

MILITARY ALLIANCE ARAB STATES TO CONFRONT IRAN SOON? REALITY AND DISAGREEMENTS HITTING CAPABILITIES

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Since the end of 2016, alliances in the Middle East again have become very fluid. Internal pressure, regional aspirations and the fall-out of the new Trump Administration, are having a detrimental effect on the region's military-political constellation. After several years of a Sunni-Shi'a confrontation in Syria and Yemen, which has led to the setup of a Sunni-led military alliance, bringing together Arab, African and Asian countries, including Turkey, Trump's Administration now has put its weight behind it too.¹ Several American advisors of Trump's skeleton government already have called for an increased Arab-Israeli cooperation to confront the ongoing power build-up of Iran and its regional allies.² The Middle East seems to be heading to a military showdown if no diplomatic breakthrough is popping up. The Sunni-Shi'a power struggle, partly supported by the ongoing Russian power projections in the Levant and North Africa, could lead to military clashes not only in the Persian Gulf, Yemen, Syria, but spread even to the North-Africa/Red Sea arena³. No clear picture can yet be painted with regards a possible military upper-hand, as both sides are not very transparent about their real capabilities⁴. To block Iran's perceived encroachment on Sunni grounds, the Sunni military alliance or "Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI)" is being set up. The future success however is decided by three Arab members, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE, while Turkey (as the only NATO member) is playing an ever-growing role in the setup the last months.

At the end 2015 Sunni Islamic countries have set up a global military alliance, which was at the start being proponed as a global fight against terrorism. At least, the official reason for founding father Saudi Arabia was that it is an "Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI)"⁵. The latter included from the beginning mostly Arab GCC and North African countries, but excluded Iran, Iraq, Syria and Yemen. Several other countries from Africa and Asia, especially Pakistan, have been included from the start. This obvious division of Sunni-Shi'a military cooperation has however taken over and led to a full-fledged anti-Iran strategy.

Anti-Iran

Since the start of the alliance, which is fully promoted by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Minister of Defense Mohammed Bin Salman, a long list of questions has popped up with regards to the main purpose of the so-called Sunni “NATO project”. Main issue is the underlying strategic approach of the alliance. Outside analysts have dubbed it to be an anti-Iran or anti-Shi’a alliance, mainly targeting the growing geostrategic position that Iran and its allies, Hezbollah, Houthis, Assad and indirectly Russia, have been acquiring in the MENA region. Under the title of IMAFT, targeting officially the rise of IS/Daesh and Al Qaeda, Saudi Arabia, UAE and Egypt, have been setting up a military cooperation to confront the encroachment of Iranian military and semi-military forces on the borders of the leading Sunni states.

However, the impact of IMAFT has been not very impressive to say the least. Even that leading Arab countries, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, UAE, Jordan, have been able to commit themselves to the whole idea, bringing even in the support of Turkey, Pakistan and others, it still didn’t result in a full-fledged military cooperation able to even project power beyond its own territory. Some attempts have been made, such as the February 2016 Saudi Arabia-led massive military exercise, called Northern Thunder, which included military assets and troops of around 20 different countries. The military exercise, which took place in King Khalid Military City in northeastern Saudi Arabia, entailed military exercises of the forces of Saudi Arabia’s, Jordan, Bahrain, Senegal, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Sudan, Kuwait, the Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Chad, Tunisia, Comoro Islands, Djibouti, Malaysia, Egypt, Mauritania and Mauritius. Looking at the full lineup of the exercise, the only functional participation however has come from the GCC states, Egypt, Jordan and Pakistan. The others on the list even don’t have any military force to speak of. Still, the first steps towards an integrated cooperation of the main forces have been taken.

The move of Saudi Arabia, aka Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, to set up this alliance has not come as a surprise. The Wahhabi Sunni Kingdom has become a major focal point of Iranian subversive operations. Riyadh, while still supporting the anti-Assad opposition groups, has also become entangled in the Yemen war. In both cases, Saudi operations are facing directly or by-proxy Iranian forces. The Syrian Assad government is heavily backed by Tehran. Without the military support of Iran, and Russia, current successes on the ground would not have been possible. Shi’a support for the Alawi-backed Assad regime, in combination with Hezbollah support, is still the main life-line of the regime. Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar, have been since the beginning of the anti-Assad revolt heavily involved, largely supporting financial and military support to the wide-range of opposition groups. Still, the lack of success of these anti-Assad forces, in combination with IS/Daesh related operations, have confronted the Sunni states with a *fait accompli*. Iran’s Shi’a approach was more successful. A Shi’a led Syria, in combination with Iran’s growing military-political power in Iraq, confronts Riyadh with an arch of instability on its northern borders.

