



The Saudi Led Islamic Alliance: An Assessment

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On December 15, 2015 the Saudi Minister of Defence and heir apparent, Mohamed bin Salman announced the formation of a 34 nation Islamic Alliance against terrorism and terrorist organisations.¹ He stated that ten more nations have been invited to join the alliance, amongst which Afghanistan, Indonesia, Tajikistan and Azerbaijan remain noteworthy.²



Image Courtesy Al Jazeera

The alliance will be based in Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations. It has been stated that the alliance would fight terror in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan, and any other terrorist group that the coalition comes across.³ The

proposed alliance would not be against any particular country, but would combat terrorism and threats like ISIS.⁴ In one of the alliance's first meetings that was held in Riyadh in March 2016, it

was decided that there will be an attempt to target the funding sources that have been sponsoring terrorist groups and organizations, even though the modalities of how the goal of ‘drying up terrorist resources’ will be achieved has not been clarified.⁵ The financial team tasked by Riyadh will have the primary responsibility of combating and eliminating the funding of terror. At the military level, Saudi Arabia announced that it would fund the budget for the establishment of an operations center in Riyadh. Despite apprehensions from various parties, within as well as from outside the alliance, it seems that this time Riyadh is trying to portray that the alliance is positively moving ahead, laying down a comprehensive and carefully thought-out strategy at all levels.

The 34 Countries in the Islamic Coalition⁶

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

The Nature of the Alliance

The threats of terrorism and other strategic challenges have strengthened many old alliances and have fostered the creation of new alignments. The ever more complex nature of the strategic environment and the diversity of security arrangements devised by contemporary nations test the very notion of “alliance,” causing one to wonder if it even remains a useful strategic concept.⁷ Such alliances become more convoluted when loose strategic alliances are formed for the appeasement of larger partners in the group. These suffer from issues of lack of commitment and trust or desire to be in close alliance with their powerful neighbours or members of the alliance of the larger, richer and more powerful neighbours.

This is not the first time that the Islamic nations in this region have tried to build a strategic alliance since the Second World War. None of the alliances were based on explicit and strict Islamic credentials or made an attempt 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 even 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 come to another state’s assistance; or dragged their feet back on putting promised structures into practice.⁸ It has also been seen that due to the lack of any punitive power given to

such alliances, members have continued financing terrorist groups; supported such groups functioning from their soil, as well as used terrorism as state policies.⁹

The Islamic Alliance is, in fact, Saudi Arabia's third attempt since the Arab Spring to institutionalize military cooperation and coordination. In 2013, it pushed for a NATO-like integrated command structure for GCC military forces, including 100,000 troops, which was followed by a common police structure (called GCC-Pol) and a common naval force in 2014. These projects, though not shelved, have not been able to bring significant strategic solidarity within the Islamic world.¹⁰

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's meetings, the project has been put on hold since summer 2015 "until further notice".¹¹ Analysts stated that the concept of such an Arab world having its own collective security structure was based on ambiguity from the very beginning as the basic objectives were not clear to most of the members. The questions that were raised included: is it a collective defence pact along the lines of NATO and therefore protects states inside the alliance from those outside, or is an alliance like that of the Russian CSTO? Or is it a collective security system along the lines of the United Nations with provisions in place to tackle inter-state conflict – and, if necessary, even intra-state conflict? Is it a European Union-like body of states cooperating also on internal security matters? And how does the fight against terrorism fit into either of these structures if Arab states have trouble agreeing on what constitutes terrorism?¹² Did the present Islamic Alliance comply with the queries that were left unanswered by the previous alliances? The present alliance will make an impact only if the above-mentioned pre-requisites that were not met before are complied with fully.

Eighteen members out of the twenty-two members states of the Arab League are part of the Islamic Alliance and all of them are part of OIC. Amongst the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, only Oman has been excluded. Oman had previously not sided with the actions of the Saudi regime and maintained a neutral role. It has emerged as a mediator in regional conflicts, serving as a conduit from the Gulf Arabs to Iran.¹³ It has also grown closer bonds with Iran in the last few years.¹⁴

There is also a lack of clarity regarding the military commitment of the members in the alliance, which is created to provide security to the region against terrorist threats. Malaysian Defence Minister Hishammuddin Hussein said that his country supported the alliance ideologically and politically, yet he ruled out any military participation by Malaysia.¹⁵ Some members of the alliance envisioned the plan of a unified military presence in the region despite remarks by Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman who stated that the alliance would not have forces on the ground. In a press conference, held in December 2015, he announced the formation of the alliance, where he stressed that the alliance would establish an operations center in Riyadh and would work for defeating terror militarily, ideologically and through media campaigns, which showed the ambiguity of statements of the Saudi leadership in regard to the alliance.¹⁶ Saudi's Foreign Affairs Minister, Adel al-Jubeir stated that the alliance will take shape as per the requests that come, the need and the willingness of countries to provide necessary support; nothing was off the table. The decisions will be made by individual countries in terms of what to contribute, and when to contribute, and in what form and shape they would like to make that contribution'.¹⁷

Such ambiguities in decisions and policies have brought forth more questions that remain unanswered as well. If some nations do contribute militarily, under which banner and direction will they function, or will all nations within the alliance make equal financial contribution to sustain the front against terrorism. The table below depicts the basic military strength of some of the major powers in the alliance.

