

Finabel



# Towards an Arab Nato?

AN EXPERTISE FORUM CONTRIBUTING TO EUROPEAN  
ARMIES INTEROPERABILITY SINCE 1953

This Food for Thought paper is a document that gives an initial reflection on the theme. The content is not reflecting the positions of the member states, but consists of elements that can initiate and feed the discussions and analyses in the domain of the theme. It was drafted by the Permanent Secretariat of Finabel.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to give an overview of the stakes to create a Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). The region has been facing a lot of instability in the past years, due to the many actors with varied interests. This organisation will aim to provide a joint response to conflicts and terrorism, while at the same time counter Iran's influence in the region. Considering the geopolitical context and the numerous issues it raises, what are the chances for the organisation to see the light during the next summit organised by the United States? And what would be the consequences on the security and stability environment of the Middle East?

In order to have an in depth analysis on the topic, this paper will be structured as follows:

The first part will give a general overview of the situation. The second part will present the conceivable impacts on regional and international geopolitics, while the third part will foresee the next steps to conceive the organisation. Finally, some conclusions and recommendations will be given.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION

The main stakeholders of the MESA project are the Gulf rentier states which are gathered within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Established in 1981, this organisation was at its beginnings more likely to create a common economic area between its member states. However, defence affairs gradually found their place on the GCC summits agenda. Indeed, in 1987 was set a common “comprehensive security strategy”, followed in 1991 by the creation of a GCC force named Peninsula Shield and the multiplication of joint military exercises. Many specialised committees have also been created during the last decades to deal with high level security matters such as counterterrorism cooperation, strategic planning and cooperation against nuclear risks.



Figure (1): Logo of the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Source: Twitter

The 2000 Manama Summit arose by setting up a joint defense agreement, which enhanced cooperation between Gulf armies. This led to the development of Gulf armies and common external operations to ensure their interests and more stability in the current violent regional context. Recently, the conflict in Yemen revealed the Gulf armies' capabilities to organise themselves inside of a coalition, in cooperation with Turkey, Egypt, Jordan, African Sunni countries and an informal participation of Israel.



*Figure (2): Group photo of the GCC extraordinary meeting regarding the Qatari crisis in June 2018. Source: Lobe Log*

Following the insurgencies in Yemen in 2014 when Houthi's rebels took the Sada province in South Yemen, the Gulf countries, at the initiative of Saudi Arabia formed an international coalition under the name of 'Arab coalition'. This coalition managed to collectively respond to the Yemeni situation, by deploying troops and conducting joint troop operations and strikes. In the last decade, the Arab coalition tried to give a common response to solve Yemen's conflict, but was nevertheless subject of disputes between its members (Qatari diplomatic crisis of 2017 followed by an embargo among others). This coalition is driven by the United States, France and the United Kingdom that have shown a tremendous support by providing council, intelligence and logistic support and last, but not least, weapon materials. The participants in this coalition engaged themselves in combating terrorism and countering Iranian power in the region.

Therefore, to create a force able to respond to crisis management such as the Yemeni war and to be able to counter Iran in case of insurgencies in the region, the GCC and some members of the Arab Coalition are looking for a path in constructing a permanent organisation which will be able to respond and deter Iranian aspirations in the region and combat terrorism. The initiators of MESA, mediated as 'the Arab NATO' are Saudi Arabia, Unit-

ed Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Jordan. To this, shall be added the United States of America whom will advise from the shadows and help the countries settle their differences.

In this crumbled environment, finding a common narrative for these countries will not be easy considering the countries' different interests. Demonising Iran seems to be the starting point of their priorities, however this will not be enough to sustain a collective defence organisation.

## **IMPACT ON THE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

### **US and Israel involvement**

The military treaty that would create the Alliance would imply the involvement of the US and Israel, whom would collaborate by giving a security support and intelligence service. Both countries will benefit from the creation of the MESA.