At the same time, Iran became heavily involved in the ongoing civil war in Yemen. Tehran openly supports the Houthi-rebel forces, which are currently fighting an open war against Saudi-UAE backed Yemen government forces. After initial successes of

the Saudi-UAE involvement, current situation on the ground doesn't bode well for the future. The Houthi forces are getting experienced in addressing the weak-spots of the Saudi-UAE led operations, mainly as both GCC countries are not willing to put a real military force on the ground to challenge the Houthis and their Iranian supporters. Still, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are committed to the continuing battle against the Houthi's and Iranian supported factions.

IMAFI

Several analysts also have openly stated that IMAFI is a Sunni military bloc primarily meant to be a deterrent to Iran⁶. The omission of Shi'ite led countries, such as Iran, Iraq and Syria, shows that the overall strategy is not an anti-terrorism alliance, as the Shi'ite led countries are also fighting against IS/Daesh, Al Qaeda and others. The latter even goes for Lebanon's main political power at present, Hezbollah. In 2016 Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Mohammed Bin Salman already indicated that the Sunni bloc was not only meant to support counter-terrorism operations. He added several times that the military alliance also would be countering other threats than only IS/Daesh. MBS also stated to the press that the coalition would fight terrorist groups "regardless of their categorization," particularly in Syria and Iraq, where he said there will be co-operation with the international community.

IMAFI is not a new kid on the block, as the Arab Gulf states, and several other Sunni countries, such as Egypt and Jordan, have been heavily involved with US and Western forces in the region. Close cooperation and military training has been in place for years, especially after the Arab Spring and the rise of IS/Daesh. In 2015, the Arab Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, joined the Western US-led coalition to carry out airstrikes in Syria against IS. After a short period of heavy involvement of the GCC countries, total commitment to Syrian operations however has faltered. Since the Saudi-UAE military operations in Yemen, military activities have been concentrating on the Yemen theatre mainly.

For most Western diplomats and military analysts, the setup of IMAFI was a surprise. US and NATO officials indicated at that time that they had not been informed at all. When asked,

U.S. Defence Secretary Ash Carter, during a visit to the Incerlik Air Base in Turkey, stated "In general, at least, it appears that it's very much aligned with something that we've been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISIL by Sunni Arab countries." Josh Earnest, White House spokesman of the Obama Administration, stated that the alliance wouldn't be a substitute or a replacement for the U.S.-led coalition fighting IS militants, noting the Saudi effort was intended to focus on broader targets.

These broader targets, as implied above, were substantiated partly by Adel Al Jubeir, Saudi minister of foreign affairs, who stated that members could ask for assistance from the coalition, which would address the requests "on a case-by-case basis." Al Jubeir did not rule out the deployment of ground troops. In how far this will be put to a test is not yet clear.

Crisis in the Making?

The military power of IMAFT, in principle involving the armies of GCC countries but also Pakistan, Turkey and Egypt, together with a long-list of smaller states, is on a regional basis a formidable one. However, problems are already building up, as Arab countries don't necessarily have the same goals and strategies. The ongoing diplomatic crisis between two main powers, Saudi Arabia and Egypt, already has put immense pressure on the effectiveness and functionality of the total alliance. In 2015, when the whole strategic approach was discussed between the leading Arab states, a military alliance of GCC-Egypt and Jordan, would have been enough to counter any possible Shi'a encroachment in the MENA region. The military capabilities of the combined forces of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi-UAE, would have been strong enough to counter or even engage third party operations. This however changed dramatically after that the Saudi-Egyptian marriage ended up in almost a divorce. Saudi financial and political ties and influence on Egypt's politics were confronted by Egyptian nationalism and a strategic re-evaluation of Cairo's priorities.

IMAFI confronted by national (Arab) strategies

In addition to the continuing Arab infighting, ongoing military cooperation of IMAFI is also constrained by national security strategies. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are stepping up their own military reach, even outside of their own area, such as the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. The latter has become imperative due to the growing influence of Iran in the latter region, aka Yemen. In recent years, Iran has sought to establish alliances with Eritrea, Sudan and other countries in the Red Sea region to enhance its capabilities against two of its key enemies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which both have naval access to the Red Sea. In Yemen, Iran's involvement is strategic, as it also has given it access to the Red Sea. Arab analysts are very worried about the possibility that Iran's navy could gain naval bases access from which it could threaten shipping through the Bab el Mandeb strait, the Red Sea's southern gateway to the Indian Ocean. The Horn of Africa is particularly important because it has a 2,500-mile coastline that runs from Sudan in the north to Kenya in the south and close to Red Sea and South African Cape maritime routes.

