

The US "Middle East Strategic Alliance" – the "Arab NATO"

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U.S President Donald Trump's administration is pursuing plans to establish a new security and political framework with US regional allies. 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.

This coalition will be formed under the name of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), but it is also known as the "Arab NATO". The US priority for the alliance is: confronting Iran's influence and countering its increased expansion in the region. The idea revolves primarily around security, but more recently, it has adopted economic and political aspects as well.

Despite agreement by a broad spectrum of Arab governments about the threats posed by Iranian policy, there are clear differences on where they stand in their priorities.

Saudi Arabia's foreign minister has said in December 2018, that Gulf States were continuing negotiations with Washington on the creation of a regional security alliance directed against Iran, despite earlier fears that the proposed pact may have been scrapped after the murder of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in a Saudi consulate in October 2018.¹

The US is seeking to host the MESA summit in the first quarter of 2019. The Trump administration rescheduled the summit at least twice due to the White House's schedule as well as delays in agreeing the MESA concept and mechanism.

The mile stones in the process to form MESA

'Arab Shield 1' joint military drill (November 2018)

Egypt hosted the joint "Arab Shield-1" drills that took place from 3 to 16 November 2018.² The drills were organized at the Mohamed Naguib Military Base near the coastal city Hamam in Matrouh Governorate.³

The drills involved land, sea, air-defense and Special Forces' from six Arab nations — Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait and Jordan. Morocco and Lebanon attended as observers. Most of the participant states have taken part in military exercises with Egypt

before, most frequently on a bilateral basis. ⁴ In October 2018, Egypt and Saudi Arabia conducted a joint military drill dubbed 'Tabuk 4' in southern Egypt.

According to a communiqué released by Egyptian army spokesman, Arab Shield 1 aimed to “develop and strengthen military cooperation between the Egyptian Armed Forces and the armed forces of brotherly Arab nations, and to develop joint Arab action in the framework of the challenges that face the region.” ⁵

The Egyptian military spokesman provided details of the drills: ⁶

Ground troops, supported by Special Forces, carried out simulations of counter-terrorist raids and urban warfare while special marine forces engaged in visit board, and search and seizure exercises.

The Special Forces that took part in the exercises performed a range of training tasks to improve their camouflage and concealment techniques, exploiting features of the terrain.

Paratrooper units performed drills equipping and carrying personnel and dealing with emergency situations that could arise during high-altitude jumps under daytime, night-time and different weather conditions. The joint skydiving drills profiled the proficiency of the participant forces and their precision in reaching designated targets.

Air force training included planning and conducting joint aerial combat manoeuvres which promoted the exchange of expertise between crews. In the course of the drills, multitask fighter jets performed various defensive sorties as well as offensive tactics against hostile targets.

The tour of Pompeo and Bolton to the Middle East (January 2019)

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and National Security Advisor John Bolton arrived in January 2019, for a nine day tour of the Middle East, and visited eight countries to meet with regional leaders.

The trip came as U.S. military withdrawal from Syria had begun. Pompeo's Middle East tour has been aimed mainly at assuring US allies of the continuation of American support for them despite the troop withdrawal from Syria.

Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo's Cairo speech indicated that Trump's regional policy for 2019 revolves around containing and countering Iran's interference and influence in the Middle East with the main message: "America is a force for good in the Middle East."

Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, in his speech at the American University of Cairo said that the Middle East Strategic Alliance, or MESA, would confront the most serious threats in the region and boost energy and economic cooperation. Pompeo said the alliance would bring together Egypt, Jordan and Gulf Cooperation Council countries. "Today, we ask each of these countries to take the next step and help us to solidify MESA," he added. ⁷

US partnerships with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council “are critical to achieving shared regional objectives: defeating Daesh, countering radical Islamist terrorism, protecting

global energy supplies, and rolling back Iranian aggression,” the State Department said in a statement released as Pompeo departed Egypt for Bahrain.⁸

The consultative meeting in Jordan (January 2019)

On January 30, 2019, foreign ministers from Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates came to participate in consultative meetings hosted by Jordan at King Hussein Bin Talal Convention Centre in the Dead Sea area.⁹

The Arab foreign Ministers did not share priorities vis-à-vis the Warsaw Conference’s agenda and in particular the new military structure initiative and failed to issue a final communique after meeting in Jordan to coordinate stances ahead of the Warsaw summit.

The Warsaw summit (February 2019)

U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz were the official hosts of the two-day conference. Representatives of some 60 nations attended the conference in Warsaw, including the foreign ministers of ten Arab countries. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, Oman and Israel were represented by high level delegations of heads of state, prime ministers and foreign ministers – while Egypt was represented by its deputy foreign minister.

The conference was originally touted by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo as focusing on Iran’s regional actions, but organizers have since dialed down the emphasis on Tehran. In a joint message Pompeo and Polish Foreign Minister Jacek Czaputowicz wrote that the summit would deal mainly with the civil wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other security-related regional matters.

