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Cooperative Security in the Middle East: History and Prospects

Since mid-2017, Trump Administration officials have stated their intention to create a security pact of certain Arab states to counter regional threats, including Iran and terrorism. This arrangement, dubbed the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), reportedly would not include formal mutual security guarantees, but nevertheless has sometimes colloquially been referred to as an "Arab NATO." As Administration officials continue to consult with regional partners on the formation of MESA, many obstacles appear to exist, including ongoing disputes among its prospective members and differences in their respective interests, capabilities, and threat perceptions.

Forging greater security cooperation among U.S. partners in the Middle East has long been a stated U.S. objective. MESA is the latest in a decades-long series of proposed regional security arrangements that have, to varying degrees, involved or been overseen by the United States. U.S. involvement in the creation of MESA or other similar potential initiatives could necessitate congressional input on or approval of specific aspects of multilateral regional security arrangements and raise broader questions about U.S. ties with allies in the Middle East and globally.

Background: Past Efforts

For over half a century, the United States has supported multiple attempts to forge a regional military pact designed to thwart the perceived ambitions of successive U.S. adversaries.

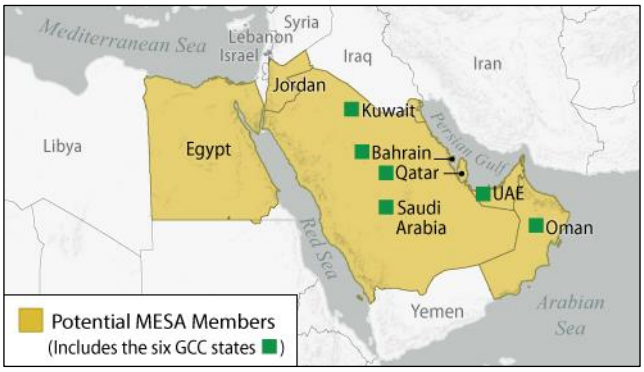
- **Baghdad Pact/CENTO**. In 1955, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, and Great Britain signed a defensive military agreement known as the Baghdad Pact as a bulwark against Soviet attempts to project influence southward. Iraq pulled out of the Baghdad Pact in 1959 and the remaining states formed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO). While the United States was not a formal member of either organization, it signed bilateral aid and mutual defense agreements with each of the signatories and participated in the organization's activities. In 1957, President Eisenhower sought congressional authorization to use military force to defend the "territorial integrity and political independence" of countries in the Middle East seeking U.S. aid against "overt armed aggression" by communist countries. Congress declined to grant such authority, but did authorize military assistance programs (P.L.87-5). Due to its members' increasingly disparate threat perceptions and interests, and the lack of any Arab states' participation, CENTO was not a major factor in regional security dynamics and was formally dissolved in 1979. It is generally regarded as one of the less successful postwar U.S.-led collective security arrangements.
- **Post-Gulf War**. Weeks after the conclusion of hostilities between Saddam Hussein's Iraqi forces and the U.S.-led coalition, the leaders of the 6 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman), Egypt, and Syria met in Damascus in March 1991 and agreed on a joint framework for regional security known as the Damascus Declaration. Egypt and Syria proposed to make available for collective defense their relatively large militaries in return for economic assistance from the wealthy Gulf states. While the proposal attracted support from some U.S. officials, and the group continued to meet at least as late as 2000, one observer in 1993 described the idea as a "dead issue."

The Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama Administrations promoted regional military cooperation and interoperability with the United States, but did not conclude formal multilateral agreements on collective security. The Arab League announced its intention to create a "defense force" to combat terrorism after a March 2015 summit, though a follow-up meeting to formalize those plans was postponed and subsequent Arab League meetings evidently passed without discussion of the idea. In December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced plans to create an "Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism;" at a November 2017 summit of the alliance, Saudi officials stated that 41 nations were members. The group, which is headed by a retired Pakistani general, has conducted military exercises, but has not taken any collective defensive actions to date.

While the United States did not have a direct role in these initiatives, President Obama directly urged Middle East allies to take a more active role in confronting the Islamic State (IS/ISIS/ISIL) and other regional threats. In 2016, then-Secretary of Defense Ash Carter urged Arab states to "get in the game" and argued that some Arab partners' expensive acquisitions of technologically complex military platforms and arms were not best suited to confront the threats arrayed against them.