To counter the Iranian encroachment, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have either established or are preparing three military bases strategically located around the western shore of the Red Sea and on the Gulf of Aden. In Somaliland, the UAE has been approved to set up a military base at the port of Berbera on the Gulf of Aden. In Eritrea, the UAE already is since 2015 building a major air and naval base next to port of Assab. Saudi Arabia has been following, as it is now finalizing an agreement for a base in Djibouti. Djibouti has the added advantage of being a member of the Arab League and of the 34-state Saudi-led anti-Iranian "Islamic coalition" announced in December 2015.

Instead of coordinating the security issues in the Red Sea within a framework of the IMAFI, Egypt also is increasing its overall naval presence in the area⁷. In January 2017 the Egyptian navy has established a naval force in the Red Sea. The latter, officials stated, is meant to protect navigation in the Suez Canal, a vital waterway for international trade. Egypt's former Assistant Minister of Defense, Hossam Suweilam, said that "the force will be the backbone of Egypt's new Red Sea strategy.... There is a marked surge of

unrest in the southern entrance to the Red Sea, which needs an aggressive policy.” The Red Sea force will utilize recently acquired naval equipment, including a French-made multifunction helicopter carrier. Egypt’s Defense Minister Sedki Sobhi was more clear about the underlying reason. He stated that the force would help Egypt impose control on its territorial waters in the Red Sea. Officially, the navy will be used to protect the Suez Canal traffic. Cairo has invested around \$8 billion in a parallel channel to shorten transit time in the Suez Canal in 2015.

At the same time, president Sisi ordered in April 2016 Prime Minister Sherif Ismail to sign a maritime border demarcation agreement with Saudi Arabia, handing over two disputed Red Sea islands to Riyadh. However, this has been cancelled as Egyptian courts have overturned the latter⁸. Opposition on the streets also was overwhelming and even threatened Sisi’s position.

Some analysts have indicated that one other reason for Egypt’s drive for a navy presence in the Red Sea is presumed hydrocarbon reserves. “Such a potential wealth is badly in need of a military power to protect it,” said Nasr Salem, a lecturer at Nasser Military Academy, the Egyptian army’s strategic and military science institute. All of this could be threatened by external forces, such as the presence of pro-Iranian forces or even Iranian navy. The fear in Egypt is that the Houthis can threaten traffic in the strait, which would deal an irreversible blow to the Suez Canal. An Iranian presence in the area, Yemen-Sudan or Horn of Africa, would also threaten it.

Cairo Confronts Saudi-led IMAFT

Egypt’s overall position in and with regards to IMAFT has always already been ambiguous. IMAFT is seen in Egypt as a Saudi answer to a call by Egypt, via an Egyptian-sponsored Arab Summit resolution (March 2015), to create an Arab Rapid Deployment Force. At that time, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were providing most that contingent’s manpower and funding. Arab League Secretary-General Nabil al-Arabi before the meeting in March already called for the establishment of a joint fighting force, one aimed at combating the spread of extremist groups. “There is an urgent need for the creation of a multi-purpose common Arab military force... able to intervene rapidly to fight terrorism and the activities of terrorist groups,” the official stated.

Egyptian sources indicated that Arab League/Egyptian plan entailed that the unified command would be a multilateral rapid deployment force based in Cairo. Main forces would come from the Egyptians, as the remaining Arab countries don’t have large standing armies. For Cairo, the latter would have been a boost of its regional (Sunni) power position. The months before, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al Sisi strongly advocated for greater security coordination against terrorism. The Egyptian idea also was supported by the fact that the US and EU rejected Cairo’s call for a renewed UN intervention in Libya. The outcome of the overall Arab League proposal however has been rather disappointing, especially to the Egyptians. Even that Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) efforts until then were rather struggling to reach a coordinated military cooperation, the Saudi idea for IMAFT has been taken on without real discourse. It could be argued that the GCC countries have been behind the setup of IMAFT to counter the possible military power projections of an Egyptian-led military force in future.

