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Saudi Arabia and its 40 Allies

What the Islamic Alliance really means

by *Florence Gaub*

In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced that an alliance of almost 40 Muslim countries would coordinate their counter-terrorism efforts with immediate effect. Is it a Muslim version of NATO or just political PR?

First of all, the idea is not new. Many Middle Eastern alliances have been announced since World War II. In 1950, the wording of the defence pact signed by Arab League member states was practically identical to that of NATO's Article 5 on collective self-defence. At about the same time, the United Kingdom's attempts to tie the countries of the region to NATO via Middle East Command, and later to at least coordinate them via the Middle East Defence Organisation, were both unsuccessful. In 1955, Iraq and Turkey launched the Baghdad Pact (officially known as the Middle East Treaty Organisation), which was also joined by Iran, Pakistan, and Britain. The member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have been working towards joining forces militarily – not just by words but by action – since 1982: first they created a joint task force (known as the Peninsula Shield Force), and since 2000 they have had a NATO-style defence agreement, institutionalised in the form of a defence council.

However, the fact is that alliances of all kinds in this region usually fail when put to the test. The Arab League could not agree on whether (or how) to help counter attacks on Lebanon in 1982, Libya in 1986, Kuwait in 1990, and Iraq in 1991 or 2003. The Baghdad Pact was dissolved in 1979 (Iraq had already left in 1958), and the rather modest Gulf force – which failed to help Kuwait in 1990 – was recently deployed to deal with opposition protests in Bahrain, in what was more of a domestic than a foreign policy measure. Nevertheless, the idea of bringing together military forces is a recurring one – and rightly so. There is much to be said for mutual support and coordination, especially when there is a clear need to meet challenges together.

An old idea repackaged

The Islamic Alliance is now the third attempt by Saudi Arabia to institutionalise military support since the Arab Spring. In 2013, the Gulf States announced the creation of a NATO-style integrated command structure under Saudi leadership, with access to some 100,000 troops. This was followed in 2014 by a joint police force (known as GCC-Pol) and a joint navy. However, as far as we know, progress on these projects has been slow. Only last year, Saudi Arabia and Egypt tried to set up a NATO-type structure within the Arab League for counter-terrorism purposes; it was to have a force of 40,000 troops and its own command structure. So well-aligned were the two countries in their stance on terrorism that President Sisi characterised security in the Gulf states as an integral part of Egyptian national security.

But the project failed. In August 2015, Riyadh put the already advanced negotiations on hold “until further notice”. There is much speculation as to why Saudi Arabia, along with Kuwait and Bahrain, decided not to establish a response force after all. Two differences of opinion are said to have led to this decision: with regard to Syria, Cairo is toying with the idea of moving closer to Assad, while Riyadh still wants him overthrown; and in terms of counter-terrorism, the top priority for Saudi Arabia is Yemen, while for Egypt it is Libya. There was also a tactical consideration at play: ultimately, Saudi Arabia did not wish to finance a mainly Egyptian force to invade other countries in the name of counter-terrorism. But this does not change the fact that Riyadh is still on the defensive politically, financially, and militarily, and is still looking for allies.

Why Saudi Arabia needs help

These are difficult times for Saudi Arabia. Following the nuclear deal with Iran, it feels abandoned by its traditional ally, the United States. In the spring of 2015, Washington rejected a pact with the Gulf states on the grounds that it had taken years to create the structure for NATO. And despite US efforts to provide military reassurance to the Gulf, tensions on the Arabian Peninsula remain high. Riyadh is involved in confrontations on several fronts: it feels threatened by Iran in the east, by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Houthi rebels in the south, and by ISIL in the north; while at home, demographic factors and the price of oil are forcing them to make difficult reforms. It cannot even fully rely on its neighbours in the Gulf. While Saudi relations with Qatar have been smoothed over since 2014, their dispute over the Muslim Brotherhood lingers on. And in 2013, Oman – traditionally a diplomatic loner – bluntly rejected Saudi Arabia’s proposed Gulf union. Oman is also the only Gulf state not to offer even token support for the operation in Yemen.¹ Riyadh feels it has been more or less abandoned to face its challenges alone.

