

Saudi Arabia and the Islamic alliance

by Florence Gaub

Riyadh ended a tumultuous 2015 on what it hoped to be a high note: the announcement of a nearly 40-member strong Muslim alliance against terror. Is this just another Middle Eastern pie-in-the-sky alliance or genuinely a functional grouping of states which share a common threat?

After all, the Middle East has seen at least five attempts at joining military forces since the Second World War, two of which included Saudi Arabia. None of these succeeded – then again, none of them explicitly attempted to invoke Islamic credentials or to include as many members. Whether the Arab League's Joint Defence Pact, the Middle East Command, the Middle East Defence Organisation, the Baghdad Pact (officially known as the Middle East Treaty Organisation), or indeed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), no previous alliance actually lived up to its own security standards. Either member states left due to a shift in regional policy, interpreted 'aggression' flexibly in order not to have to come to another state's assistance, or dragged their feet on putting promised structures into practice.

Nevertheless, the idea to cooperate militarily on a more regular basis has made a comeback in the region. There are many good reasons – from efficiency to cost-savings to political legitimacy – to do so, especially given their shared threats.

Old idea, new bottle?

The Islamic alliance is in fact Saudi Arabia's third attempt since the Arab Spring to institutionalise military cooperation and coordination. In 2013, it pushed for a NATO-like integrated command structure for GCC military forces, including 100,000 troops; in 2014, this was followed by a common police structure (called GCC-Pol) and a common naval force. These projects are, however, progressing slowly for the moment.

In 2015, Saudi Arabia initiated, along with Egypt, the creation of a common anti-terror force under the umbrella of the League of Arab States. This 'Joint Arab Force' was to have 40,000 troops, as well as a standing command structure. Unity of purpose was at an all-time high, with Egypt's President Sisi even declaring that national security in the Gulf was an integral part of Egyptian security. In spite of these enthusiastic declarations and several defence chief meetings, the project has been put on hold since summer 2015 'until further notice'.

Saudi Arabia, supported by Kuwait and Bahrain, allegedly did not see eye to eye with Egypt on strategic priorities: whereas Riyadh was focused on Yemen, Cairo set its sights on Libya, and whereas Egypt was not disinclined to rekindle ties with the

embattled Syrian President Assad, Saudi Arabia continues to seek regime change in Damascus. A more tactical matter might have been a reason too: in the end, Riyadh might not have been overly keen on funding a mainly Egyptian force which could invade other Arab countries under the pretext of fighting terrorism.

In spite of these two somewhat disappointing experiences, Saudi Arabia continues to seek allies – mainly because it perceives itself to be on the defensive despite displaying a will, and a capacity, to project power. It is this perception which has ultimately led to a substantial change in its usually rather quietist foreign policy.

Trouble across the Gulf...

Riyadh sees itself in strategic dire straits. Following the nuclear deal with Iran, it feels somewhat abandoned by its traditional military ally, the US. In 2015, Washington explicitly ruled out a mutual defence pact with the Gulf states on the grounds that structures like NATO would take decades to build. Instead, it offered military assistance, especially in the areas of missile defence and cyber warfare.

Additionally, levels of tension in the Gulf remain elevated. Although Saudi Arabia has patched up relations with Qatar since the 2014 fallout, Gulf cohesion remains weak. Oman, always a diplomatic maverick, bluntly rejected a proposed Gulf union in 2013, and was the only Gulf state which declined to even symbolically support Saudi Arabia in its Yemen campaign two years later. Saudi Arabia consequently feels somewhat isolated with the several challenges it faces on not one but several crucial fronts: to the east is Iran, to the south, al-Qaeda on the Arab Peninsula (AQAP) and Houthi rebels, and to the north, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Domestically it is challenged, too, with a political transition to manage amidst historically low oil prices and ever-growing demographic problems.

While relations with Iran have historically been difficult, they have now reached a new low. A precursor to the current situation was increasingly inflammatory rhetoric over the last years. In September 2015, tensions mounted following the

death of over 2,000 pilgrims (464 of whom were Iranians) during a stampede in Mecca. Tehran accused Riyadh of negligence and contemplated taking the matter to the International Court of Justice. A similar situation had occurred in 1987, when Saudi security forces clashed with Iranian pilgrims, leading to the death of around 400 people. Respective embassies were subsequently occupied by demonstrators, and Ayatollah Khomeini called for the toppling of the Saudi monarchy.