IMAF T Imminent Future

Still, the IMAFT future is still undecided, as Arab countries, including possible third party Sunni forces from Turkey, Pakistan and others, have always been riddled with disagreements. The prioritization of a combined military forces, under leadership of a leading Arab country, to counter threats to the region, is still far away. A lack of coordination between the so-called member-states is also again apparent. Different military strategies or regional power strategies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan or Egypt, have already shown, as indicated above, to have a debilitating effect on the current military cooperation.

When looking at the IMAFT strategy towards Syria, it has become very clear that GCC countries (Saudi Arabia-UAE) are having a totally different approach at present than is being taken by Cairo. The Gulf Arab countries are still largely combining their efforts to remove the Shi'a alliance of Syrian president Assad from the country. Cairo, after starting a tit-for-tat diplomatic conflict with Saudi Arabia, has shown a willingness to open to a discussion with Russia and Iran on the future of the Syrian ruling elite. This will not go down lightly within the ruling circles in Riyadh and/or Abu Dhabi.

Another possible divisive element will be the role that others in the alliance are playing. The ongoing conflict between Cairo and Qatar is still not resolved at all. The support of the Qatari government of the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohammed Mursi, after the removal of President Husni Mubarak, is still not forgotten. Mainstream Egyptian politicians and military are still very wary about Qatar's continuing openness to the Muslim Brotherhood, support of Hamas and its role in the Syrian conflict. On this level, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have been agreeing for a very long time, but current developments in Saudi Arabia could change this to the worse.

For Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood position in national and regional politics is a red-line. Not only Qatar's perceived pro-MB standpoints, but also continuing pro-MB statements popping up in Turkey, are putting pressure on Egypt's overall willingness to commit itself to IMAFT or to confront the Iranian supported groups in the region. For Saudi Arabia, the latter is not a breaking point in any discussion. This already has been proven by the ongoing rapprochement between Riyadh and Turkey, who has been very vocal in the support of Muslim Brotherhood.

IMAF T To End In Arab Disagreement?

The Arab (Sunni) military alliance is until now seen as part of a continuing trend in the Middle East. Military cooperation between Arab states has always been the dream of a long-list of leaders in the region. 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. As many have written before, none of these succeeded. Whether the Arab League's Joint Defence Pact, the Middle East Command, the Middle East Defense Organization, the Baghdad Pact (officially known as the Middle East Treaty Organization), or indeed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), no previous alliance lived up to its own security standards. Continuing regional political shifts, internal and external strife and power politics of perceived Arab leaders, have always prevented a success. Even during major military events or conflicts, such as the Arab Israeli wars (1947-1973), Lebanon's

Civil War and Syrian intervention, Yemen War in the 1950s, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait or even the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988), no Arab military alliance has been formed and supported the others. Nevertheless, the idea to cooperate militarily on a more regular basis has again re-emerged.

Even that some indicated it is another old idea in a new bottle, some analysis could show that there is possibly a different geopolitical situation in the region at present. Economic issues are also playing a role, as the hey-days of crude oil revenues streaming in, forming the situation of rentier states, are largely over. Spending patterns have been changed dramatically in most of the Arab Gulf states, while at the same time the Arab periphery, including Egypt, has been hit by economic turmoil and outright revolts. The effects of the Arab Spring, which hit Tunisia, Libya, Egypt and Syria, were largely not felt in the Arab Gulf.

The latter situation of stability in the GCC changed dramatically, when not only Iran showed an increased willingness to project its power to Sunni area (Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen), but also a Sunni-originated extremist group, ISIS or Daesh, become a prominent destabilization fact. The latter's unexpected success militarily on the ground, threatening even the collapse of Syria and Iraq, while projecting its future threats to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab countries, shocked the rentier states. Military capabilities of the GCC countries, even that looking at their defense expenditure an immense amount of hardware has been acquired, are still below a rationally needed level. Confronted by economic hardship, high unemployment, radicalization and the end to the Pax Americana under former US president Obama, Sunni countries in the region needed to reassess their options and realign their security arrangements with military and economic reality. The need for efficiency to cost-savings to political legitimacy, in combination with a share threat (Daesh/Iran), have led to a renewed fever to build up a military alliance.

At the same time, the IMAFT foundations have not been built on just a dream of the Saudis. Since 2013 Saudi Arabia has been actively pushing for increased regional military coordination. Riyadh pushed in 2013 for a NATO-like integrated command structure for GCC military forces, including 100,000 troops⁹. Until now, all these GCC military integration projects have been progressing very slowly.