Table 1 - Basic Military Strength of the Major Powers in the Islamic Alliance

Country	Defence Budget	Manpower	Reserves	Tanks	Fighter Jets	Armoured Vehicles	Artillery	Helicopters	Multipurpose Rocket Launcher	Navy Ships
Turkey	\$18.19bn	410500	185630	3778	1020	7550	679	443	811	115
Pakistan	\$7bn	617000	51500	2924	914	2828	3278	313	143	74
Egypt	\$4.1bn	468500	800000	4624	1107	13949	2360	200	1481	221
Saudi Arabia	\$46bn	233500	25000	1210	675	6472	432	182	322	55
Malaysia	\$4.7bn	110000	296500	74	74	1318	184	79	54	61
Morocco	\$3.4bn	195800	150000	1215	282	2384	192	125	72	121
UAE	\$15.2bn	65000	0	545	479	2204	105	185	54	75
Jordan	\$1.3bn	110000	6500	1250	246	2547	72	116	88	37
Kuwait	\$5.1bn	15,500	31,100	368	105	861	0	42	27	38
Qatar	\$1.93bn	11,800	0	92	72	464	12	43	21	80

Source: www.globalfirepower.com

A Strategic Alliance of Sunni States?

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has long seen itself as providing leadership and protection to its Sunni allies, trying to bring them together on various fronts and issues. Analysts have found Saudi Wahhabism of the present day to be an ideological mélange, which witnessed various Sunni violent, radical as well as extremist factions operating in and around the Kingdom. The manner in which Islamic jihadism has made an indelible mark on international politics and has transformed regional social and political dynamics during the last three decades, has brought a strong belief within decision makers in the Kingdom that jihad is an element that can be used in nations where Muslims were supposed to be living the life of oppression, especially in states like Bosnia, Chechnya, and the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁸ The strategic rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, has been the primary reason behind many a conflict, built mostly along sectarian and ideological lines - Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world, and Iran as the leader of the Shia Muslim world. As per the Saudi belief system, fighting the Houthis in Yemen who belong to a Shi'ite sect drawing inspiration and military support from Shi'ite Iran is logical; and protecting the interests of the Kingdom as well as checking the Iranian strategic play to encircle the Kingdom through sectarian violence is justified, very similar to the Saudi providing financial assistance to Hamas organizations and projects.¹⁹ They have turned the larger Cold War confrontational theatres like that of Yemen into regional theatres of conflict. They also intervened militarily in Bahrain when Shia unrest threatened the stability of the government.²⁰

One of the leading Sunni Islam's seat of learning, Cairo-based Al-Azhar institution called on world's all Islamic nations to join the "Islamic military alliance", calling the formation of the alliance against Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS/ISIL) and other terrorist groups "historic."²¹ However, the lack of commitment and coordination among the members within these fronts has been one of the principal reasons why these fronts failed to achieve their desired objectives. The clubbing of the nations in this alliance also raises question about the nature of the alliance. In the alliance, Saudi Arabia practices Wahhabism; Bahrain is a Shi'a majority state, and the invited country of Azerbaijan is also a Shi'a state. Lebanon, Kuwait as well as Pakistan have large Shi'a Muslim population as well. The rest of the states are Sunni states. But strangely, Benin and other alliance members like that of the Ivory Coast and even Gabon cannot be called Islamic countries as they have considerable Christian population and others following animistic religions. Nigeria's membership of the Saudi Arabia-led Islamic coalition against terror has been attracting mixed

reactions from Nigerians. Various religious groups within Nigeria remain annoyed because of the manner in which the Nigerian government has declared the country an Islamic state. Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari supported Nigeria being part of the coalition as Boko Haram, which has declared its loyalty to ISIS and has challenged the territorial integrity and peace in Nigeria, has become part of the agenda of the coalition.²²

Lebanon parliament includes many Shiite representatives headed by a Shiite politician, Nabih Berri, who didn't officially object to Gulf operations in Yemen, criticizing Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah for his aggressive statements against Saudi Arabia following the launch of Operation Decisive Storm. Berri had also praised on numerous occasions the important role of Egypt in the Arab region, which may have contributed to decision of bringing Lebanon as an Alliance member.²³