The US decision to forge an "Arab NATO" by following the NATO structure came from their involvement to fight terrorism in the region. As stated in the first part, the United States would be backing up the strategic Alliance by assisting it to enhance missile defence, military training, counterterrorism and to strengthen regional economic and diplomatic ties.

However, this initiative aims at reinforcing cooperation and easing tensions between Sunni countries by bringing them together against the Shiite Iran, which has been accused of supporting terrorism, and which the US failed to isolate on the international scene in the wake of its withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal. If the US thinks that facing the "common enemy" will gather the Gulf countries, the latter will have to face several con-

## Interests for each State of the region

A collective defence system between Arab states has been discussed for many years and each project included different stakeholders. The implosion of several main regional actors these last decades (Iraq, Syria, Libya and even Egypt) lead to the so-called *Gulf moment* (Jean-Loup Samaan, *Toward a NATO in the Gulf*). The MESA project would eventually establish a common defence and security system between the GCC members, with the participation of Jordan and Egypt: Jordan is diplomatically close to Saudi Arabia and UAE which are supporting its involvement in the MESA project, while Egypt must ensure its interests on the Gulf peninsula through such a regional committee. Iran threats on Bab-el-mandeb are one of Egypt main economic concern. In this regard, Cairo is already a member Arab coalition. Given its seashore at the Red Sea, Riyadh has also a critical interest towards the stability of Egypt and therefore provides support to the regime and its participation to MESA. Egypt might also play an important role within the collective security system as it could be a counterbalance power to Saudi Arabia and give some guarantees to other states in the region.

conflicts, such as the one between Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar. In addition, it could also increase tensions between Iran and the US, as well as with the EU as we will observe further on.

By being involved at the creation of this alliance, the US would maintain their presence and interests in the region. Indeed, considering the natural resources and the trade sea route, a disengagement from the Middle East would not be a smart policy. On that point, the strategic Alliance would need an offshore balancing that the US could support.

Israel seems to be in favor of the MESA, as it could confirm its growing influence and ensure its interests in the region. As the most significant military power of the Middle East and a strong ally of the US, the involvement of the Hebrew state in this Alliance seems to be a challenge. Israel is still not recognized as a state and have no official diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.



Figure (3): US president Donald Trump during a bilateral meeting with Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in Riyadh during May 2017. Source: Al Arabiya

Jordan and Egypt: Jordan is diplomatically close to Saudi Arabia and UAE which are supporting its involvement in the MESA project, while Egypt must ensure its interests on the Gulf peninsula through such a regional committee. Iran threats on Bab-el-mandeb are one of Egypt main economic concern. In this regard, Cairo is already a member Arab coalition. Given its seashore at the Red Sea, Riyadh has also a critical interest towards the stability of Egypt and therefore provides support to the regime and its participation to MESA. Egypt might also play an important role within the collective security system as it could be a counterbalance power to Saudi Arabia and give some guarantees to other states in the region.

This cooperation would enable Gulf countries to add hard power capabilities to their traditional soft power based on oil economies and to protect their regional interests.

The biggest risk concerning the stability of the Gulf regimes is the security vacuums left



in the neighbouring countries. Leaders of the peninsula – and especially of the smaller countries – fear a spillover effect. Ensuring political stability in the region is also a way for Gulf countries to ensure their own stability. Their ability to intervene and accurately operate rely on their capacity to cooperate both strategically and operationally. The MISA project shows up as the suited arena for such a collaboration.

Due to their economic system, maritime security appears to be one of Arab states' major interest. Their oil and gas maritime trade highly depends on Bab-el-mandeb and Hormuz straits. These routes are of Arab and international interests and represent 30% of oil and gas global trade. Iran's threats on these routes, recently stated in retaliation for the American sanctions on Iran oil exports, would have important economic outputs on Arab economies, if enforced. In this regard,

a collective and credible Arab maritime military response could be at the benefit of all stakeholders.