In 2015, as already stated before, Riyadh, in strong cooperation with the Sisi government in Egypt, pushed for 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 structure¹⁰. The underlying reason was the growing threat to the GCC countries, and the ongoing struggle inside of Egypt to remove Muslim Brotherhood and others from power. Egypt even declared openly that it sees GCC security issues as an integral part of its own security environment. However, words were again not met by deeds. Internal regional differences have led that this effort again was put on ice.

GCC countries at that time were heavily involved already in the Syrian conundrum and fighting against Houthis and Iran in Yemen, while Cairo's main target was and is the ongoing battle in the Sinai against Daesh, while it wants to have stability in Libya at the same time. Another major stumble block is the fact that Egypt already in 2016 indicated

that it would be open for any discussion on Syria's future, which indicated even an option to discuss with Russia and Assad how to deal with the ongoing conflict. The latter of course stands contrary to the GCC approach, as all Arab Gulf states are currently supporting the anti-Assad groups in full¹¹.

Power Politics Breaking Up Saudi-Egyptian Cooperation

Egypt and Saudi Arabia also are having a strategic conflict. Both parties are currently trying to regain their former status or acquire a leading role in the New Middle East. Based on the historically and practical power position of Egypt, and especially its armed forces in the Arab world, a leading role for Cairo's generals in any military operation or configuration would be normal. Sisi's strategy to position the Egyptian forces, its main power base at present, as the leading for in any Arab/Sunni military organization has not only lead to a direct conflict with the Gulf Arab states, but also has caused Cairo to reconsider its strategic options.

At the same time, Saudi's move to set up, almost unilaterally IMAFT, is seen by mainstream Saudi military strategists, and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, as a legitimate move to acquire a leading position in the Middle East. Riyadh already in 2013-2015 was not keen at all to fund a mainly Egyptian military force, capable of even invading other Arab countries. Some leaders in Riyadh were very wary of the possibility of such as force invading an Arab country (Saudi Arabia) under the pretext of fighting terrorism. Still, without the involvement and support of Egypt's armed forces, IMAFT or whatever it will be called in due course, is a tiger without teeth.

Reality Is Bleak And Hits In?

Gulf Arab countries fully understood that any real military opposition against a covert or direct Iranian attack will only be able to be countered by an Arab army including Egypt. No real other strategic options at present are on the table for the GCC region, considering the partly retraction of US engagement in the Middle East. Gulf Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, have been very disappointed by the US support (and the West) of not only the Arab Spring but more importantly the Iran nuclear deal. The support to lift almost all sanctions on Iran has brought a deep feeling of being abandoned by the West. The US also ruled out that they would actively support a mutual defence pact with the GCC countries. A possible NATO-like military cooperation between Washington and the GCC, which would have been a dream come true for the Arab countries, was totally put on ice¹².

No other option than to put a full Arab military cooperation in force was at that time seen as the only option left. However, several Arab countries could not be taken in, Syria, Libya, Yemen and Iraq, were out of the total constellation already. Iran's full military cooperation with Syria and Iraq, even able to overwhelm Western support to opposition groups, confronted Saudi Arabia and its compatriots in the Gulf, with a dire situation. The only option left was to start it with a skeleton force of Arab countries, even leaving out Oman at that time¹³, and to ask non-Arab Sunni Islamic countries to join. Hence the surprise move to take in countries from Africa and Asia, including Pakistan. The latter is

still seen as one of the strongest non-Arab Islamic countries, when looking at its armed forces and nuclear capabilities. For some analysts, Saudi's choice to ask Pakistan is clear. Pakistani armed forces are very intertwined with Saudi armed forces, as they have been supporting and training with Saudi forces since decades.

The Pakistani nuclear capability is also regarded as a strong strategic asset. Since the acquisition of a nuclear bomb, Pakistan's arsenal also has been dubbed the Islamic Nuclear Bomb, as part of its research and development was funded by Arab countries. Taking in Pakistan not only increased IMAFT's capabilities, but indirectly also confronted Iran with a second military front on its own borders, this time including a nuclear weapon option.

The distrust between Saudi Arabia and the US (West) also has resulted in another development. Saudi military evolution shows that it has become much more enticed to set up its own military force in full. Since 2003, its army has almost doubled, reaching a level of just above 200,000. The Saudi Air Force, which was not a real force in the 1990s or even beginning of the 21st Century, now is the second largest in the Arab world (behind Egypt), entailing around 300 planes. With its own missile defense systems and a burgeoning navy, the current defense posture is becoming impressive, in GCC terms. Still, a military confrontation with Iran would be looking for trouble and possible defeat.