Relations with Tehran have been difficult for decades, but now they have reached a new low. In September 2015, officials of the two countries exchanged harsh words after several thousand pilgrims were killed in a stampede in Saudi Arabia, 464 of them Iranian. Tehran claims that almost 5,000 of its citizens fell victim to Saudi negligence and threatened to take the matter to the International Court of Justice. Back in 1987, 400 people lost their lives when Saudi security forces clashed with Iranian pilgrims, whereupon the countries’ respective embassies were occupied by demonstrators. Ayatollah Khomeini then called for the overthrow of the House of Saud, but Tehran had regularly used provocative rhetoric, even before these events: after the fall of Sana’a, Ali Reza Zakani, a member of the Iranian parliament, declared that Iran now had four Arab capitals under its control (Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad being the other three). The Iranian Army commander Ahmad Reza Pourdastan said al-Saud was a hated family that just understood the language of power. Following the execution of a Shiite cleric in January this year, the Saudi embassy in Tehran was occupied once again and diplomatic relations were broken off.

Riyadh perceives the threat from Tehran to be so great that there have long been suspicions it would even join forces with Israel to contain it.² The opening of an Israeli liaison office in the United Arab Emirates – in the International Renewable Energy Agency – may well be a further step in the rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf States. Since the Arab Spring, Saudi Arabia sees itself as the only country in the region with any will to power. While Egypt is trying to re-establish itself as mother to the Arab nation, it is clearly Iran and Saudi Arabia who currently control the fate of the region. Where Riyadh once acted with reserve, it has now adopted a proactive approach to foreign policy – just like Iran.

¹ Al-Monitor, Omani rejection of GCC union adds insult to injury for Saudi Arabia, 9 December 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/12/oman-rejects-gcc-union-insults-saudi-arabia.html#ixzz3yRxEuKoL>; Al-Monitor, Oman breaks from GCC on Yemen conflict, 7 May 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/oman-response-yemen-conflict.html>
² Haaretz, Sunday Times: Israel, Saudi Arabia Cooperating to Plan Possible Iran Attack, 17 November 2013, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.558512>

In its approach to terrorism, Riyadh is currently waging a war on three fronts. ISIL has declared war on Saudi Arabia several times – including when the Saudis announced the formation of the Islamic Alliance, which ISIL considers an infidel alliance. An ISIL video showing the execution of an alleged Saudi spy called for Saudi citizens to rise up against their infidel rulers. In the last two years, ISIL has carried out several attacks in Saudi Arabia and killed over 50 people. Since then, Riyadh has stepped up its border controls, but the threat of ISIL does not just come from outside. Approximately 3,000 Saudi citizens have joined the terrorist cult in Iraq and Syria, and their return could lead to terror attacks, as has happened in Europe. A particular problem is that ISIL has attacked Saudi Arabia's Islamic credentials. As the guardian of the holy sites, Riyadh ought to be above accusations of heresy, and yet ISIL is causing it political damage both abroad and at home: from a foreign perspective there are striking ideological similarities between the kingdom and the caliphate, while on the home front ISIL undermines the religious justification for the political system in Saudi Arabia.

Riyadh also faces a threat from the south, where Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula is using Yemen to prepare attacks on Saudi Arabia (among other things). Since 2003, the organisation has succeeded in carrying out 16 attacks against the kingdom, and in 2009 the current Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef narrowly escaped with his life. The Houthis (a Shia militia) are a further security problem for Riyadh: since the mid-2000s there have been armed clashes between the militia and Saudi security forces, and in 2015 these escalated into a military operation which continues today. Furthermore, there are troubles in Riyadh's internal politics. Since the death of King Abdullah in January 2015, there have been rumours of rifts within the royal family. In particular, the King's son Muhammad bin Salman, the defence minister and now self-appointed chief reformer, is a rather controversial figure. In 2014, Riyadh was determined to "invest away" its domestic problems, despite the drop in the price of oil (2015 saw the biggest budget in Saudi Arabia's history), but there has since been a complete U-turn in this policy. Meanwhile, the price of oil is still falling, in part because Riyadh is still producing oil to finance its domestic situation.

