The Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA): Another Brick in the Wall?

By: Jouna Khaldoun

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Considering that no region in the world has faced more crises than the Middle East since the 1940s (Morley, 1959), and that hardly a year passes by without outbreaks or threats of violence, it is no surprise that today, the region dwells at the heart of global security concerns. (Davis, Smith and Wezeman, 2017). A single political incident could catalyze into an unrestrained escalation, setting off a chain of violent confrontations involving local, regional, as well as, transnational powers (International Crisis Group, 2020). Accordingly, the regional political climate enthused the inevitability of a collective security architecture that would contain the power vacuum causing conflict and disarray in the region. It is within this context that the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) was suggested by the Trump Administration in 2017.

MESA was proposed to serve as what they claim, an "Arab NATO" or a collective security complex, encompassing GCC member states in addition to Egypt and Jordan, supported by the United States as a "guarantor of peace and stability". It ought to serve as a bulwark against Iranian aggression, terrorism, extremism, and bring stability to the Middle East, by enhancing the interoperability of its member states. (Farouk, 2019)

This Sunni-majority alliance is an ultimate pact against Iran and is presumed to serve American interests in the Middle East (Ragab, 2020). By reducing US military presence and allocating regional responsibility on MESA members while increasing their arms supply, Iranian hegemony shall be countered with minimal American intervention. Even though MESA's viability is greatly contested, the disastrous impact this alliance could have on Middle Eastern regional stability is abundantly neglected and only seen from an American perspective. Although

tailored to stimulate peace, MESA will have an opposite effect and shake the balance of power and stability of the region.

A plethora of reasons will expectantly hinder the possibility of establishing MESA, starting with the absence of a clear consensus among member states on its operational mission. There is an evident cleavage dividing the alliance, which is the perception of the Iranian threat, or in other words, intra-GCC differences on Iran.

Saudi Arabia and UAE wish to form a collective security alliance to alter Iranian hegemony, considering that they view Iran as a foe and an imminent threat. Whereas, States such as Kuwait and Oman preach and practice normal relations with Tehran (Farouk, 2019).Unlike fellow GCC members, Qatar shares close ties with Iran, but also has an indispensable relationship with its Gulf neighbours and the US. As for Egypt and Jordan, their threat perception has little to do with Iran, which is why Egypt withdrew in 2019, further weakening the possibilities of forming the alliance.(Kalin and Landay, 2019) Moreover, Jordan's main threat stems from Israel's expansionist foreign policy (Barari, 2018), and with MESA favoring Israeli interests in the region, it is not a favorable scenario for the Hashemite Kingdom.

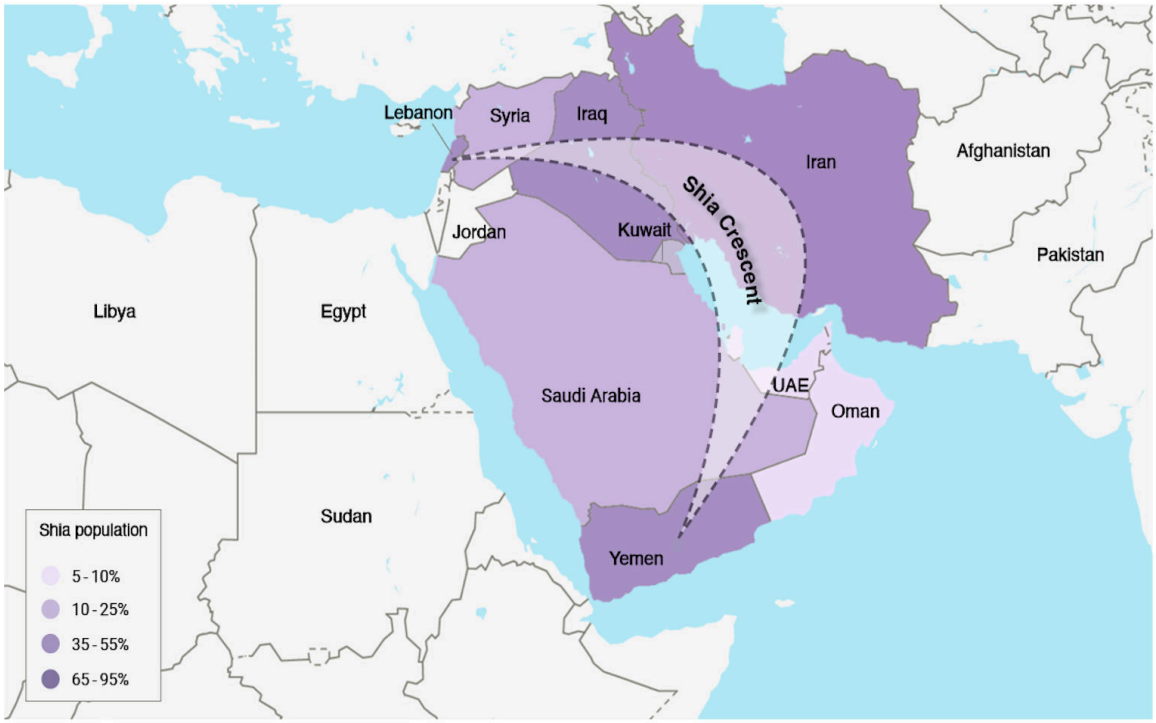
Given the power balance architecture in the region, no country is considered as a permanent friend or foe, and the way that countries perceive one another varies according to their discernment of threats (TISRI, 2020). That being said, and with MESA being a power-based institution against an explicit rival, this alliance could only disturb the balance of power in the region and further aggravate tensions in the Middle East.