The ongoing Yemen confrontation also has led to a direr situation in the Syria-Iraq theatre. GCC forces are currently not anymore active in and around Syria. The only Sunni forces still in place are the Turkish army and Jordanian assets. Fighting on a third front, Libya, which would have been a major feature of a real Sunni military cooperation after Syria, is presently not possible. Egypt and the UAE are the only ones willing and able to act in North Africa¹⁴. The weakness of IMAFT approach at present is showing¹⁵. Will Turkey come to the rescue the main question is.

Turkey

After being already part of IMAFT from the start, Turkey's role is currently growing. Turkish president Erdogan has shown a willingness to act unilaterally, not only in his fight against terrorism in Turkey, but also willing to put Turkish armed forces in harm's way if this will increase the regional power position of the country. The assertiveness of Turkey in addressing the Daesh, and Kurdish armed groups, in Syria and Iraq, has brought Ankara a lot of praise inside the Arab ruling elites. The aggressive stand of Turkey, even with the danger of coming into a military confrontation with Russia, Iran, Hezbollah or others, is worrying to some but most Arab Sunni countries in the Gulf region are looking at it with positive feelings. The latter already has brought a major change in the relationship between countries such as Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar on one side, and Turkey on the other.

In April 2016, it became clear that Saudi Arabia and Turkey were looking at a new marriage of convenience. The visit of King Salman to Turkey, officially to attend the Organization of the Islamic Conference in Istanbul, was showing a thaw in relations. The latter meeting was a follow-up of Turkish president Erdogan in December 2015. The Erdogan meeting in 2015 resulted in a strategic cooperation agreement, entailing

military, economic and investment. When looking back now, it can be a first step of the creation of IMAFT. For Turkey, its strategy is still very diffuse. Some can argue that the alliance with Saudi Arabia has increased Ankara's position to build up its regional strategic capacity in the Middle East. The setup of Turkish military bases in Qatar and Somalia is a sample of this. For Saudi, the Turkish involvement is also important, not only as Ankara can provide the 2nd largest armed forces in NATO, but also opens to Riyadh a highly sophisticated defence and military electronics industries. The latter has already been partly put in place, as there is a growing defense cooperation showing between Saudi and Turkish counterparts¹⁶.

Riyadh seems to be happy to have Ankara in its military constellation, as this keeps Cairo partly in check, while also Saudi Arabia, and its GCC compatriots, have direct links to Turkey in case of a deepening confrontation with Iran. At the same time, Turkey's growing cooperation with Russia (and Iran) presents the Arab countries with a major challenge. A split between the Sunni Arabs and Turkey could lead to a further destabilization of the already embattled region. If Turkey and Russia also can bring in Egypt to the other side (according to main-stream Arab the Dark Side), Saudi Arabia's aspirations to lead the Arab Sunni world in the coming years could be in shambles.

For Riyadh, there is even more at stake than only the military confrontation with Iran and the instability on its borders. Saudi strategists will also be looking at the necessity of increased inter-Arab cooperation and the integration of Turkey in its influence spheres if the economic confrontation with Iran is to be won too. Analysts are referring to Turkey's renewed close relations with Moscow as a USP for Ankara in its discussions with the Arabs. At present, Saudi Arabia (as the main OPEC producer) and other Arab GCC producers are looking at Moscow, leading non-OPEC producers (if taking out the US), for increased coordination in the oil markets. After decades of confrontation between OPEC and Russia, the current situation is the contrary. Leaving geopolitical issues aside (especially Syria-Iraq), Saudi Arabia is looking for cooperation with Moscow. The latter already has opened to this, as it decided in 2016 to openly discuss OPEC-Non-OPEC cooperation in full. Turkey's role in this new relation could be vital, as it holds stakes on both sides. Ankara has reopened its channels with Moscow, even discussing at present military cooperation and Russian military exports to the NATO country. At the same time, Ankara is steadily improving its stand in the Arab world, with as its main focal point Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Growing economic and military cooperation is one of the cornerstones at present. Saudi Arabia (and several GCC countries) fully acknowledge the pivotal role of these Arab countries, but also is more than willing to be a bridge between Russia and the Arab world. As a Sunni European-Asian power broker, it can bring its European/Western approach in line with a Sunni-Islamic flavor. Some even have indicated that Turkey's ongoing economic relations with Iran will be a price asset, as Ankara can discuss Sunni-geopolitical concerns in full in Tehran. Arab political strategists also have said that the Arab rapprochement with Turkey is meant to increase the pressure on the Russian-Iranian military cooperation. By opening to a more normal geopolitical, economic and military relationship with Russia, Arab countries, including Turkey, could become much more attractive to Moscow than its current main ally in the region, Iran and its supporters (Assad-Hezbollah).

