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Commentaries

New Series

THE MECCA JOINT DEFENSE AGREEMENT: A NEW LAYER OF REGIONAL SECURITY COOPERATION?

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Negotiations had reportedly been underway for nearly three years, but the Israeli-US war on Iran and its regional spillover have accelerated the process, creating the context in which the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement between Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Türkiye materialized. Since the outbreak of the war, the shortcomings of the security architecture on which the Gulf Arab states have relied thus far have become increasingly apparent, prompting a reassessment of the existing equation. Yet the responses from Abu Dhabi, Riyadh and the other Gulf Arab capitals have not translated into greater cohesion within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Statements emphasizing a united front and a commitment to collective security have not been matched by concrete steps toward a sustainable intra-GCC security architecture.

Instead, the war has exposed and intensified pre-existing intra-GCC fault lines, most notably between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with recent developments in Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen underscoring these growing divergences. At the same time, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have reassessed their respective security strategies, advancing their pursuit of increasingly autonomous trajectories. Reports of the deployment of Israel's Iron Dome system in the UAE, alongside officially denied claims of high-level Israeli visits during the war, have reinforced the perception of an increasingly consolidated security partnership between Abu Dhabi and Tel Aviv. For Saudi Arabia, the conflict has created stronger incentives to deepen cooperation with Egypt, Pakistan, and Türkiye.

Against this backdrop, the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement between Ankara, Islamabad, and Riyadh – three major regional geopolitical players – should be understood primarily as diplomatic signaling. It reflects growing strategic alignment but falls well short of a collective-defense mechanism modeled on NATO. Portraying it as a “Muslim NATO” is therefore misleading. The pact fits into a broader effort to develop a more indigenous approach to regional security by diversifying security relationships. It reflects an attempt to develop a further layer of deterrence through which regional states can reduce their exposure to external uncertainty, while remaining compatible, as some experts have pointed out, with the logic of burden-sharing within a US-linked security ecosystem.

This convergence did not arise from the Iran-Israel-US war alone. Even before the emergence of the quadrilateral consultative framework bringing together the three signatories to the Mecca Agreement and Egypt, a broader trend towards regional coordination across the Indo-Mediterranean corridor was already taking shape. Shared interests in the Horn of Africa and growing common ground on regional security dossiers, particularly Somalia and Sudan, have contributed to this process.

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On the eastern side of the Red Sea, the threat posed by Yemen's Ansarullah, better known as the Houthis, has added another layer of cooperation. The newly established Multinational Maritime Defense Alliance, launched at Saudi initiative to protect commercial shipping in the Red Sea following the Houthis' maritime blockade against the Kingdom, counts Egypt, Pakistan and Türkiye among the countries that have signed the statement establishing the coalition.

Yemen is likely to be the first major test of the scope and limits of the Mecca Agreement. Growing pressure on the Kingdom along its southern border from Houthi drone and missile attacks, compounded by strikes from the north carried out by Iran-backed militias in Iraq, has compelled Riyadh to partially recalibrate its restraint-based approach. As broader evidence of its recalibrating posture toward regional security, Saudi Arabia conducted joint strikes with Washington on Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) positions across Iraq on July 28, 2026. These strikes came after accusations from the Kingdom that Iraqi factions – reportedly in coordination with the Houthis – had launched multiple drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities. The episode suggests that Saudi Arabia's continued pursuit of de-escalation no longer appears to preclude the use of military tools where the country considers them necessary to safeguard its security. With regard to Yemen, Riyadh remains committed to de-escalation, to avoiding a renewed large-scale military intervention in the war-torn country, and to keeping diplomatic tracks open. However, should attacks cross a certain threshold, the Gulf Arab country could reassess its approach and consider military action that goes beyond limited, calibrated strikes to restore deterrence.

The key question for the Mecca framework is, therefore, what commitment it would entail for Ankara and Islamabad should Riyadh come under attack and, as a result, undertake more extensive military actions. This invites comparison with the Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement (SMDA) signed between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia in September 2025 – which elevated the bilateral relationship from conventional military cooperation to a formalized framework for joint defense. Its central principle – that an attack or threat against one state should be treated as a threat against the other, requiring a collective response – echoes the mutual-defense logic underpinning the Mecca Agreement. Yet, as with the SMDA, the operational parameters of the new agreement remain largely unclear. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has been quoted as saying that the parties are expected to determine, through consultations, the degree, form, and modalities of support required in the event of an attack, while no state would be considered a threat until a member itself came under attack. As reported, such support could include intelligence, logistics, ammunition, and, at more advanced stages, military units, depending on the scale of the threat – thereby leaving room for calibrated responses.

The absence of clearly defined implementation mechanisms leaves the meaning of mutual defense, as well as the scale and timing of retaliation in response to a perceived threat or attack, open to interpretation. At the core of this “ambiguity” surrounding the Mecca Agreement lies a shared interest among its members in preserving flexibility and strategic autonomy.

Some experts have noted that each of these states is genuinely interested in stabilizing West Asia, considering it essential to addressing their own domestic issues and ensuring regional security. The Mecca pact arrives

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amid growing concerns among the three countries about Israel's increasingly expansionist military posture and the enduring threat posed by Iran. Their threat perceptions and strategic priorities, however, do not necessarily align. For Saudi Arabia, Yemen constitutes the primary platform through which its core security interests are directly threatened – placing the Houthis, together with Iran's regional posture, at the core of Riyadh's strategic calculus. Israel ranks at the top of Türkiye's regional agenda, with frictions between the two countries deepening across several theatres, including Gaza, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Horn of Africa, and, most notably, Syria. The recent flare-up of tensions following Israeli strikes on the Abu Al-Duhur airbase in Idlib further illustrates the depth of this rivalry. Pakistan, meanwhile, continues to regard India as its primary adversary.

These differences in security priorities matter because effective defense cooperation becomes more challenging when it entails a binding commitment to military intervention, particularly when members expected to provide support may regard such a commitment as too costly and insufficiently aligned with their own security interests. For this reason, the defense pact should primarily be viewed through its diplomatic weight and political signaling value.

By connecting Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Türkiye while remaining open to new members, the agreement reveals an underlying logic of regional coordination around shared vulnerabilities. Its strategic value lies in creating additional options and reflecting a shared recognition among the parties that regional stability can no longer be entirely outsourced to external providers. Its success will ultimately depend on its ability to translate into practical cooperation – while preserving the strategic autonomy of its members. Whether this balance can be sustained amid deep regional crises will determine whether the agreement will develop into a credible deterrent and a useful framework for crisis management.

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