorism, though it likely had a secondary objective: reinforcing Saudi Arabia's standing as a leader in the Muslim world. The coalition did not evolve into an operational military alliance or a "Muslim NATO." One of the main reasons for this was the absence of a shared threat perception. The term "terrorism" provided a common rhetorical denominator, but member states did not necessarily agree on what fell under that definition, which threats should take priority, or what they were prepared to do about them. The sheer number of member states also hindered deeper cooperation: the broader and more diverse the framework, the more difficult it is to reach consensus on objectives, command structures, and the use of force. More importantly, participation in the coalition's operations remained voluntary—a mechanism that reduced the fear of entrapment in other countries' wars but also weakened the military commitment.

The organization should not, however, be regarded as a complete failure. The "coalition" has survived, and even expanded, carrying out activities in training, capacity building, combating terrorist financing, and ideologically countering extremism. [In 2026, it tightened its cooperation with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre \(UNCCT\)](#). In this sense, it has evolved into an institutional platform for coordination and capacity building. For Riyadh, this carries intrinsic value: the coalition places Saudi Arabia at the center of a broad Muslim security network, giving it legitimacy, status, and the ability to convene. This case illustrates a key distinction: a framework may fail to generate mutual military commitments, yet succeed as an instrument of influence, declaratory intent, and regional leadership.

A similar, though not identical, pattern is evident in the establishment of the [Council of Arab and African Coastal States of the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden](#) in January 2020, with the participation of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Yemen, Eritrea, Djibouti, and Somalia. The Council was not established as a formal defense alliance, nor was it initially intended to create a joint military force; the Saudi foreign minister made clear upon its founding that the objective was to develop collective coordination based on the member states' existing capabilities. Its purpose was to establish a framework for consultation, coordination, and cooperation in an area that had become a theater of strategic competition. In this sense, the initiative can be seen as an attempt by regional states to reinforce their "ownership" of Red Sea security, at a time when the military and economic presence of outside powers and actors in the region was growing.

For Saudi Arabia, the move represented an attempt to institutionalize the Red Sea as a distinct strategic sub-system and position Riyadh at its center. The placement of the Council's headquarters in Riyadh reflected this ambition. From Riyadh's perspective, the importance of this theater stems from its role as a vital artery for trade and energy, the need to defend its western coast and new economic projects, and its utility as a partial strategic alternative to export routes passing through the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, however, the Council demonstrated the difficulty of transforming geographic proximity into a collective security interest. Member states share the same maritime space, but do not necessarily share the same threat perception: Egypt focuses on the security of the Suez Canal and its own standing in the Red Sea, whereas Saudi Arabia assigns greater weight to Yemen, the Houthis, Iran, and the security of energy transit routes. The Council therefore created a new institutional framework and served Saudi Arabia's aspiration to shape the regional architecture, yet the ongoing crisis in the Red Sea illustrates its limitations.

[Six years later, Riyadh launched the establishment of the Multinational Maritime Defense Alliance, initially comprising 14 countries and designed to protect navigation in the Red Sea, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Gulf of Aden.](#) In this respect, the very creation of a new framework is largely an admission of the previous framework's limitations in providing an effective security response. This time, Riyadh sought to give the alliance a clearly military and operational character, including a joint command, a command-and-control center, and a maritime operations center. It is still unclear, however, what forces and capabilities the member states will make available, and how willing they will be to act in a crisis. Until proven otherwise, there is considerable doubt that the new alliance will fare differently from its predecessor.