Israeli Prime Minister, Netanyahu, on his way to Warsaw made clear the conference is centered on Iran: "It is a conference that brings together the United States, Israel, many countries in the world, many countries in the region, Arab countries, against Iran's aggressive policy, its aggression, its desire to conquer the Middle East and destroy Israel," he told reporters.¹⁰

The Warsaw conference, scheduled over two days, coincided with the 40th anniversary of Iran’s 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Although the Iranian leaders downplayed the significance of the Warsaw summit, they are concerned about it as pressure against the regime is continuing to mount.

The Islamic Republic has been struggling with the worst economic crisis since its establishment in 1979 and any additional pressure, whether it is diplomatic or economic, can endanger the power of the Islamic regime.

Countering the American-led gathering, President Putin of Russia announced a summit meeting with the leaders of Iran and Turkey in Sochi on the main day of the Warsaw conference, setting up rival events.¹¹

The summit comes at a time when there appears to be a core division between US and EU policy on the Islamic Republic. US President Donald Trump last year pulled out of the Joint

Comprehensive Plan of Action, commonly known as the Iran nuclear deal, and the Treasury Department consequently imposed sanctions on the Iranian regime, which targeted critical sectors such as the banking, energy, currency and financial systems.

On the other hand, the EU has been trying to help Iran bypass US sanctions through a newly established mechanism called the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX).¹²

The Warsaw summit was the largest diplomatic gathering and the first of its kind that has been organized to confront the Iranian regime. The conference, as expected, did not rally consensus for an immediate serious drive to change the behavior of the Iranian regime, but it may be the start of a "Warsaw Process" regarding Middle East security.

Summary

U.S President Donald Trump's administration is pursuing plans to establish a new security alliance of Arab countries aimed at countering Iran's influence in the Middle East.

This coalition will be formed under the name of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), but it is also known as the "Arab NATO".

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."

The idea came after an agreement in 2015 at the Arab League summit in Cairo to create a joint Arab force. Egypt and Saudi Arabia, would be the central poles of any such alliance, the two largest Arab forces in terms of the balance of military power as well as political influence.¹³

Such an alliance need not originate as a unified or unanimously created extension of the Arab League but could originate with a smaller group of states that have the will and capacity to build a collective security project.¹⁴

Egypt hosted the first in a planned series of Arab military drills .The "Arab Shield-1 "joint military exercises were the largest Arab multilateral military exercises to date. The drills aimed to strengthen interoperability between the participants, hone their skills in planning and managing combat activities on land, in the air and at sea, and promote the exchange of expertise between the different air, naval and ground forces.¹⁵

Secretary of State, Pompeo in his trip to the Middle East was promoting a U.S.-backed initiative to form what some have termed an "Arab NATO" that would bring the region together in a military alliance. At each of his stops in the region, Pompeo was urging progress on creating the Middle East Strategic Alliance, which would join GCC militaries with those of Egypt and Jordan to serve as a counter-balance to Iran, which they all accuse of fomenting unrest and rebellion throughout the region.¹⁶

Building a multinational strategic political and military alliance has always been a hard task and there are many challenges and structural and political obstacles in the way of an "Arab NATO. But if the Arab world can no longer rely on American forces to protect their security

and interests, then the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) would be critical a step to deal with the complex challenges of the Middle East.

The Warsaw conference is a step in this direction and the start of a “Warsaw Process”, a much larger regional effort changing narratives and forcing countries that support terrorism, namely Iran, to change their ways.

Notes

¹ Anti-Iranian 'Arab NATO', Sputnik, January 9, 2019.

² Egypt hosting 'Arab Shield 1' joint military drill with 8 Arab countries from 3-16 November, Ahram Online, October 31, 2018.

³ UAE and Saudi join major Arab military drills in Egypt, The National, November 10, 2018.

⁴ Ahmed Eleiba, Arab Shield: The largest joint Arab military drills to date, Ahram Online, November 14, 2018.

⁵ Egypt's army chief-of-staff, Arab counterparts attend primary phase of Arab Shield 1 exercise ,Ahram Online, November 15, 2018.

⁶ Ahmed Eleiba, Arab Shield: The largest joint Arab military drills to date, Ahram Online, November 14, 2018.

⁷ US aim to establish Middle East Strategic Alliance: Pompeo, Anadolu Agency, January 11, 2019.

⁸ Pompeo to push Arab Nato initiative during Gulf visit, Gulf News, January 11, 2019.

⁹ King discusses joint action with Arab foreign ministers, The Jordan Times, January 30, 2019.

¹⁰ Poland Hosts Middle East Summit Spearheaded By United States, Radio Liberty, February 13, 2019.

¹¹ Anti-Iran Message Seeps Into Trump Forum Billed as Focusing on Mideast Security The New York Times, February 13, 2019.

¹² Majid Rafizadhe ,Warsaw summit has Iranian regime worried, Arab News, February 14, 2019.

¹³ Ahmed Eleiba, Arab Shield: The largest joint Arab military drills to date, Ahram Online, November 14, 2018.

¹⁴ Ahmed Eleiba, Arab Shield: The largest joint Arab military drills to date, Ahram Online, November 14, 2018.

¹⁵ Egypt's army chief-of-staff, Arab counterparts attend primary phase of Arab Shield 1 exercise ,Ahram Online, November 15, 2018.

¹⁶ Matthew Lee, Pompeo in Middle East reassures allies about US role in region, pushes for 'Arab NATO', A.P, January 12, 2019.