Another major goal of the MESA project would be to strengthen the cooperation between countries regarding missile defence. Iranian's growing ballistic missile capabilities worries the neighbouring countries – detainment of short and middle range ballistic missiles (SRBM and MRBM) and suspicions of intercontinental ones (ICBM). Even though the UAE and Saudi Arabia are working closely with the White House in order to ensure counter capabilities thanks to the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) technology, a common Gulf missile defense system would surely be a more effective and efficient solution.

The aforementioned stakeholders also have various national interests that may mismatch the narrative of this project.

*Figure (4): 8 Arab nation Troops in the kick off exercisce held on November 3, 2017 in Egypt.*

*Source: Facebook*



<b>Matter of priorities</b>	<b>Countries position</b>
<b>Counter Iran</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saudi Arabia: its main interest is to counter Iran, its greatest rival.</li> <li>• UEA and Bahreïn: consider Iran as a rival but don't consider it as a priority.</li> <li>• Jordan and Egypt: recently cut their relations with Iran considering the regime was threatening arab security.</li> <li>• Qatar, Oman and Kuwait: kept relations with Iran. Oman was American and Iran mediator while JCPoA was discussing. Qatar relations with Iran lead to a conflict between GCC members since 2017.</li> </ul>
<b>Counter terrorism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saudi Arabia: obscure links to terrorism, although officially hardly fighting against it.</li> <li>• UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Bahreïn, Oman: fighting terrorism with high priority. Egypt, UAE and Bahreïn even cut their relations with Qatar, suspected to finance terrorism.</li> <li>• Kuwait: the country recognised in 2016 that it was not doing enough to counter terrorism as it was financially involved in it. However, Kuwait announced it will take a greater part into antiterrorism.</li> <li>• Qatar: accused of financing support to terrorism, Doha nonetheless took legal measures and participated actively in counter-terrorism. Several experts consider that the quartet decision to embargo the Qatari regime was not entirely motivated by Qatar possible links to terrorism.</li> </ul>
<b>Counter trade issues</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UAE, Egypt, Jordan, Bahreïn, Oman, Kuwait: protecting their economic interests remains their top priority and their hard power is implemented in this perspective.</li> <li>• Saudi Arabia: the richest Gulf regime wishes to preserve its economic interests. However, its top priority remains to counter their Iranian rival.</li> <li>• Qatar: given the difficult economic consequences of the quartet decision to establish a blockage against Doha, Qatari can not afford any maritime issues. This is its main priority.</li> </ul>

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Israël involvement into MESA</b></p>	<p>Even though Arabs and Israelis have always been rivals, their relations are taking a new step forward.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Saudi Arabia: Washington D.C. has been encouraging for a couple of years to get the Saudis and the Israelis closer together. If the relations between the two countries are not formalized yet, unofficial cooperation on defence matters seems to already occur. Indeed, in a realpolitik way, the two rivals soon to be allies get along by applying the proverb “the enemy of my enemy – in this case Iran – is my friend”.</li> <li>• UAE, Oman, Qatar, Bahreïn: the Gulf emirates are slowly following the trend. As an example, Bahreïn declared Israël’s “right to exist” and UAE participated in a joint air force exercise along with Israel.</li> <li>• Egypt: shares a common enemy with the Israelis: ISIS. Therefore, their relationship has reached an unprecedented level these last years while they were cooperating against terrorism.</li> <li>• Jordan: encouraged to make peace and cooperate by the Americans, Jordan and Israel leaders met at the beginning of 2018. Their relationship also seems to improve.</li> <li>• Kuwait: this country appears as the last one to reject any idea of cooperation with the Israelis. At the end of May 2018, Kuwait even proposed a draft resolution at the UN Security Council to set up an “international protection mission” for Palestinians.</li> </ul>
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When it comes to their relationships with Iran, counter-terrorism fight, economic interests or the eventuality of Israel’s involvement into MESA, the stakeholders of the collective defense project show consistent mismatches. The Qatari dispute from 2017 is the most vibrant example, as even though the Gulf states may share major interests, their disagreements might stand as obstacles to an end come.