For Turkey, the current reorientation on the Middle East has been pushed forward

by an unexpected military coup mid-July 2016. The reactions from the West, and large amount of criticism on president Erdogan, have forced it to focus on the Middle East, looking for a new power position in the Arab world. An alignment with Russia and China, as some have been afraid of, is currently not really on the table. At present, Ankara is in a decision-making process which could lead to a rearrangement of alliances. When looking at IMAFT, Turkey is at present interested in this third alternative, a regional security alliance, led by Saudi Arabia, but supported by Pakistan. For Western analysts, it is very interesting to see if Ankara really is going to break with its old alliances (NATO), and will forge a new one. As stated above, Turkey has been setting up already military and economic agreements with Saudi Arabia (and the GCC) and Pakistan. Turkey is setting up bilateral military development agreements with Riyadh, while already being a major arms exporter to Pakistan¹⁷.

Just before the Munich Security Conference, Turkish president Erdogan already has stepped up his efforts to gain traction in the Arab world again. Erdogan has been touring the GCC countries, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Qatar. According to İbrahim Kalın, assistant to the Turkish President, Turkey developed a wide-ranging relationship with the Gulf countries. The Turkey-GCC High Level Strategic Dialogue mechanism established in 2008 in Jeddah has helped realize new potential but ought to be further activated to create new opportunities. Currently Turkey has large interest in security priorities and economic outlook of the GCC countries. For Turkey, main interest is also GCC support for Ankara's security concerns over the PKK and FETÖ. Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain have taken several steps to stop the activities of FETÖ institutions and individuals in their countries. At the same time, Turkey and the GCC are confronting Daesh and other terrorist organizations.¹⁸ Erdogan has reiterated during his visit that Riyadh and Ankara have repaired ties strained over the 2013 ousting of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood president Mohamed Morsi, a Turkish ally.

Since 2016 Turkey has hosted Saudi warplanes at its Incirlik air base as part of the US-led coalition against Daesh militants, who are among an array of factions fighting in Syria. The capture at the end of 2016 by Syria's army of the country's second city Aleppo, backed by Russian air strikes, was a setback for Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Even that Turkey is coordinating part of its operations in Syria with Russia, and Assad-Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey are still largely on the same line, a removal of Islamists extremist groups is still the main operational goal of both. During his visit to Ankara beginning of February, Saudi Foreign Minister Al Jubeir stated that the positions of Saudi Arabia and Turkey are "absolutely identical" on Syria¹⁹. Both Riyadh and Ankara are hoping for better relations with Washington under President Donald Trump. Some issues however still need to be removed before Saudi Arabia and Turkey are again real buddies. Erdogan's full cooperation with Qatar and the build-up of a Turkish military base in the latter country, is still looked upon by Riyadh with suspicion. While both states are united in their backing for rebels fighting Assad's regime, they also shared support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. If this is not cleared, a real open military relationship could still be blocked. Riyadh's issues with Qatar is still unresolved, even that diplomatic warmth has returned in the media. Under the surface, Saudi Arabia is still looking for a real break between Doha and several leading Islamist groups, especially Muslim Brotherhood, but also Hamas and others. Turkey's close ties to Doha will also be a constant

in the ongoing discussions in Riyadh. No Saudi defense minister or heir-apparent will be looking for close relations with either of them, as long MB and others are removed totally. Turkey's political stamina and prowess will be also tasked by Riyadh and others with regards to Israel. Ankara's opening to Israel, after a long period of conflict, could be bringing unexpected gains. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Turkey are fully aware of Israel's anti-Iran standpoints. The Arab-Turkish coalition could be a major force, in the eyes of the Israelis, to block not only Iran's growing power in the region, but also to deal a blow to its other enemies, Hezbollah, Hamas and Al Qaeda. Ankara has before already been a go-between for both parties. Maybe this will return, to the benefit of all.