> [MESA] will, when it comes to fruition, be a broad spectrum of countries from the Gulf and from North Africa, all throughout the Middle East, aimed singularly at taking down threats from all across that region. It'll work on economic issues, it'll work on security issues, and we'll work on political issues, we'll work on sharing meeting their energy needs as well.
> -Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, March 19, 2018

Prospective MESA Members



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MESA

MESA reportedly would include the six GCC states along with Egypt and Jordan. According to a National Security Council spokesperson, the group "will serve as a bulwark against Iranian aggression, terrorism, extremism, and will bring stability to the Middle East." No concrete progress appears to have been made in organizing MESA, though several prospective members conducted joint military exercises in Egypt in November 2018. The pact, as reportedly envisioned, is intended to be a collaborative security partnership between the U.S. and its regional allies, reflecting a desire by successive U.S. Administrations to see greater cooperation in areas like missile defense and counterterrorism. U.S. and foreign officials have also described MESA as a forum to discuss regional issues and adjudicate disputes between its members, as well as a mechanism to "boost trade and foreign direct investment."

One key unknown element of MESA is the prospective type and level of U.S. financial, military, or other support for the project. On one hand, MESA can be seen as an attempt to reinforce U.S. engagement in the region at a time when U.S. partners report rising doubt about U.S. commitments and appear willing to countenance greater security, political, and economic ties with U.S. competitors like Russia and China. On the other hand, MESA could reflect the Trump Administration's broad goal of reducing U.S. overseas commitments by increasing burden sharing. Some have argued that while the United States shares many goals with its regional partners, they are independent states with disparate agendas, and that outsourcing at least some U.S. deterrence to potentially less capable or reliable partners increases the risks of instability and unintended conflict.

Potential Obstacles

Observers note a number of significant barriers to regional military cooperation like that envisioned by MESA. The most pressing is the ongoing rift between Qatar and several of its erstwhile GCC partners, led by Saudi Arabia. Qatar's relatively independent foreign policy, which has included support for regional Muslim Brotherhood-linked and –inspired movements and a relatively high degree of engagement with Iran (with which Qatar shares key gas reserves), has long contributed to friction between it and the Saudi-led bloc. Since June 2017, Saudi Arabia, supported by the UAE and others, has sought to isolate Qatar economically and politically. U.S. attempts to mediate the dispute have been unsuccessful to date.

The ongoing GCC split highlights that divides exist between U.S. allies on both specific policy issues and broader regional dynamics. For example, beyond Qatar, there are intra-GCC differences on Iran, with which Oman and Kuwait have relatively open and normal relations. More fundamentally, the MESA project is likely to be undercut by the same issue that has bedeviled similar past efforts, namely GCC states' wariness of ceding power to Saudi Arabia, the bloc's largest member and de facto head. These trust issues belie the NATO analogy often used to describe MESA: even its most enthusiastic proponents do not imagine anything close to the kind of mutual defense guarantee that is at the core of NATO. Any equivalent U.S. guarantee would require treaty consent by the Senate.

Possible Questions for Congress

U.S. Aid. Historically, the U.S. has leveraged assistance to support policy outcomes; for example, during the Gulf War, the U.S. forgave the debt of coalition partner Egypt and froze aid to Jordan, which supported Iraq. What kinds of U.S. aid or other incentives might be necessary to spur greater collaboration today? Why did the Administration not request funds related to MESA in its FY2020 budget?

Arms Sales. Congress has overseen billions in arms exports to Middle Eastern states. How well do these sales address the kinds of security challenges that exist in the region, particular when it comes to confronting Iran, which tends to rely on more asymmetric means of power projection? What specific platforms or programs should Congress authorize to address interoperability? Are technical issues or political divisions more important impediments to unified Gulf missile defense, a longstanding U.S. national security priority? How can Congress address both?

Israel and Regional Balance. Ties between Israel and certain Gulf states have expanded in recent years, brought about by parallel cooperation with the U.S. and shared regional interests vis-à-vis Iran. How might improving prospective MESA members' capabilities affect the regional security balance, and Israel's legally mandated qualitative military edge (QME) specifically? How might potential future changes in regional political alignments factor into U.S. calculations on efforts such as MESA?

Use of Force. U.S. support for partner-led operations, such as that of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, have sometimes drawn criticism from some Members. How can the U.S. ensure that U.S.-enabled operations by its partners support U.S. interests and values? Under what mandate might MESA members engage in military operations? Under what circumstances would U.S. forces join them and with what authorization and financial support from Congress?

Human rights and democracy. What role should human rights concerns play in Members' deliberations over whether to allow proposed arms sales? How significant is it that all prospective MESA members are monarchies and/or authoritarian and what role, if any, should these states' political systems play in U.S. policy?

Clayton Thomas, Analyst in Middle Eastern Affairs

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