Military under pressure

There are also military demands on Saudi Arabia. Until recently, its army had the reputation of a sleepy parade formation, while its national security was outsourced to the United States. But the development of its military shows that Riyadh has completely lost faith in this arrangement. Since 2003, the size of its army has doubled from 100,000 to 200,000 military personnel; its air force, with 305 fighter jets, is now the second largest in the Arab world after Egypt's – and probably a lot more modern. Riyadh is even working on a missile defence system, and its navy has grown from 15,000 to 25,000 personnel. The buildup of the Saudi military suggests that Riyadh is preparing for war at sea and/or in the air – or at least wishes to create that impression. But what the Saudi military lacks is experience. Its last foreign deployment before the Arab Spring was in 1991, against Iraq, but even in the years prior to that it was seldom deployed. Among the reasons for the Saudi operation in Yemen are that it provides Saudi pilots with bombing and reconnaissance experience, and it helps the coordination of various units on the ground – as well as cooperation with other countries. But Yemen is a burden on resources: since September, Saudi jets have stopped launching attacks with the coalition against ISIL, despite their participation having been announced with great fanfare. Saudi troops remain in Bahrain. In spite of support from the relatively large Emirati Air Force (with 200 fighter jets, this desert state the size of Barcelona has worked its way up to become the fourth largest air force in the region) and a coalition of Arabic and African countries, Riyadh remains essentially alone in its campaign in Yemen.

The company you keep: the Islamic Alliance

This is where the Islamic Alliance comes into the picture. It is a natural progression from earlier failed alliance projects, but avoids entering treacherous political waters. Just like the unsuccessful Arab Alliance, it is intended to help Saudi Arabia in the following three ways: by restoring balance to the region, as a counter-weight to Iran; by repairing damage to the country's Muslim reputation, both at home and regionally; and by leading to synergistic effects militarily. The regional component is reflected in the allies themselves: all 34 of them are members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, launched by Saudi Arabia in 1969, but another 23 member states of that organisation are not in the alliance.³ Most of the countries excluded appear to be those with Shia majorities among their populations, such as Iran, Syria, or Iraq. (Lebanon, which has a 30 percent Shia population, was listed by Saudi Arabia as a member, but later claimed not to have been asked to join.) The Saudi defence minister, Muhammad bin Salman, has stressed that the alliance is open to any Muslim country, provided they do not finance terrorist groups (such as Hezbollah, which Saudi Arabia listed as a terrorist organisation in 2013). However, it is a de facto Sunni Muslim alliance and, as such, has an anti-Iranian stance.

The alliance also serves two other purposes: it presents a united Sunni front to restore the Muslim legitimacy which both Iran and ISIL seek to undermine with revolutionary Islamic rhetoric; and it has a tactical military component, if a limited one – no standing army, no command structure, and no integrated units. It is to start out on a small scale with intelligence sharing and coordination (which is happening already to a limited extent in Yemen). Potential fields of operation include Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan, according to the defence minister, bin Salman. Even a troop deployment has not been ruled out in the medium term. All that can be said at this stage is that “nothing is off the table”, in the words of the Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir. But first and foremost, the alliance is intended to create an institutional platform for cooperation – thus laying the foundation stone for future joint operations. The new alliance is neither a kind of NATO (an integrated force concentrating on defence measures outside its territory), nor an EU (involved in domestic cooperation on counter-terrorism), nor is it like the UN (prepared to carry out peace missions after a conflict). Instead, it is a military alliance in the classical sense.

*Florence Gaub is senior analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies.
This article reflects the author's personal opinion.*

³ Members announced include: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Chad, Comoros, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauretania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. However, Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan claim not to have been asked to join. In the case of Libya and Yemen it is unclear which of them actually declared that they were joining.