More recently, the execution of a Saudi Shia cleric in early 2016 for ‘seeking foreign meddling in the kingdom, disobeying its rulers and taking up arms against the security forces’ led to the occupation of Saudi Arabia’s embassy in Tehran and the eventual suspension of diplomatic relations between the two states.

... and in the neighbourhood






But Saudi Arabia also faces major terrorist threats. ISIL has declared war on Saudi Arabia not once but several times – most recently when the Islamic alliance was announced, which ISIL considered a heretical move. The jihadist group has released a video depicting the execution of a Saudi citizen suspected of being a spy and has called for a Saudi revolution to overthrow the ruling family. Over the last two years, ISIL has perpetrated over a dozen terror attacks on Saudi soil, resulting in over 50 casualties.

Although Riyadh has increased border patrols, ISIL is not only an external threat. There are around 3,000 Saudi Arabian ‘foreign fighters’ in ISIL, more than half the number of Europeans. But whereas Europe has one in 100,000 citizens joining the jihadist organisation, Saudi Arabia has one in 10,000, and their possible return is viewed with great concern by the Saudi authorities.

Perhaps more worryingly, both ISIL and Iran challenge Saudi Arabia on the ideological front in similar ways. Both reject the theological justification for its political system, and propagate an Islamic-revolutionary rhetoric which openly calls for regime change. But given that Iran’s Shia-centric system is unlikely to appeal to Sunnis, ISIL poses the greater – and more direct – ideological threat. In fact, as the custodian of Islam’s holiest places – Mecca and Medina – Saudi Arabia is highest

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The Saudi-led Islamic military alliance

Country	Defence budget	Army personnel	Battle tanks	Military aircraft
 Turkey	\$18.1 billion	410,000	3,700	1,000
 Egypt	\$4.25 billion	468,000	4,700	1,100
 Saudi Arabia	\$51 billion	233,000	1,150	665
 UAE	\$14.8 billion	65,000	545	460
 Jordan	\$1.4 billion	110,000	1,300	246

Data sources: Arabnews.com – Business Insider UK

on ISIL's list of targets. And since ISIL espouses the same belief system, its Salafism resembles the kingdom's ideology to an embarrassing extent.

That said, the jihadist group far surpasses Saudi Arabia when it comes to literal interpretations of Islam or indeed international ambition: in contrast to al-Baghdadi, no Saudi king ever claimed the title of caliph. ISIL has also advocated, for instance, the destruction of the Kaaba – the black cube in Mecca's Grand Mosque – because its construction predates Islam and there is a hadith – reports on the words and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad – according to which it is to be destroyed as an idolatrous object.

ISIL is also scornful of materialism and criticises the oil wealth of the Saudi leadership, and is even harsher than the fiercely conservative kingdom in its application of punishments. But these differences cannot gloss over the fact that there are more ideological commonalities than differences – something which challenges Saudi Arabia domestically and also damages its regional standing as the Sunni powerhouse.

But threats also lurk in what Saudi Arabia considers its backyard, Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula is the group's strongest regional outlet: it claimed responsibility for the Charlie Hebdo attacks in January 2015, came very close to bringing down two US airliners and failed only narrowly to assassinate (now) Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. Although often seen as a Yemeni outfit, a third of AQAP's members are

Saudi, as is a considerable part of its leadership. Its goals are not only to destabilise Yemen but, like ISIL, to bring down the House of Saud. Like ISIL, it has succeeded in seizing and holding territory, and it has benefitted greatly from the ongoing war in Yemen.

AQAP is also fighting the Houthis, the Shia rebels against whom Saudi Arabia launched a full-scale military campaign last year. Perceived to be a Hizbullah in the making and therefore a serious additional headache for Riyadh, Saudi security forces have regularly clashed with the Yemeni militia on the border since the mid-2000s.

