

The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go

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The Arab world needs a collective security architecture. The U.S. project of a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) could in theory be a step forward, especially as it links military security to political and economic security. But so far, MESA has been conceived to meet U.S. needs—to target Iran and to reduce U.S. regional presence without allowing China or Russia to gain influence—while disregarding the priorities, and constraints of prospective Arab member states.

U.S. and Arab officials acknowledge that MESA is a collective work in progress. Another working group meeting on MESA is expected to take place later this month. Certain elements will be crucial to address if it is to happen, and even more so if MESA is to succeed in building regional security rather than merely fueling the regional arms race.

WHAT IS MESA AND WHY DID THE UNITED STATES PROPOSE IT?

MESA was first announced during U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017;

the Riyadh Declaration [described](#) the alliance as contributing “to peace and security in the region and the world.” It will include all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—as well as Egypt, Jordan, and the United States. The idea revolves primarily around security, but more recently, it has adopted economic and political aspects as well. It joins a rather crowded field of regional alliances that exist in practice or on paper, or are still under consideration.

Such an alliance fits squarely within the thinking of not only the Trump administration (see, for example, the December 2017 [National Security Strategy](#) and 2018 [National Defense Strategy](#)) but also the preceding administration of Barack Obama; both articulated a desire to scale back the U.S. security posture in the Middle East. The defense strategy promotes “expanding regional consultative mechanisms” and “deepen[ing] interoperability” to share the burden of protecting U.S. allies and interests across the world. In the Middle East, this strategy is compatible with [Trump's](#) determination to reduce the [U.S. contribution to regional security](#), and make U.S. support strictly

equivalent to what Gulf countries pay. From now on, Gulf countries will have to pay more to secure themselves and to “[reimburse](#),” in Trump’s word, the United States for previous decades of protection. The Trump administration expects Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, to continue [controlling oil prices](#) and to back [U.S. policies against Russia and China](#).

MESA was initially conceived to build Gulf states’ capabilities to counter Iran without intervention by the United States, or Russian or Chinese intervention. Recently, however, [State Department officials](#) have been trying to reshape it to reflect larger strategic objectives. Tim Lenderking, U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for [Arabian Gulf affairs](#), indicated that the alliance would focus on “Iran, cyber concerns, attacks on infrastructure, and coordinating conflict management from Syria to Yemen” along with counterproliferation and counterterrorism. And the [foreign minister of Bahrain](#), Sheikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa, has stated that “MESA is not against anyone.”

HOW DOES THE UNITED STATES ENVISION MESA?

As time has passed, U.S. officials have developed the MESA concept in a variety of ways that would allow the United States to reduce its military presence without losing clout in the region. In addition to getting Arab states to invest more in their own (and each other’s) defenses, [U.S. officials](#) will be trying to use MESA to push back against growing Chinese and Russian influence in the region, including their support to Iran.

The Security Pillar

MESA seeks enhanced [interoperability of member states’ defense systems](#), probably through “regional capabilities centers” that would cover “the maritime, cyber, air, and missile domains” as well as border security, asymmetric warfare, and command and control. So far, joint troops

and an agreement like NATO’s Article 5 are off the table. According to the latest National Defense Strategy, interoperability between allies entails “operational concepts, modular force elements, communications, information sharing, and equipment that accelerate foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces.” With U.S. training and systems, MESA would allow members to rely on each other to fill national defense gaps.

The intended interoperability would certainly impose limits on the region’s increasing [arms purchases from European](#) countries and, most importantly, Russia and China. This issue has become prominent in recent years. [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) have collaborated to fund non-U.S. arms purchases for other [Arab armies](#). China has sold [ballistic missiles](#) as well as armed drones to Gulf countries, and has established its first overseas [military base in Djibouti](#), adjacent to U.S. military presence on strategic waterways.

Arab states’ [defense](#) and [security](#) cooperation with Russia comes at a time when Russia’s military and political presence in the Middle East is encompassing Washington’s traditional allies. Egypt has always purchased Russian arms, but Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia may have exploited their potential [purchase](#) of Russia’s S-400 defense systems to extract [advanced arms purchases](#) from the United States. The potential expansion of those systems beyond [Syria](#) threatens [U.S. access](#) to and domination of airspace in the region.

In the words of [General Joseph Votel](#), commander of U.S. Central Command, Russia and China, along with Iran, “are increasingly competing to be the partner of choice—militarily, politically, and economically—with U.S. allies.” MESA would also allow U.S. control of end-use violations of its arms, especially violations that involve revealing U.S. technology to Russia, China, North Korea, or those linked to the use of U.S.-made arms against civilians.