## Impact on the European Union

At this stage of the situation, it would be too early to foresee plausible outcomes of the state of affairs. However, if the organisation is created it will nevertheless have a direct impact on the EU/ Middle East relations.

In this part, the hypothesis given will be the following: *If MESA is created at the hand of the United States, the EU risks to be overshadowed in the process, be less heard in the international discussions and suffer economic collision.*

The role of the US will increase in the region by possibly becoming the vital partner in the area. Furthermore, giving the United States' strong interests to encounter Iran it would be foreseeable to imagine an escalation of tensions in the region, leading to a possible international armed conflict between MESA countries and Iran. A conflict would be for the benefit of American and Gulf economy, although it could probably weaken more the region and consequently the EU. This escalation could lead to another major migration and refugee crisis that the European Union would need to solve on its own.

Moreover, giving that the EU is condemning the new US sanctions against Iran and following the rejection of the JCPoA – by modifying its Blocking Statute – it is increasing its economic partnership with Iranian companies and facilitating economic cooperation between the European zone and Iran. An escalation of the situation would not only lead to a refugee crisis, as well as to an economic dispute, as a war would make it impossible to cooperate.

In contrast, the European Union could bring input to MESA by sharing its knowledge on joint cooperation. Therefore, if the EU takes part in the early discussions it could make sure that the structure and the goals of the new organisation will not be opposed to the EU interests. This idea will be developed in the given recommendations.

## STEPS TO ACHIEVE THE ORGANISATION

Stated in the previous parts, a collective defence system would be a possible answer to the current geopolitical situation in the region. In theory, such a treaty would imply a collective response to the common threats, as the security of one is the concern of all. In other words, the countries of the future MESA have real security issues, as well as common perceptions and interests that could accelerate the realisation of the project.

Figure (5): The Middle East strategic Alliance with the United States. Source: The Economist





However to reach that stage, Gulf states will have to deal with three major issues:

- relationship with Qatar – embargo,
- ties with Israel,
- who will be in charge of the Head of Permanent Command of the Alliance.

As a rule of thumb, the most powerful military, in terms of capabilities – here UAE – should fulfill the commandment role. Yet, the political will of Saudi Arabia to initiate this project and show its leadership in the region might be defining the Alliance *raison d'être*, and therefore the Commandment nationality. Moreover, the Saudis would *a priori* benefit from American support, which is definitely an asset in this leadership race. In addition, smaller countries are looking for some guarantees to counterbalance Saudi Arabia's ambitions, as they are concerned by seeing their own interests dissolved in the decision-making process.

As the potential members of MESA mainly belong to the Gulf peninsula and because discussions with Morocco or other Sunni States about their participation to the Alliance have not been conclusive, the nickname “Arab NATO” would likely be substituted to “Gulf NATO”.

If for now, negotiations seem to be at the informal stage, the next step forward on the agenda is scheduled at the end of 2018 by the White House. This meeting will aim at encouraging cooperation and establishing a solid basis for MESA.

## CONCLUSIONS

This paper provided an overview of the situation in the Middle East regarding the different stakeholders and their aim to create a joint military organisation under the name of MESA. If created, this entity may be able to act and influence conflicts, humanitarian crisis and combat terrorism in one of the most unstable region of the world.

To conclude on what has been elaborated above, MESA could become the most important actor in the area. With the silent involvement of the United States, Gulf states will benefit from an accompanying framework to create a solid system. MESA will reshape the politics in the Middle East and nevertheless solve or create new conflicts.

Moreover, already gathered into the GCC, these nations have several features in common, which might facilitate their military collaboration within MESA. Unlike NATO or the EU, all members are sharing Arabic as a common language. Most of their equipments, doctrines were influenced by the US, UK or France, therefore the Gulf armies more or less operate in similar processes which might increase interoperability between their military cultures.

