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The Middle East Strategic Alliance: An Uphill Struggle

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KEY TAKEAWAYS

In 2017, the Trump Administration proposed a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) with Arab partners to deepen relations with the countries in the region.

The U.S. must forge broad consensus on the mission, division of labor, and long-term goals of the proposed alliance before it can jump-start its formation.

Even though little progress has been made, the idea of forming a MESA is a worthwhile one, and the U.S. should double down on its efforts to remove obstacles.

In 2017, the Trump Administration proposed the creation of a multilateral Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA) with its Arab partners to deepen relations with the countries in the region. So far, little progress has been made on realizing MESA. Centuries' old mistrust between regional countries, a lack of common threat assessment, and the ongoing Gulf dispute between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and other countries have prevented real progress. The idea of forming a MESA is worth trying. Even with setbacks, the U.S. should double down on efforts to end the Gulf dispute; make the case for a MESA that focuses on security, energy, and economic issues; place more emphasis on improving military capability instead of highlighting threats; and keep Congress involved in the process when appropriate.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/ib5056**

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MESA

The U.S. has strong bilateral military, security, intelligence, and diplomatic ties with several Middle Eastern nations, including Egypt, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, and the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Because the historical and political circumstances that led to the 1949 creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have largely been absent in the Middle East, the region lacks a similarly strong collective security organization.

The initial U.S. concept for MESA, which included security and economic cooperation, as well as conflict resolution and deconfliction, generated considerable enthusiasm, but the project was sidelined by the Gulf dispute.[1]

The idea of forming a new security pact emerged publicly during President Donald Trump's May 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia for the Riyadh Summit, his first official trip outside the United States. The Saudis, like other Gulf Arabs, were focused on rebuilding close ties with the new Administration after a period of strained bilateral ties during the Obama Administration due to the flawed and risky 2015 Iran nuclear deal. The Trump Administration shared the GCC's concerns about Iran's hegemonic regional ambitions and embraced the concept of a multilateral security organization that also could enhance strategic cooperation against ISIS and other Islamist extremist threats.

The MESA concept dovetailed with the Trump Administration's push for greater burden-sharing and a renewed focus on great power competition under its 2017 National Security Strategy. By building up the military capacity of MESA partners, Washington could promote regional security and stability, while freeing up U.S. military forces for deployment in other regions. After the bitter dispute between Qatar and its neighbors erupted in 2017, ambitious plans for a formal alliance were downsized to focus on building a more limited framework for regional cooperation on military training, energy, and trade issues. Egypt withdrew from tentative plans to participate in April 2019, dealing another setback to the Administration's plans. The prospects for standing up the alliance also have been clouded by Saudi–U.S. tensions over the 2018 extra-legal execution of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

Some of the challenges facing MESA are:

- **The Gulf dispute.** The Gulf dispute involving Qatar and some of its Arab neighbors is the number one issue preventing the creation of MESA. Until this issue is resolved, it is unrealistic to think that these countries could sit at the same table in what is hoped to be a security alliance.

- **No clear Arab consensus on MESA's mission.** Saudi Arabia and the UAE want the main focus to be on security. On the other end of the scale, Oman would like the focus to be on trade in economics. These issues are not mutually exclusive, and a well-rounded MESA should focus on security, economics, trade, and energy.

- **A general lack of trust among the Gulf states.** Middle Eastern countries traditionally have preferred to maintain bilateral relationships with the U.S. and generally have shunned multilateral arrangements because of the lack of trust among Arab states. The GCC's member countries often have difficulty agreeing on a common policy with respect to matters of security. This reflects both the organization's intergovernmental nature and its members' desire to place national interests above those of the GCC. The recent dispute regarding Qatar illustrates this difficulty.

- **A lack of agreement on the main threats to the region.** On one end of the spectrum, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE take a hawkish view of the threat from Iran. Oman and Qatar, the former of which prides itself on its regional neutrality, and the latter of which shares natural gas fields with Iran, maintain cordial relations with Tehran. Kuwait tends to fall somewhere in the middle. This complicates the ability to form an alliance like MESA.

Start Small, Think Big

The short-term U.S. goal should be to lay the strong foundations on which a future MESA can be built. Instead of going for the immediate creation of MESA, the Administration should work with partner countries in the Middle East to build confidence and work on a step-by-step basis to lead up to the eventual creation of MESA. To do this, the Administration should:

- **Double down on efforts to end the pointless Gulf dispute.** Since 2017, some Gulf countries, led by Saudi Arabia, have implemented a blockade against Qatar and cut diplomatic ties. These countries have legitimate concerns about some of Qatar's activities, but in recent years Doha has made major advancements and has properly addressed many of these concerns. It is time that all countries involved sit at the same table and find a solution that can end the blockade. The U.S. should play a major leadership role through this process.

- **Focus less on specific threats and more on improving military capabilities.** Saudi Arabia and the UAE see Iran as the biggest threat to the Gulf region. Other countries in the region do not share this assessment—at least publicly. The U.S. is also worried about the increasing role of Russia and China in the region, which is seen to be a lesser concern for the Gulf states. Instead of focusing on a specific threat, which will never enjoy a Gulf consensus, the U.S. should identify key military, security, and intelligence-gathering capability gaps that all the countries can address together. This will allow MESA to be ready for all security threats to the region without publicly specifying that Iran is the source of many of them.

- **Keep the right balance among security, economics, and energy.** A sensible U.S. strategy would be to balance these issues as equally as possible. MESA should be seen as a stool with three legs (security, economics, and energy). If one leg is longer than the other, the whole stool is slanted at best, and unusable at worst. For too long, the U.S. has focused too much on just one of these issues at a time. This is not a healthy or sustainable way to advance U.S. interests in the region.

- **Keep Congress involved.** Any final agreement establishing MESA that explicitly offers a U.S. security guarantee similar to NATO's Article 5 must be put before the U.S. Senate for ratification as a treaty.

Conclusion

Washington's MESA alliance-building effort has been undermined by the clashing priorities, policy disputes, and threat perceptions of prospective Gulf MESA members. The U.S. must forge a broad consensus on the mission, division of labor, and long-term goals of the proposed alliance before it can jump-start its formation. Progress will be impossible until political tensions have been resolved over the Qatar dispute and the Khashoggi affair. Until then, Washington will have to operate through the current "hub and spoke" security architecture of the Gulf.

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Endnote

1. In June 2017, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and several other Muslim-majority countries cut or downgraded diplomatic ties with Qatar after Doha was accused of supporting terrorism in the region. All commercial land, air, and sea travel between Qatar and these nations has been severed, and Qatari diplomats and citizens have been evicted.