The Political Pillar

The MESA framework incorporates governance mechanisms and member states' commitments to each other. It would also provide member states with a mechanism for dispute resolution and a much-needed platform to coordinate action during regional crises. It would prevent the resulting vacuum that terrorists, China, or Russia could otherwise fill. The United States also counts on MESA's coordinated action to support its “[deal of the century](#)” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and to implement a rapprochement with Israel that could join MESA.

MESA countries have different assessments of how the intra-GCC crisis (Qatar against the quartet of Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) affects MESA. The Qatari foreign minister stated that “the real challenge facing the U.S.-led alliance is to solve the Gulf crisis.” The recent resignation of [General Anthony Zinni](#), the U.S. envoy tasked with resolving the Gulf crisis and establishing MESA, as well as U.S. [Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s](#) recent statements, seem to confirm the Qatari view. Nevertheless, the U.S. administration continues to pursue MESA.

The Economic and Energy Pillars

MESA’s economic and energy pillars are far less noticed than the defense pillar. MESA would “[boost trade and foreign direct investment](#) between its members,” according to the foreign minister of Bahrain. In fact, these pillars helped dilute MESA’s political and military identity, encouraging less wealthy and skeptical Arab states to join. Through the economic pillar, MESA becomes a venue to plan and coordinate regional economic development and energy sector integration with assistance from U.S. agencies such as the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the office of the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR).

Projects to reform, connect, and insulate energy markets in the region are a priority. MESA would therefore challenge the rapidly growing [Chinese](#) and [Russian](#) investments and infrastructure projects in the region, especially in the oil, gas, and nuclear energy sectors. At the same time, it would coordinate Arab replacements of U.S. financial contributions to regional stabilization and assistance programs.

OBSTACLES TO MESA’S SUCCESS

The alliance has gotten off to a slow start because prospective Arab member states have varying levels of enthusiasm. Some widely shared reservations and challenges are listed below.

MESA Lacks a Convincing Security Framework Beyond Confronting Iran

Some Arab members do not agree that Iran is an imminent danger, nor do they agree on the best way to deal with it. While U.S., Saudi, [UAE](#), and Bahraini statements express a need for MESA to confront Iran, [Egyptian](#), [Jordanian](#), and even [Qatari](#) officials have publicly expressed reluctance. Kuwait and Oman have not shown fervent support for MESA. Aside from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, no other country involved supports military action against Iran. Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman preach and practice engagement with Tehran instead of confrontation. Egypt and Jordan tend not to oppose the U.S. and Saudi discourse on MESA, at least publicly, in order to guarantee support for their regimes, as well as access to benefits that may otherwise be out of reach.

Arab States See MESA as Primarily Serving U.S. and Saudi Interests

Some regional partners are wary of establishing a new alliance instead of building the capacities of existing Arab and GCC security mechanisms. Those mechanisms embrace a wider and more consensual

vision on collective security that includes but goes beyond defense against Iran. MESA, so far, is U.S. made and is perceived by skeptical partners as an attempt to transform them into economic, political, and military tools, rather than “allies,” in the U.S. strategy against Iran. Table 1 shows current collective security structures that reflect Arab visions of collective security. It also

shows that Gulf states have already made progress on the levels of interoperability and unified command within the GCC framework, with support from the United States. Those endogenous collective mechanisms are largely ineffective yet representative of how far the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan are willing to go on collective defense.

TABLE 1
Current Security and Defense Structures With Arab MESA Members

Name	Year Established	Members	Objective	Scope of Action	Operational Status
The Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation	1950	Arab League member states	Collective defense against armed aggression against one or more of its members, and joint exercises.	Created a joint defense council and a military department inside the office of the secretary general. Joint troops are supposed to operate under the unified command of the biggest Arab army in the field.	The treaty has never been militarily operationalized but still serves as the frame of reference for security cooperation within the Arab League.
The Peninsula Shield Forces	1985	GCC countries	Rapid deployment against external aggression. To serve as the main security cooperation mechanism for the Gulf countries.	It comprises land units from the armed forces of each country. It includes infantry and, as approved in 1993, navy and air units. It became the Joint Peninsula Shield Forces in 2006. A Rapid Reaction Force was added in 2009. In 2013, the PSF was folded into the GCC Unified Military Command for unified land forces.	The force was deployed in 2003 in Kuwait in preparation for the U.S. intervention in Iraq. Its only major operation was its 2011 intervention in Bahrain to put down massive demonstrations against the monarchy.
The Cooperation Belt	1997	GCC countries	Create an early warning system.	Connected the operation centers of the air forces and air defenses in GCC states' armed forces. It also established a secured telecommunications military system.	Entered into effect in 2001 and provides better communication between air defense structures.
The GCC Joint Defense Agreement	2000	GCC countries	Transition from military cooperation to military operation and create a GCC defense strategy, a formal pact according to which an attack on one member is an attack on all.	Expanded the Peninsula Shield Forces from 5,000 to 22,000 troops. It was followed by the Joint Defense Council and the Supreme Defense Committee to supervise the implementation of the joint defense agreement.	It was operationalized as a reference for the Peninsula Shield Forces' deployment in Kuwait and Bahrain.