The implications of this project come with great risks and challenges for the future MESA countries, their partners and other stakeholders. The role of the European Union in this process is yet to be determined. The US involvement has to be transparent and has to be put to good use. It shall not serve to express US interest in the region, but rather stop conflict in the Arab world. At the current time, tensions between countries represent the main obstacles, but if achieved, this project should bring unity to the Gulf countries and the region.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

After having assessed the aforementioned stakes and challenges, several recommendations will be presented. These recommendations aim to advise on the specific role that the European administrations and military bodies can play, under their regional organisations, in order to facilitate the creation process of MESA.

On the one hand, the role of the EU has to be considered, as its involvement in the MESA can be a way to influence the organisation and to stay in new international issues. The EU has economic interests in the region, especially with Iran, an observer status could be an occasion to avoid political turmoils with states of the Middle East. However, the EU seems to be invisible in the region, the problem being an absence of a common policy. It is time to consider a new strategy to ensure the presence of the organisation in the region, in order to be able to act according to its own interests. It is therefore imperative to demonstrate one's ability to play a decisive and positive role in the area that is geographically close to the EU. Without a new dynamic to integrate the MESA, the credibility needed to make the EU voice heard on the Middle East and international stage will be lacking.

On the other hand, the role of NATO in supporting the creation of this organisation is crucial for the European states, which look forward to a long lasting cooperation with the Middle Eastern powers. If EU would advocate on the political sphere, NATO will engage to cooperate providing its expertise in the military joint cooperation field. *Per se*, NATO can provide counseling to the MESA commandement on achieving a common culture and military doctrine. NATO doesn't have a military culture of its own, but rather 28 different cultures united as one in diversity. This idea would be put forward and would

help MESA countries communicate despite their differences.

Furthermore, NATO could accompany the standardization process by sharing good practices. As the military structures in the Gulf has been implemented by the French, British or the US, NATO could come up with a similar roadmap for standardization as the patterns of the different militaries match their own. This will not only show a strong cooperation between European and Gulf states, but will also mark a unique cooperation between two military joint regional structures.

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Created in 1953, the Finabel committee is the oldest military organisation for cooperation between European Armies: it was conceived as a forum for reflections, exchange studies, and proposals on common interest topics for the future of its members. Finabel, the only organisation at this level, strives at:

- Promoting interoperability and cooperation of armies, while seeking to bring together concepts, doctrines and procedures;
- Contributing to a common European understanding of land defence issues. Finabel focuses on doctrines, trainings, and the joint environment.

Finabel aims to be a multinational-, independent-, and apolitical actor for the European Armies of the EU Member States. The Finabel informal forum is based on consensus and equality of member states. Finabel favours fruitful contact among member states' officers and Chiefs of Staff in a spirit of open and mutual understanding via annual meetings.

Finabel contributes to reinforce interoperability among its member states in the framework of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), the EU, and *ad hoc* coalition; Finabel neither competes nor duplicates NATO or EU military structures but contributes to these organisations in its unique way. Initially focused on cooperation in armament's programmes, Finabel quickly shifted to the harmonisation of land doctrines. Consequently, before hoping to reach a shared capability approach and common equipment, a shared vision of force-engagement on the terrain should be obtained.

In the current setting, Finabel allows its member states to form Expert Task Groups for situations that require short-term solutions. In addition, Finabel is also a think tank that elaborates on current events concerning the operations of the land forces and provides comments by creating "Food for Thought papers" to address the topics. Finabel studies and Food for Thoughts are recommendations freely applied by its member, whose aim is to facilitate interoperability and improve the daily tasks of preparation, training, exercises, and engagement.



Quartier Reine Elisabeth  
Rue d'Evere 1  
**B-1140 BRUSSELS**

Tel: +32 (0)2 441 79 38  
GSM: +32 (0)483 712 193  
E-mail: [info@finabel.org](mailto:info@finabel.org)

You will find our studies at  
**[www.finabel.org](http://www.finabel.org)**