Pakistan, from 2014, has been conducting a superficial and half-hearted war against terrorism, where the Pakistan Taliban and its splinter groups like that of the Jamaat-ul Ahrar, which has alliances with militants within various provinces in Pakistan, time and again, has caught the Pakistani administration by surprise, showing the shortfalls of the Pakistan National Action Plan (NAP) as well as the various operations conducted selectively against those terrorist outfits which target Pakistani interests.²⁴ On another front, various terrorist outfits still function from Pakistani territory as well as from Pakistani Occupied Kashmiri territory against India and Afghanistan, which are considered to be good terrorists by the Pakistani administrators, providing such groups legal as well as financial protection. But Pakistani civilian and military leadership has made attempts to consolidate the Islamic world in trying times, not only to strategically position itself but due to its own domestic and economic compulsions, recently making covert attempts of mediating between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the aftermath of Saudi embassy ransacking incident in Teheran, which had put diplomatic ties between the two nations in jeopardy.²⁵ The growing role and effective positioning in the strategic conundrum, brings Pakistan its strategic benefits and perks. Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, was offered the Commander-in-Chief's position in the new multi-national force after he retires from his current post, which was offered to him during his visit with the Pakistani Prime Minister to Riyadh.²⁶ Though the offer has been made, Raheel Sharif or the Pakistani Army has not issued any official statement regarding him accepting the offer. Saudi's previous call for Pakistan joining Operation Desert Storm in Yemen in April 2015 by sending ground troops was also declined as there was severe opposition in the Pakistani parliament regarding Pakistani Army being directly involved in the conflict.²⁷

Most of the nations within the alliance have been accused of abetting sectarian conflicts within their respective territories as well as involved in funding organizations that have been involved in such conflicts. But they need to make serious strategic domestic policy shifts and alterations, if they seriously want to create a platform where terrorism of any form, good or bad, can be tackled.

Critical Assessment

There are states in the coalition that have not been able to decide on playing any specific role in the coalition. Algeria has declined to participate in spite of its shared interest in the fight against terrorism. It is, therefore, both a sectarian as well as a geopolitical alliance.²⁸

Analysts have assessed the 34 nation coalition through various prismatic assessments. "The Saudis are motivated by their internal security and grip on power as well as a sectarian and geopolitical rivalry with Iran... In order to really fight terrorism, the Saudis must declare war against themselves and end the support it has been giving to radical groups across the world," says Hayder al-Khoei, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, London.²⁹ Micah Zenko, a Senior Fellow at the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations, remained extremely critical stating that a Saudi-led coalition fighting terrorism is like a "[drug] cartel leading a counternarcotics campaign."³⁰

The nature in which the coalition was formed and declared *a priori* taking all the coalition partners on board also gathered criticism from the regional neighbours. As mentioned before, some nations showed ignorance about their membership as well as the nature of the alliance. Indonesia's Foreign Ministry said that it had been invited to join a "centre to coordinate against extremism and terrorism," not a military alliance.³¹ Lebanon's Foreign Ministry denied having knowledge of Saudi Arabia's creation of an Islamic anti-terrorism coalition.³² Pakistani Foreign Secretary Aizaz Chaudhry was quoted in the daily newspaper *Dawn* as saying that he had been surprised to read of Islamabad's inclusion.³³ The Chairman of Russia's State Dumas of International Affairs noted that without the participation of Iran and Iraq, the functioning of the Islamic Alliance against terror seems to be highly unlikely, as it will remain inefficient and unable to act.³⁴

Saudi Arabia has been instrumental in establishing this front as a way to convince others of the role of Iran in creating instability in the region. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir stated

recently that Iran must change its “behaviour” towards Saudi Arabia if it wants normal ties with the Kingdom. He categorically stated that Saudis have tried to forge closer ties with Iran for more than three decades but “in exchange we received nothing”... as Saudi Arabia was “confronted with interferences in our domestic affairs... attacks against our embassy.”³⁵ Jubeir said Iran “knows what to do to have normal relations with Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Islamic world and that is to change its behaviour... and the door will be open for normal relations.”³⁶ Bahrain’s Minister for Foreign Affairs Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa also stated in an interview to *Al Arabiya* that Iran, ‘at this moment in time and history’ remains to be the largest threat for the region.³⁷

The rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the first quarter of 2016—the execution of Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr, the storming of the Saudi embassy in Iran and the cessation of diplomatic ties between the two states, and the Islamic coalition without Iran—simply highlight the extent to which the Saudis are now actively pushing back perceived Iranian influence in the region and the manner in which they have launched an alliance which could distract the glare from their own domestic economic and political turmoils.³⁸