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative	2004	NATO, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates	To contribute to global and regional security by offering Middle East countries bilateral security cooperation with NATO.	Broad security-related objectives and the following strategic objectives: Increase military interoperability through participation in selected military exercises and related education and training activities; and participation in selected NATO and Partnership for Peace exercises and in certain NATO-led operations.	In 2017, the initiative's regional center in Kuwait was inaugurated to offer courses and conferences to cover security issues of common interest.
Arab Peace and Security Council	2006	Arab League member states	To prevent, manage, and solve conflicts between Arab states; to support efforts for postconflict reconstruction to prevent a renewal of conflict; and to coordinate counterterrorism efforts between member states.	To create a peacekeeping force that includes military and civilian components to be stationed in their respective countries and to be trained on rapid reaction; to create a data bank and an early warning system; to establish a group of experienced mediators; to mediate and reconcile conflict situations; to decide on collective actions to face the aggression or the threat of aggression against any Arab state, including by another Arab state.	The council held its last meeting in 2012. There is currently a project to restructure and re-establish it. Only Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria had ratified its charter.
Arab Cooperation Framework on Early Warning and Crisis Response	2010 (start of phase 1) and 2015 (phase 2)	Arab League member states, sponsored by the EU, and managed by the United Nations Development Program	Strengthening the early warning capability in the Arab League to provide effective responses to impending regional crises, conflicts, and postconflict situations.	To create an Arab Cooperation Framework on Early Warning and Crisis Response; to create the league's Crisis Management Department; to establish and train an Arab civilian task force to be deployed in field missions in postconflict situations.	The Crisis Management Department was created, but a number of Arab states still refuse to establish the cooperation framework, arguing that its mandate allows intervention in sovereign states.
GCC Unified Military Command	2013	GCC countries	To support and strengthen the interoperability of GCC militaries. In 2015, two objectives were added: supporting postconflict reconstruction and coordinating counterterrorism efforts.	It established a force of 100,000 men, half of them from Saudi Arabia; the unified maritime command was created in 2014; and it included planning and management of joint land, air, and naval military operations and military telecommunication (a common network entered into effect in 2000).	Became operational in 2018 when the GCC appointed a Saudi military commander to it.
Joint Arab Force	2015	Arab League member states	To confront threats and challenges, including terrorism, that affect the security, safety, and stability of any party and constitute a direct threat to Arab national security.	To create a force of 40,000 men with armor, air, and naval capabilities; establish a Rapid Reaction Force; participate in peacekeeping and security operations in the states' parties; and any other tasks determined by the Defense Council.	Remains only on paper.

Sources come from the Century Foundation, the Secretariat General of the GCC, *The Europa World Year Book 2004*, the Kuwait News Agency, *International Institutes of the Middle East*, NATO, the Arab League, *Al-Hayat*, Security and Defense Arabia, UNDP, the Foreign Policy Research Institute, and *Al Arabiya*.

As it stands today, MESA embodies all the obstacles that continue to make those mechanisms ineffective. Chief among those obstacles is Saudi domination of Gulf security and defense policies, something that Gulf countries have been resisting for years—yet with MESA, this domination would henceforth have U.S. support.

MESA Ignores Domestic Political Drivers of Instability

The alliance does not incorporate threats inherent to the domestic and regional policies of the Arab states involved. This challenge makes MESA inconsistent with the U.S. goal of “a [Middle East that is not a safe haven](#) or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists.” According to the [Global Terrorism Index](#), armed conflicts and high levels of political terror are the two main incubators of terrorism. MESA members are involved in both. According to the index, “Political terror is defined as extra-judicial killings, torture, or imprisonment without trial.” Political terror, sometimes carried out in the name of fighting terrorism, is transforming some Arab prisons into what professor Hamed el-Said dubbed “[universities of terrorism](#)” where, instead of being rehabilitated, oppressed youth become radicalized. Meanwhile, some MESA members support radical Islamist actors against other members, and across the region. The [Trump administration’s underestimation](#) of the threats posed by such policies leads to a mistaken belief that more arms will bring more security and collective action that supports U.S. policies in the region. This rationale was illustrated in [Pompeo’s speech in Cairo](#) during his January 2019 tour of Arab countries, where no reference was made to such harmful Arab policies.