[Another Saudi-led coalition was formed in 2015 for the war in Yemen.](#) Unlike the counter-terrorism coalition or frameworks safeguarding freedom of navigation, this one required its partners not merely to declare solidarity but to take part in an actual war. Riyadh succeeded in convening a coalition that included, among others, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, and Morocco, but significant disparities in the level of commitment were apparent from the outset. Oman refrained from joining, while Pakistan—a longstanding security ally of Saudi Arabia—rejected an explicit Saudi request to take an active role in combat

operations. [The Pakistani parliament opted for neutrality, while making a critical distinction: Islamabad made a vague commitment to assist if Saudi Arabia itself came under attack, but was unwilling to fight the Saudi war in Yemen.](#) Varying degrees of commitment were also evident among the participating members. Egypt contributed limited naval and air assets, which it later withdrew, but avoided deploying substantial ground forces, partly due to the memory of its disastrous entanglement in Yemen in the 1960s; subsequently, the participation levels of other members also shifted or declined over time. The Yemeni case thus clearly illustrated the distinction between Saudi Arabia's ability to form a coalition and its ability to generate a deep and sustained military commitment. It also sharpened the dilemma of entrapment: even close partners of Riyadh sought to retain the right to decide whether a threat to Saudi Arabia was also a threat to them, and whether it justified the cost of going to war.

Another case is the Saudi–Emirati–Bahraini–Egyptian Quartet against Qatar from 2017–2021. Unlike other frameworks, the four countries had a relatively shared threat perception and a clearly defined goal: exerting pressure on Doha to change its policies. The four states managed to sustain political and economic coordination over several years and imposed an extensive boycott on Qatar, yet failed to achieve their primary goal: [Qatar did not accept the 13 demands put to it and did not substantively alter its foreign policy.](#) Its ability to rely on its wealth, its relations with the United States, and support from Turkey and Iran diminished the effectiveness of the pressure. The case demonstrates that even relative cohesion among coalition members does not guarantee success when coercive capacity is constrained, its demands are perceived as an infringement on sovereignty, and the target state is capable of bearing the cost and mobilizing external backing. Moreover, the coalition had the opposite effect on collective security: the rift within the GCC weakened security cooperation among the Gulf states and hindered efforts to forge a united regional front vis-à-vis Iran.

The war with Iran that began in February 2026 is the clearest test to date of the GCC's concept of collective security. Beginning on February 28, as the war between Iran and the United States and Israel erupted, Iran attacked all six Council members, ostensibly creating the optimal conditions for activating joint defense mechanisms: a single external adversary and a direct threat to all members. Although foreign ministers adopted the principle of collective self-defense on March 1, the declaration did not translate into the activation of a joint command or a collective military response. The defense mechanisms built over decades remained on the sidelines, and despite ad hoc coordination, each state confronted the threat on its own. In doing so, the war highlighted the gap between consensus on the very existence of a common threat and the capability and willingness to translate that consensus into collective defense in practice. Moreover, if Iran indeed calibrated its attacks across the states to fragment their response, this illustrates how an adversary can exploit the framework's structural weakness: political solidarity without an effective operational mechanism for joint action in real time.

The war with Iran also requires a reassessment of Pakistan's commitment. Unlike its refusal to participate in the war in Yemen in 2015, Pakistan deployed thousands of troops, fighter jets, UAVs, and an air-defense system to Saudi Arabia in April 2026. Yet the deployment commenced only after the ceasefire between the United States and Iran (April 2026) took effect, and

therefore should not be considered proof of Pakistani willingness to fight alongside Riyadh at the height of the conflict. The forces were designated primarily for defense, advisory, and training purposes, and were not employed against Iran. Moreover, the deployment took place against the backdrop of a generous Saudi grant to support Pakistan's economy, indicating that Pakistan's economic interests are also part of the equation. The case thus reinforces the concept of conditional commitment: Pakistan is willing to commit resources and contribute to the kingdom's defense, while limiting the risk of being drawn into a war.

Lessons and Insights from the Arab Experience

The examined case studies differ from one another. The Arab League and the 1950 Treaty of Joint Defense sought to forge a pan-Arab collective security mechanism, whereas the GCC and the Peninsula Shield Force represented a narrower and more homogeneous sub-regional endeavor based on geographic, regime, and strategic proximity. The Arab Maghreb Union combined aspirations for economic and political integration with elements of mutual defense. The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen was an ad hoc alliance designed to wage actual warfare. Meanwhile, the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition and the Red Sea Council were designed to address more specific threats, while combining security objectives with political coordination, capacity building, and aspirations for regional leadership. Some of the frameworks were Arab, others Muslim; some were pan-regional, others sub-regional; some created permanent institutions and ostensibly binding charters, while others were more flexible coalitions.