Reaction of Iran

Most of Iranian response to the Islamic Alliance has been extremely cautious, making references to international analysts who have undermined the functionality of the alliance critiquing the ill-defined nature of objectives set by such alliances. Head of Ghana Islamic Society, Ahmad Abdul Qais Abdullah addressing the Iranian media stated that Saudi Arabia is supporting the Boko Haram Takfiri terrorist group and that the terrorist groups in the region are inspired from Wahhabism.³⁹ A Pakistani analyst, General Talat Masood while being interviewed stated that ‘the coalition gives an impression that only Sunni countries are in it; that simply makes it a sectarian group rather than a real anti-terrorism alliance... They should also have included Iran as a major power against Daesh and also some main victims of the terrorist group (Iraq and Syria) so that it could be helpful and being considered as a sect-neutral alliance’.⁴⁰ It has also been reported that Gen. Anwar Majid Ashqi, head of the Middle East Center for Strategic and Legal Studies in Riyadh, stated in a telephonic interview to Al-Ghad al-Araby channel that Iran is welcome in the alliance if it proves that it does not support terrorist organizations. Ashqi said that the precondition is necessary ‘because Western states accuse [Iran] of financing terror’. However, the General neglected comments on the memberships of Turkey, Qatar and Sudan, despite numerous allegations that they support terrorism, as well.⁴¹

In an interview with the Habilian Association, Finian Cunningham said, “The Saudis are intended to use this coalition to project their animosity and antagonism towards Iran and its allies – under the guise of fighting terrorism’.⁴² Critics have further stated that the creation of the alliance has further served as one of the more recent gambits in the ongoing Sunni-Shiite conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its affiliates: the Houthis, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and Hezbollah. On both sides, the term “terrorism” is ill defined, allowing enemies to be prosecuted as well as executed as terrorists, which included the recent execution of a Shia cleric , which created significant tension between Saudi Iran relations.

Future Trends of the Alliance

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi appreciated Saudi Arabia’s initiative to form the Islamic Military Alliance to fight terrorism and extremism and expressed China’s willingness to cooperate with the alliance.⁴³ Israel as well has supported the alliance as it has been pushing the Sunni Arab states for closer ties.⁴⁴ Tel Aviv is hoping to counter the influence of Tehran – which has repeatedly threatened to attack Israel with the nuclear weapons it was developing, according to the *Wall Street Journal*.⁴⁵

Saudi Arabia organized a twenty-one nation military exercise called Operation North Thunder in February 2016 aiming to enhance fighting abilities, increase coordination between countries participating in the exercise and facilitating the exchange of information and experience. Col. Ibrahim Al-Marie a retired Saudi colonel stated that such joint military drill was considered to be the most important in the past five decades conducted by Gulf, Arab and Islamic countries, which would rely on the latest technology in light of the growing regional terrorism and turbulent environment.⁴⁶ The participating countries are Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan, Bahrain, Senegal, Sudan, Kuwait, Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Chad, Tunisia, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Oman, Qatar, Malaysia, Egypt, Mauritania, and Mauritius, nations part of the alliance.⁴⁷ The multilaterally coordinated military exercise though was a sign of unity and strength between the nations that participated, but it was not a confirmation that the nations participating in the exercise will also contribute in the formation of a joint task force for the Islamic Alliance.

The first meeting of the Islamic Alliance took place on March 27, 2016 in Riyadh. The purpose of the meeting was to lay the foundations of operations by the Islamic coalition. Brigadier General Ahmad Al Assiri, the Saudi military spokesperson, said that the representatives of the

newly-formed Islamic Military Counter-Terrorism Coalition will not limit their fight to Daesh, but will confront terrorism in general. He stated that the representatives from the members of the alliance focused on the ideological, financial, military and media aspects to combat terrorism. The meeting did not address specific cases, such as Hezbollah and its classification as a terrorist group, but worked out an operation mechanism.⁴⁸ They vowed to dry up the resources of terrorism. Assiri stated that the attendance of 39 Muslim nations, not all of which were members of the alliance, “sends a strong message on the importance and nature of the alliance,” adding that the force is needed in the face of the Islamic State group.⁴⁹ A Sudanese army delegation, which was headed by the chief of staff Emad al-Din Mustafa Adawy, along with the head of the military intelligence, the director of strategic planning department at the ministry of defence and the assistant chief of staff of the air force, also attended the first meeting of the Islamic Alliance.⁵⁰ It can be deduced that there might be the creation of military alliances bringing Shia nations together to counter such efforts.

It has been found that serious fissures have erupted within the key members of the alliance that were visible in the 13th OIC Summit where the rift between the Egyptian and Turkish leaderships created a significant discord within the summit.⁵¹ It is not difficult to assess that this alliance as well, if it does not define its objectives and definitions, manner of functioning as well as intentions clearly, will remain a failed objective, as its predecessors.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council

Endnotes:

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