Within this context, MESA comes as another example of U.S. support to Arab regimes that makes the United States, as well as its regional interests and allies, a target of popular anger and terrorism. Al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State have shown that terrorist ideologies cannot be easily contained to small, local pockets. Today, terrorist networks have spread throughout the region into Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt,

the Horn of Africa, and all the way to the Sahel. Ignoring the roots of political terror limits MESA’s capacity to target Iran’s “malign activities” as Pompeo described them. Tehran’s destabilizing activities in Bahrain and [Saudi Arabia](#) find fertile ground in the political, religious, and socioeconomic grievances of their Shia communities.

U.S. lenience toward authoritarian regimes does not guarantee that Arab states will return the favor by aligning with U.S. policies in the region, especially if the United States is in retreat. Syria’s restored relations with Bahrain, the UAE, and Jordan illustrates this. Also, this U.S. lenience is incompatible with other U.S. policies that threaten to inflame Arab public opinions against any new alliance with the United States. This is clearly the case in regards to the administration’s Israeli-Palestinian policy, which is hardly supported by its Arab allies. [Articles](#) in official [Arab](#) press [outlets](#) about MESA are already negatively hinting that it is another U.S. project to push Arab states into an alliance with Israel. Recent Saudi and Egyptian actions to mitigate the domestic impact of warming relations with Israel are proof that Arab regimes are still wary of domestic public opinion on this issue. This pushback hinders U.S. plans for Israeli involvement with MESA.

Joining MESA would also be hard to explain to the publics of the countries involved in the GCC rift, where media campaigns have created profound popular hostility between the two sides. Arab states operating in regional conflicts under the banner of a U.S.-led alliance also threatens to mobilize Arab public opinions, which are particularly sensitive to intra-Arab and intra-Muslim military interactions. Similar mobilizations occurred during the 1960s and current wars in Yemen, the 1991 Gulf war, the twenty-nine years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon, and Arab countries’ contributions in 2003 to the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq. Most of those incidents spurred public hostility to the United States and Israel, and eventually turned into demonstrations against some incumbent Arab regimes.

MESA Suffers From Expectation and Confidence Gaps

All members have different expectations for the alliance, in addition to confidence gaps with both each other and the United States. Arab states see MESA as primarily a military alliance and have responded accordingly. Skeptics see Saudi Arabia and the UAE as more prone to addressing regional threats with military power, risking escalation that could engage other MESA members. Egypt, Kuwait, and Jordan's limited military involvement in Yemen is representative of this skepticism. [Oman was never part of it](#). In contrast, Saudi Arabia intervened in Yemen and Bahrain, threatened to intervene in Qatar, encouraged a military intervention in Syria, and has supported military action against Iran. The UAE has joined the Yemen intervention and is increasing its military presence in the Horn of Africa. Both [Saudi Arabia](#) and the [UAE](#) are focused on enhancing their [strategic autonomy](#), which means less foreign control on the end-use of their arms.

It is unclear why MESA would achieve a higher level of trust between its Arab members and, therefore, a higher level of commitment beyond the current selective and verbal-only engagement to Gulf defense. This issue is crucial given that the United States is leaving the region and thus cannot guarantee the outcome of new engagements. MESA doesn't address the question of joint command and control, even though this deficiency is the main reason all regional attempts at collective defense have been ineffective thus far. Arab members of MESA do not share the level of trust needed for information sharing that would make their maritime, cyber, air, and missile defenses more interoperable than they already are. Specifically, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are currently the three main contenders that do not trust each other for either command or control.

In fact, various MESA members prevent their domestic national security institutions from working together to lower the chances of a coup. Until January 2018, the [Egyptian military establishment](#) still judged that U.S.

interoperability would infringe on Egyptian national sovereignty. The politicization of the Egyptian military establishment, the Gulf's reservoir for ground troops, is a constant source of distress to Gulf countries. Inter-Arab military exercises and membership in international military coalitions still failed to establish the level of confidence needed for "[true operational interoperability](#)" and the standardization needed for real time collective defense that doesn't require U.S. command. The region also has a long history of failed and bitter experiences. The most relevant endogenous experience to MESA was the 1991 [Damascus Declaration](#) that capitalized on the momentum of the liberation of Kuwait. The project integrated economic and political pillars, was coordinated with both the United States and Iran, and included Syria but not Jordan. Yet this promising structure was thwarted by Arab Gulf countries' preference for U.S. over Arab military protection, leaving behind a sentiment of deception that is still present today.