Yet despite these differences, all gave expression to the same fundamental premise: an attempt to translate shared interests or identity into the capacity for collective security action, specifically to provide security for member states. In every case, to varying degrees, there was a substantial gap between the vision and its implementation. As early as 1950, the Arab League established ambitious mechanisms for mutual defense but struggled to activate them when put to the test. The Peninsula Shield Force failed to protect Kuwait in 1990, although it was deployed under entirely different circumstances in Bahrain in 2011; the Maghreb Union effectively became dormant due to the rivalry between Algeria and Morocco; the coalition in Yemen exposed wide disparities in threat perceptions and in partners' willingness to bear the costs of war; and both the Islamic framework and the Red Sea Council evolved primarily into mechanisms for coordination, training, legitimization, and signaling rather than binding collective defense systems, despite the declarations made when they were established.

At the same time, several of these frameworks endured, fulfilled important roles, and were even activated under specific circumstances. Yet time and again, it became clear that it is relatively easy to agree on the need for collective security, sign treaties, establish headquarters, and conduct joint exercises, yet far more difficult to agree on who the enemy is, who will lead, how much autonomy each state will retain, and, above all, what price each is willing to pay for the security of another. In terms of alliance theory, states sought to reduce the risk of abandonment through collective frameworks, while simultaneously avoiding entrapment and preserving their freedom of action. This is perhaps the central lesson of the Arab experience in alliance building:

the problem was not a lack of collective-security frameworks, but a lack of commitment when the moment of truth arrived.

An analysis of these case studies raises the question of the underlying logic driving the formation of alliances and security frameworks when their operational viability or the willingness to activate them remains in doubt. The Arab experience demonstrates that alliances and regional organizations are not merely instruments of warfare; they function as mechanisms for signaling intentions to partners and adversaries regarding preferences, interests, and red lines. The more costly the signal, whether it involves deploying forces, conducting exercises, integrating military capabilities, or making a formal commitment, the greater its potential credibility. Yet signaling does not inherently require an automatic commitment to go to war. From Saudi Arabia's perspective, the ability to convene states within a framework headquartered in Riyadh can generate prestige, expand its influence, and convey to allies and adversaries alike that it is not isolated. The very act of forging an alliance may therefore serve as an instrument of foreign policy, even if the alliance itself was not intended to be activated in every scenario.

Relations with the United States add another dimension. Saudi Arabia is not necessarily seeking to replace Washington as its main security guarantor, but to reduce the cost of dependence on it. In alliance-theory terms, this is a policy of hedging: maintaining the alliance with the United States while expanding ties with other actors, including Pakistan and Turkey, and at the same time engaging in dialogue with Iran. [Engaging diverse partners does not, therefore, reflect contradictory strategies; these relationships can exist in parallel to expand a state's room for maneuver.](#)

The defense agreement signed in Mecca on August 7, 2026, by Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan has renewed the relevance of this question. The agreement includes a provision stating that an attack on any one of the three countries will be considered an attack on all of them. At first glance, it brings together three major Muslim countries with complementary assets: Saudi Arabia offers religious and economic standing; Turkey has a large military, operational experience, and a developed defense industry; and Pakistan has a large military and an operational nuclear arsenal. The symbolic dimension is no less significant. The choice to sign the agreement in Mecca—the holiest city in Islam—and the prominence given to the leaders' prayer after the signing lend it a dimension of Islamic legitimacy. Riyadh can thus present itself not only as a funder or security partner, but also as making the holy sites available to a broader Islamic framework. In this sense, the alliance also serves Saudi Arabia's ambition to establish its position as a center of leadership in the Muslim world.