Apart from the lack of common threat perception, which is a crucial pillar to a form any security alliance, the simplest way for MESA to crumble is for its member states to experience domestic instability ample enough to cause them to waver in their regional commitments (Farouk, 2019), and Arab states are no strangers to domestic turbulence. The Arab Spring is an illustration of the latter statement, considering how regime change contributed to a shift in Arab States' regional commitments.

According to a scientific study of war conducted by Vasquez and Rundlett (2015), alliances are a virtual necessary condition for multiparty wars, and while aimed at promoting peace through collective security, they paradoxically lead to war. Additionally, the fact that an alliance is created against a specific party, only leads to further aggression against it as well as its policies. It is clear that creating an alliance predominantly composed of Sunni states against Iran and its Shia militias is a call for war and more animosity. (Dedeoglu, 2018)

MESA members must seriously consider how this alliance will affect its strategic competitor and what response it might prompt. Being the principal adversary of the alliance, Iran will in all probability, respond inauspiciously. MESA, as well as US efforts to counter Iran's unconventional alliance network, in the face of mounting regional opposition, will only culminate in an increasingly aggravated security dilemma and a political deadlock in the region. It's going to make Iran more dependent on its Axis of Resistance that stretches from Tehran to Beirut. (Behravesh, 2020). Also called the Shia Crescent, it is considered as the most vital affiliate of Iran's unconventional alliance and patronage network in the Middle East.

Iran's network of influence in the Middle East: The Shia Crescent



By empowering MESA, Iran will shift the balance of power by, embedding more Shia militancy as well as violent non-state actors in the region, consequently generating more terrorism, violent extremism, and engaging the entire Middle East in fighting more proxy conflicts, while making it a breeding nest for militias and guerilla warfare.

Since 2003, the Iranian Quds Force has trained, created, and funded a weighty transnational Shia militancy. The collective devotion of these militias has been enough for Iran to achieve its regional goals, whereas cohesion among Iran's regional adversaries has been marked weaker (IISS, 2019). Therefore, increased terror activities from Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah and others should be expected.

American policymakers and MESA supporters will not proclaim this, but MESA is a recipe for disaster. For a taste of what to expect from MESA, one must simply look at Yemen and the disastrous effects instigated by regional intervention in this conflict. Saudi Arabia's ill-conceived intervention did not only fail to subdue the Iranian-backed rebels but also ironically increased Iran's influence in Yemen (Miller & Sokolsky, 2018), which is precisely what is foreseen for MESA: upgraded Iranian influence and militarization.

What the Trump administration envisaged as a prophecy for a regional security organization in the Middle East, will most definitely not result in an Arab equivalent of NATO, the alliance that helped maintain peace in Europe during the Cold War. In fact, Arab States would be left with an alliance network closer to the version of the pre-World War I alliances that dragged Europe into paroxysm and inevitable war (Miller & Sokolsky, 2018).

Instead of engaging with the perplexity of forming new alliances, an overabundance of collective security and defense alliances already exist among MESA members. Focusing on past alliances could be a better step forward for regional security and interoperability. This will not only impede external actors from exercising their interests in the region, but will also promote Arab cooperation, and most importantly, will embrace a broader and a more consensual vision on collective security that incorporates and goes beyond creating a pact against Iran.The Table

below exhibits already existing regional alliances reflecting Arab visions of collective security and comprising MESA member states, which further emphasizes the lack of necessity for a collective security complex led and driven by American interests.

If Arab states truly endeavor a peaceful Middle East within the foreseeable future, MESA initiatives should be long gone and forgotten. Establishing new alliances instead of building the capacities of existing Arab and GCC security mechanisms is redundant and an inadequate allocation of effort and resources. US initiatives in the region revealed old convictions that international solutions can solve the security deficit that has long plagued the Middle East, where in fact, regional cooperation and dialogue might be the less burdensome solutions.

Already existing Collective Security and Defense Structures comprising MESA members:

Name	Members	Objective	Scope of Action	Operational Status
The Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation (1950)	Arab League member states	Collective defense against armed conflict or aggression	A joint defense council as well as a military department exist inside the office of the secretary general. Joint troops operate under the unified command of the biggest Arab army	Has never been militarily operationalized
The Peninsula Shield Forces (1985)	GCC member states	Rapid deployment against external aggression	It entails land units from the armed forces of each country. Includes infantry, navy and air units	The force was deployed in Kuwait in 2003 as preparation for the U.S intervention in Iraq. Was operative in the 2011demonstrations in Bahrain to break-off protests against the monarchy

The GCC Joint Defense Agreement (2000)	GCC member states	Transition from military cooperation to military operation. To create a GCC defense strategy insinuating that an attack on one member is an attack on all.	Expanded the troops of the Peninsula Shield Forces from 5,000 to 22,000 troops. Implemented a Joint Defense Council and a Supreme Defense Committee to supervise	It was operationalized as reference for the Peninsula Shield Forces' deployment in Kuwait and Bahrain
Arab Peace and Security Council (2006)	Arab League member states	To prevent, manage and solve conflicts between Arab States and to coordinate counterterrorism efforts between member states	Created a peacekeeping force, a data bank and an early warning system to mediate and reconcile conflict. To decide on collective actions against aggression	The charter has been ratified only by Egypt, Tunisia and Syria. Its last meeting was held in 2012 and there are currently efforts to restructure and establish it
GCC Unified Military Command (2013)	GCC member states	To support and strengthen the interoperability of GCC militaries	Established a force of 100,000 men. A unified maritime command was created in 2014 and included planning and management of joint land, air and naval military operations and telecommunication	Became operational in 2018
Joint Arab Force (2015)	Arab League member states	To confront threats and challenges that affect the security, safety and stability of any party that constitute a threat to Arab National Security.	Created a force of 40,000 men with armor, air and naval capabilities. Participate in peacekeeping and security operations and conduct any tasks determined by the Defense Council	Remains only on paper

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