On the economic level, Arab states also seem to be hesitant. Oman hosted a meeting on January 9, hailed by U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton, about "[Economic Development and Energy Cooperation Among the United States and Middle East Partners](#)." Omani and other Arab statements, except for Bahrain, linked that meeting to the GCC rather than to MESA. Thus, it is [doubtful](#) that MESA would produce any promising outcomes on the economic level. The Arab world remains [unattractive to private investors](#) because of its state-organized economies, corruption, legal and regulatory constraints, political instability, [socioeconomic deficiencies](#), sanctions, and the omnipresent threat of military conflicts. Those structural [impediments](#) require a vision for economic development that goes beyond regional economic growth built on optimizing rents.

All economic [reports](#) cite [political](#) decisions as the major impediment to regional economic cooperation. Moreover, recent World Bank reports indicate that Gulf countries continue to use their sovereign wealth funds

to secure domestic stability and to invest in emerging economies. Therefore, those funds should not be considered as MESA resources.

In the energy sector, U.S. projects are facing major challenges. First, the quartet boycotting Qatar is determined to limit the consumption of Qatari gas and to compete with it in the energy market. Second, the U.S. Congress is already preemptively blocking U.S.-Saudi cooperation on nuclear energy. Third, the current crisis of confidence between U.S. and Arab members does not encourage them to interrupt their politically and economically promising partnerships with fellow authoritarians Russia and China. Fourth, MESA will need to catch up with the evolving strategic dynamics in the eastern Mediterranean's gas sector.

Finally, the United States will likely fail to include the control of oil prices in the transactional strategic bargain behind MESA. The expectation that Saudi Arabia will control oil prices according to Trump's demands has already proven to be wrong. The kingdom's decision last month to lead an OPEC Plus production cut to provide funds that sustain state spending on public acquiescence is a case in point. In addition, market dynamics and divisions within OPEC and GCC states will hinder any lasting commitment to low oil prices. OPEC countries and Russia are already concerned that U.S. oil production has surpassed their own, with Riyadh and Moscow doubling down on their cooperation. Kuwait's reported position on Chevron's role in the neutral fields and the UAE's recent FDI legislation are yet more reminders that Gulf countries will continue to consider oil as their lifeline and a matter of national sovereignty.

SUGGESTED CHANGES FOR SUCCESS

Changes could be made to MESA that would increase the alliance's chances of coming into existence, and increase its ability to actually contribute to regional security, instead of merely driving more arms purchases.

Build on Past or Current Efforts

The United States should start by supporting existing efforts to build collective security mechanisms and a GCC interoperable ballistic missile defense architecture before advocating a new military alliance for collective defense.

On the military side, the United States should dig into the lessons learned from CENTCOM's combined maritime task forces and joint inter-Arab military exercises. The importance of those experiences stems from increased Arab interest in Red Sea security and the rotating command that allowed Arab countries to lead joint operations. The lessons learned can provide a good reference for U.S. expectations from any Arab strategic alliance that the United States would not command.

Address Immediate Sources of Arab Insecurity

The resolution of the GCC rift must precede any talks about the establishment of a regional alliance. The basis for this resolution must be a commitment from all countries to halt their meddling in the domestic affairs of each other and of all other Arab states.

To uproot terrorism, the Trump administration must reverse its policy of lifting conditionality on arms purchases and link the benefits of MESA to what it dubs "gradual reforms." Political, education, and socioeconomic reforms are the only way to achieve the administration's objective of "security through stability" in the Middle East. The United States must also guarantee that Arab states will not use MESA-related technology and weapons to silence opponents at home and abroad.

All Arab MESA members must contribute to developing MESA's founding principles, scope of action, and objectives instead of just reacting to U.S. proposals. If they do not contribute, MESA will not gain momentum.

Improve Confidence Between Arab States and the United States

The Trump administration needs a more consistent Middle East policy with consistent public statements, as well as fewer abrupt decisions and changes in personnel. U.S. decisions, like withdrawing from Syria and waiving Iran oil sanctions, are leading to a similar crisis of confidence that spoiled the Obama administration's U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum.

The United States has already shown its commitment to pursue [MESA by holding technical meetings](#) on its different pillars, despite recent tensions in U.S.-Saudi relations. In addition to the February 13 meeting in Warsaw on the future of peace and security in the Middle East, the United States is also convening a meeting on MESA's political and security pillars the same month. Both meetings clearly overlap, and the United States and its Arab partners may discuss MESA on the sidelines of the Warsaw meeting. Both meetings will provide indicators on whether the United States will work through these regional challenges to a robust security architecture or, instead, continue to overlook these obstacles.

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