The significance of this new alignment should not be measured solely by its ability to become an effective military alliance or by its members' willingness to fight for one another. Its significance appears to be primarily strategic and political: it expands the members' room for maneuver, gives them additional partners and options, and strengthens their bargaining position in the region. For Saudi Arabia, it reduces, if only at the margins, its exclusive dependence on the United States and strengthens its position as a hub linking different centers

of power. For Turkey, it deepens its reach into the Gulf and expands its influence in the Arab and Muslim worlds. For Pakistan, it provides an important political and economic foothold in the Middle East. The question, then, is not only what the alliance can do in wartime, but also what new political options its very existence gives its members in relation to the United States, Iran, Israel, and other Arab states.

Early developments since the signing of the agreement indicate that the three countries seek to grant the 'Mecca Alliance' institutional substance, rather than leave it as a declaration of solidarity. Discussions are also underway on intelligence, training, logistical coordination, and cooperation in the defense industries, including joint development and production. It is too early to determine whether these efforts will translate into a military commitment in a crisis, but they point to an important shift from a declaratory alliance toward the creation of permanent mechanisms for coordination and cooperation. Plans to develop a path for other countries to join, together with reports of interest from additional countries, could increase the alliance's political weight. They could also exacerbate a familiar problem for collective-security frameworks in the region: as the number of members grows, so too may differences in their threat perceptions and in their willingness to bear costs for one another. The central test, therefore, is not the creation of institutions in itself, but whether institutionalization will, over time, generate interdependence, the capacity for joint action, and a credible commitment when put to the test.

The agreement clearly illustrates the tension between security and autonomy. Saudi Arabia wants to reduce the risk of abandonment, particularly amid doubts about the American security guarantee, by expanding its network of partners. Turkey and Pakistan, by contrast, want to benefit from the agreement without becoming entrapped in a situation that obliges them to fight Saudi Arabia's wars. This concern is not theoretical. In 2015, when Saudi Arabia sought support for the war in Yemen, Pakistan, as noted above, avoided direct involvement despite its deep security ties with Riyadh. Pakistan also took no military action to defend the kingdom after the attack on Saudi oil facilities in 2019. This experience shows that the Saudi-Pakistani relationship can be very close, yet still remain conditional on Islamabad's independent interests.

Islamabad seeks to avoid entanglement in a regional war in the Gulf and to preserve its relations with Tehran as much as possible, yet it finds it difficult to ignore the expectations of Riyadh—its longstanding ally and one of its most vital sources of economic support. Although the discussion has recently centered on the Mecca Alliance between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey, focusing exclusively on this new agreement misses the main point. Pakistan's commitment to the kingdom rests upon a security and economic relationship spanning decades. Pakistan has long provided troops, training, and security assistance, while Saudi Arabia has extended loans, deposits, and financial aid during crises, as well as supported the advancement of Pakistan's nuclear program. For Pakistan, which faces persistent economic hardship, Saudi support is vital and difficult to replace.

Pakistan has so far avoided direct involvement in the fighting in Yemen, but circumstances have changed: Saudi Arabia is now facing direct strikes on its territory and infrastructure. As pressure on the kingdom mounts, Pakistan will find it difficult to limit itself to declarations of support, nor can it afford a rift with Saudi Arabia. Further assistance on its part could include air defense, intelligence, and additional forces, even without participating in offensive operations. Therefore, should Pakistan expand its involvement in the conflict waged by Saudi Arabia, this should not necessarily be seen as an achievement of the Mecca Alliance, but rather as an expression of a longstanding strategic commitment and deep economic dependence. The Mecca Alliance may provide the headline, but it is the bilateral Saudi–Pakistani relationship that explains the intervention.