New Kid On The Block Israel

At the same time, the IMAFT approach could be receiving some unexpected support, especially in the confrontation with Iran. The last years, media sources reported several times a rapprochement between archrivals Saudi Arabia and Israel²⁰. Several Saudi high-rank unofficial meetings occurred with Israeli counterparts, but all were denied by Saudi government statements. However, looking at the Saudi-Iran conflict, Israel's anti-Iran stand could be playing into the hands of Riyadh. Israeli intelligence reports, especially via DEBKA, even have stated that the director of Saudi Arabia's General intelligence agency, Khalid Bin Ali Al Humaidan, has paid a surprise visits to Ramallah (West Bank) and Jerusalem on February 21-22. The latter was not confirmed by Palestinian and Israeli sources, but also not denied. According to the Israeli news site, the visit of the Saudi official has come just after that news emerged that Iranian engineers were working around the clock on a project dubbed "Riyadh First," for adding an extra 100 km to the intermediate range of the Scud-C (600km) and Scud-D (700km) surface missiles, to enable them to reach the Saudi capital and explode in the center of Riyadh. The project, which is going forward at the Al Ghadi base in Big Ganesh, 48km west of Tehran, was ordered by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hassan Rouhani. The latter could be still an empty threat, but analysts have reiterated that Iran is increasing its missile capabilities. Unconfirmed reports have already stated that on February 4, Iranian-backed Yemeni Houthis fired a missile which they claimed was a homemade Borkan with a range of 800km into Saudi Arabia. It struck the al-Mazahimiyah military camp west of Riyadh. Israeli military sources stated that the attack was the first test of the newly-extended Iranian Scud, as a dress rehearsal for the real strike.

If the Saudi visit to Jerusalem is confirmed, Al-Huymaidan may have explored security issues. DEBKAFle's sources note that the Saudi spy chief is a professional soldier and the first commoner to hold the post of Director of Saudi General Intelligence. Among his predecessors were high-ranking princes such as Bandar Bin Sultan, Turki Bin Faisal and Muqrin bin Abdul Aziz. The Israeli news, even that it is unconfirmed, falls in line with the statements made by Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Al Jubeir and his Israeli counterpart Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman, who both have accused Iran of being the main cause of instability and threats in the Middle East. When looking at their statements, made during the Munich Security Conference 2017, a large amount of synchronization is shown. Both have accused Iran of being a threat to Arab Sunni countries, increasing instability and threatening not only Riyadh but also Israel.

Pakistani To Lead IMAFT, The Odd Duckling?

The members of IMAFT will also need to deal with another surprise move. Retired Pakistani military chief of staff General Raheel Sharif was appointed as commander of the Saudi-led, anti-Iranian military alliance in February 2017. Analysts have indicated that the appointment, which could indirectly lead to some confrontations with other member countries, could be a defining moment in Saudi- Pakistani relations. The appointment could kill several birds with one stone. Until now, the alliance has been a paper tiger. The appointment of General Shareef could assist the alliance to set up a real force. Strategically it could be Saudi coupe de grace, as Riyadh seems to award Sharif for opposing the Pakistani parliament rejection in 2015 of a Saudi request for military support in Yemen²¹. The latter took Riyadh at that time by surprise, as Pakistan until then was considered a strategic ally, fully aware of its economic dependency on Saudi Arabia (remittances). Pakistan is also at present fighting a new formed alliance of Daesh and Taliban. Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have been historically intertwined, including in its religious issues. The country has part of Saudi's ongoing proxy war against Iran, since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. The appointment would build on decades of Pakistani military support of Saudi Arabia dating back to war in Yemen in the late 1960s.

The Future

Looking at the current developments, there are no rational indicators showing that IMAFT will be able or willing to confront Iran in the region. The ongoing internal discussions or outright conflicts prevent the Sunni alliance to even consider or prepare a full-fledged military force able to withstand or confront Iran on the battlefield. The only positive effect of the possible integration of these forces in future would be that there is a movement to integrate military capabilities and investments. Before however the Arab countries, in combination with other Sunni countries, will be able to present themselves as a new "Arab or Sunni" NATO, a lot of water will flow through the Nile or the Euphrates. Iran should not be getting anxious about the ongoing efforts. The picture could however dramatically change if Turkey (NATO), Israel and Pakistan would be willing to coordinate direct military action against Iran with their Arab neighbors. Combining two nuclear forces (Israel, Pakistan) and the 2nd largest NATO army (Turkey), with the Arab confrontational strategy, would present Tehran with a force to reckon with. IMAFT 2.0 would be without any question can bring Tehran on its knees. This however, as a lot in the Arab region, can still be a fata morgana.

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