Under military pressure

With the exception of the need for domestic reform, the threats facing Saudi Arabia are mostly linked to security. But until recently, its military was seen as a parade force while real security matters were outsourced to the US. But a look at Saudi military evolution shows that Riyadh had lost trust in this alliance some time ago: since 2003, its army has grown from 100,000 to 200,000 and its air force now ranks second behind Egypt in the Arab world with 305 combat-ready jets.

Riyadh is also developing a missile defence system, and its navy has grown from 15,000 to 25,000 men over the last decade. This defence posture seems to suggest that Saudi Arabia is anticipating an air and sea war – or at least wants to be seen to be preparing for one.

But what the Saudi military truly lacks is experience. Its last overseas deployment before the current crises was in spring 1991 against Iraq, but even before that it was not particularly active. Its military campaigns in Yemen (Operation Decisive Storm and its successor Operation Restoring Hope) could almost be seen as a live training exercise for targeting, intelligence gathering and co-ordination between air and ground forces, as well as for joint deployments with other nations.

But the Yemen campaigns have required resources to be rechanneled from other theatres. Saudi Arabia's sorties in the anti-ISIL campaign over Iraq and Syria have all but stopped – in large part because Yemen diverts attention, but also because Riyadh is unhappy with the coalition's overall approach. Also, Saudi troops are still tied up in Bahrain – and despite international support, especially from the UAE (whose air force now ranks fourth in the Arab world with over 200 fighter jets), Saudi Arabia is somewhat alone in its Yemeni endeavour.

Show me your friends

This is where the Islamic Alliance comes into play. A natural progression of the Gulf and Arab alliance projects, it is less ambitious in scope but perhaps more efficient. The alliance's purpose is threefold: counter-balance Iranian influence in the region, restore Saudi Arabia's somewhat tarnished Muslim reputation and create military synergies between signatories.

The alliance's composition is rather telling: while all of its 34 'members' are also in the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) – itself a body whose creation in 1969 was pushed for by Saudi Arabia – 23 OIC members are missing from the list. Most noteworthy are the absences of Shia-majority countries Iran and Iraq. Lebanon, whose Shia population is thought to stand at 30%, was listed as a member despite protests from its government that it had in fact not agreed to participate (this was also the case for Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia). It is equally unclear which government agreed on behalf of Libya, Palestine and Yemen.

Announced members of the alliance

Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Chad, Comoros, Ivory Coast, Djibouti, Egypt, Gabon, Guinea, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates, Yemen.

Although Saudi defence minister bin Salman stressed that any Muslim state could be a member of the alliance as long as it does not fund terror groups (e.g. Hizbullah, which Saudi Arabia blacklisted in 2013), it is *de facto* a Sunni-Muslim alliance – and therefore one that is, at least potentially, positioned against Iran.

A closer look reveals, however, that other Sunni states, such as Algeria, have declined to participate in spite of their shared interest in the fight against terrorism. It is therefore less a sectarian, and more of a geopolitical alliance.

But it is the formation's Muslim credentials which are important, as they allow it to act as a counterweight to ISIL's rhetoric. A unified Muslim front against an organisation claiming to be the newest (and only true) Sunni Muslim state is a valuable

strategic communications step. It also has a tactical component, although for the time being a limited one. This means: no standing troops as in the planned project with the Arab League, no command structure as with the GCC, and no integrated units either. Instead, the Islamic alliance project seeks to start small with the exchange of intelligence (which is already taking place to a limited extent in Yemen).

Only much later, would it consider the deployment of troops under its remit. While possible areas include those which are currently most affected by terrorism (Libya, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, Afghanistan), "nothing is off the table" according to Saudi Arabia's foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir. First and foremost, the alliance will act as an institutional platform for further interaction – and therefore act as a first step towards greater cooperation.

In that sense, the Islamic alliance is not an Arab equivalent of NATO, which is an integrated defence force aimed at opponents outside the member states' territory. Nor is it like the EU, which encourages closer cooperation on domestic security issues such as terrorism. Nor is it even like the UN by being geared towards conflict resolution and post-conflict stabilisation. In fact, it is a very classical military alliance.

Florence Gaub is a Senior Analyst at the EUISS.