The Qatari experience also demonstrates the limitations of regional security frameworks. Over the years, Turkey built a tight strategic and security partnership with Qatar, deployed troops on its soil, and framed its presence there as a contribution to Qatari and regional security. Yet when Qatar's sovereignty faced a real test—the Israeli strike in 2025 and Iranian attacks in 2026—the Turkish presence did not translate into military intervention to defend its ally. After the Israeli strike, Ankara limited its response to strong condemnation, expressions of solidarity, and diplomatic engagements; similarly, the Iranian strikes were intercepted by Qatari forces and defense systems operating in the country, and did not lead to any overt deployment of Turkish forces against Iran.

The fact that Arab states collaborated militarily against Israel, most notably during the Yom Kippur War, does not contradict this article's central argument; it helps sharpen it. Arab states' mutual commitment is conditional and dependent on circumstances, and is not an automatic result of treaties and security frameworks. In 1973, exceptional conditions enabled cooperation: Egypt and Syria saw Israel as a common threat, both had a direct national interest in reclaiming territory they had lost in 1967, and the military objective was clearly defined. Additional Arab states also extended military, political, and financial assistance, but its scale and form varied according to each state's interests and the costs it was willing to bear.

The history of security frameworks in the Arab world demonstrates that regional security cooperation is best viewed as a spectrum of possibilities. At one end lie declaratory commitments, statements of solidarity, and "soft" cooperation in intelligence, training, procurement, and political-military coordination. In the middle lie frameworks that include planning, command, or joint military mechanisms. At the opposite end lies the most binding tier: the willingness to use force and even go to war alongside an ally under attack. The accumulated experience shows that most regional frameworks have remained toward the lower end of this spectrum. It may be precisely the ambiguity of their commitments that has enabled them to be established and endure, but that same ambiguity has left them "on paper": they have given member states deterrence, legitimacy, status, and cooperation, while leaving each state to decide whether and how to take part in an actual conflict.

In principle, the credibility of any regional alliance can be evaluated according to three core variables: the degree of convergence in threat perception; the extent to which defending an ally

aligns with the assisting state's own national security; and the cost of fulfilling the commitment. The 2011 military intervention in Bahrain largely met these criteria, making action possible. The Islamic Coalition and the Red Sea Council met them to a far lesser extent, and therefore remained primarily frameworks for coordination, legitimacy, and prestige. The Mecca Agreement should be assessed by the same criteria. It has the potential to evolve into a meaningful security framework, even if none of the three member states extends an automatic commitment to enter into war on the others' behalf. Yet the more it develops joint command and planning, the early deployment of forces, the integration of defense systems, regular exercises, and industrial and technological interdependence, the higher the political and military cost of abandoning an ally in a crisis will become.

Indeed, the insights emerging from the Arab experience are not necessarily unique to the Middle East. The dilemmas of abandonment and entrapment, differences in threat perceptions, disputes over burden sharing, and tension between the need for security and the desire to preserve autonomy also characterize alliances in other regions. At the same time, a prominent set of conditions exists in the Middle East that complicates the creation of a deep and enduring security commitment: acute sensitivity regarding sovereignty and regime survival; struggles for regional leadership; differing threat perceptions, even among close neighbors; substantial dependency on external great powers; and the centrality of non-state actors and proxy conflicts. This is therefore not a case of "Arab exceptionalism," but of a regional environment in which several factors known to weaken cohesion and commitment in alliances operate simultaneously and with particular intensity.

The proliferation of overlapping security frameworks in the Arab arena is, in itself, a significant finding. The same states belong simultaneously to alliances and bilateral agreements, ad hoc coalitions, and regional frameworks, without any single arrangement necessarily replacing the others. This suggests that the purpose of forming such alliances is not always to create a deep military commitment, but may also be to signal, hedge, gain status, and expand room for maneuver. Rather than entrusting their security to a single binding framework, states in the region build overlapping layers of partnerships, each offering different benefits while preserving their freedom of action. In this sense, the proliferation of alliances actually attests to the weakness of mutual commitment: the more alternatives a state maintains, the less need it has to rely exclusively on a single framework and bear the cost of commitment it entails.

Israel and Arab Collective Security

Historically, Arab states' limited capacity to translate political solidarity into military commitments served as an asset for Israel, particularly when Israel itself was seen as the common threat. Today, too, emerging regional frameworks could, over time, develop an anti-Israel orientation, especially in light of mounting criticism of Israel across the Arab and Muslim worlds in recent years. Joint statements by Arab and Muslim states since October 7, 2023, show that the Palestinian issue can still provide a broad common denominator, even among states that disagree on other strategic matters.

In the current reality, however, Israel also has a clear interest in effective inter-Arab cooperation. The Gaza Strip is a key example. A stable arrangement in Gaza cannot rely on Israel alone; it requires the involvement of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and other Arab actors in reconstruction, funding, governance, and the creation of an alternative to Hamas rule. The harder it is for these states to coordinate their positions and resources, the greater the relative weight of Qatar and Turkey, which already play central roles in mediation and in implementing arrangements concerning Gaza. From Israel's perspective, therefore, strengthening a pragmatic Arab bloc capable of acting together could help not only stabilize Gaza but also balance Qatari and Turkish influence.

The Saudi–Turkish–Pakistani agreement could likewise carry implications for potential Saudi–Israeli normalization. As Riyadh expands its portfolio of security and diplomatic partnerships, its reliance on the Israeli channel as part of its efforts to strengthen its security and regional standing may diminish. Turkey and Pakistan are not substitutes for the United States, nor can they offer Saudi Arabia the full range of benefits associated with a strategic arrangement with Washington and normalization with Israel. But the very existence of alternatives gives Riyadh greater room for maneuver and bargaining power. There is also a political dimension: deepening ties with two major Muslim countries allows Saudi Arabia to strengthen its standing in the Arab and Muslim worlds at a time when normalization with Israel carries a high political cost for the kingdom. The new “alliance” therefore does not close the door to normalization, but it could make normalization seem less necessary and urgent to Riyadh, raising the price Israel and the United States would have to pay to advance it.

Regional and international tensions surrounding Iran are another major consideration. For years, Israel sought to turn shared concerns about Tehran into a cohesive anti-Iranian bloc. In practice, even when there is a common threat and Arab states are attacked by Iran, their threat perceptions are not identical: the Gulf states seek to maintain channels of dialogue with Iran and avoid becoming part of an Israeli–American front against it. Even the covert security cooperation with Israel, which has expanded in recent years under CENTCOM's auspices, has advanced much further at the functional level than toward the creation of an overt anti-Iranian alliance. The lesson for Israel is that it should not expect a “Middle Eastern NATO,” but should instead promote mission-specific coalitions—in air defense, intelligence, protection of shipping lanes, and counter-smuggling—where the shared interest is clear and the political cost for Arab states is relatively low.

A concluding insight is that Israel should not necessarily aspire to formal regional alliances. The Arab experience shows that the more ambitious a framework is and the broader the commitment it demands, the sharper the concerns about loss of autonomy and entrapment, and the less likely the commitment is to be put into practice. Flexible, discreet, functional cooperation may prove more durable. For Israel, success need not be measured by the number of agreements it signs, but by how deeply it is integrated into networks for intelligence, defense, energy, trade, and maritime security that create interdependence and give others an interest in maintaining ties with it.

Finally, a cautionary note for Israel against sparking regional cohesion through its own policies. Arab states struggle to unite when their threat perceptions differ, yet they are capable of cooperating when they perceive a particular threat to be direct and shared. Therefore, it is in Israel's interest to preserve the divergence among perceived threats across the region and avoid unnecessarily providing a common denominator that could draw regional states closer together in opposition to Israel. In other words, Israel benefits from the weakness of Arab collective security when that mechanism is directed against it, yet requires Arab collective security when it helps stabilize the regional environment and address common threats. This tension should be central to Israeli policy toward the alliances now taking shape in the region.