



## **An 'Arab NATO' and America's Militarized Mideast Policy**

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### **Abstract**

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The Trump administration's push for a Saudi-led "Arab NATO" to attack Iran is emblematic of an increasingly destabilizing and militarized US policy toward the Middle East. While the US military-industrial complex and its Arab client states would profit from this venture, it risks plummeting the region into further chaos, expand ungoverned space for terrorist actors to thrive, inflict further harm on European stability in the form of a new wave of refugees, as well as threaten Asian economy and security. With the relocation of ISIS from the Mideast to Asia and Iran as a natural ally to combat Wahhabi fanaticism, the Saudi-led alliance may have the unintended consequence of galvanizing Eurasian actors to coalesce against further war and destruction.

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## Analysis

The Donald Trump administration's quiet push for a Saudi-led "Arab NATO," tentatively known as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), is emblematic of an increasingly destabilizing and militarized US policy toward the Middle East.

The military alliance, pushed by Saudi Arabia to counter Iran, would include the six Arab Gulf states, Egypt and Jordan, with a summit provisionally scheduled for Washington on October 12-13.

However, this anti-Iran alliance risks plummeting the Middle East into further chaos, just as Iraq and Syria are beginning to recover from the past years of ravage by ISIS and various Salafi-Wahhabi terrorists sponsored<sup>1</sup> by Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states. Moreover, it would further expand ungoverned space in the region for terrorist actors to thrive.

While the US military-industrial complex and its Arab client states would profit from this venture to attack Iran, it would inflict further harm on European stability in the form of a new wave of refugees, as well as threaten Asian economy and security.

### Iran, not Saudi Arabia, a Natural anti-terror Ally in Asia

Already, Southeast Asia is reeling from the relocation<sup>2</sup> of ISIS<sup>3</sup> from the Middle East, on the heels of decades of imported terrorism due to the relocation of US/Saudi-sponsored Mujahedeen (al-Qaeda) from Afghanistan. Thus, despite the oft-repeated US mantra that Iran is the "largest state sponsor of terrorism," this view is not largely shared by Asians.

In Asia, terrorism is of the Wahhabi strand, inadvertently making Iran a natural anti-terror ally.

As the late prime minister of Singapore Lee Kuan Yew<sup>4</sup> noted, Wahhabi fanaticism is the root cause of terrorism in Asia, and "Americans ... make the mistake of seeking a largely military solution." In 2003 when Fareed Zakaria of Newsweek interviewed Lee regarding al-Qaeda and Islamic extremism in Iraq, he warned, "In killing terrorists, you will only kill the worker bees. The queen bees are the preachers who teach a deviant form of Islam in schools and Islamic centers, who capture and twist the minds of the young."

As such, the notion of the US backing Riyadh,<sup>5</sup> which has spent US\$100 billion<sup>6</sup> exporting Wahhabism, and helping to build a more militarily capable Saudi Wahhabi-led alliance, would likely be disconcerting for countries in Europe and Asia.

<sup>1</sup> "Vice President Joe Biden stated that US key allies in the Middle East were behind nurturing ISIS", December 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=25aDP7io30U>

<sup>2</sup> Gov. Philip D. Murphy/Lt. Gov Shiela Y. Oliver, State of New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness, "ISIS: Establishing a Foothold in Southeast Asia", February 20, 2018, <https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/analysis/isis-establishing-a-foothold-in-southeast-asia>

<sup>3</sup> "Singapore: Southeast Asia in 'very real' danger of ISIS attacks", *The National*, April 28, 2018, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/singapore-southeast-asia-in-very-real-danger-of-isis-attacks-1.725439>

<sup>4</sup> "Lee Kuan Yew: To stop terrorism, go after the queen bees (preachers)", *Times of Israel*, October 13, 2014, <http://blogs.timesofisrael.com/lee-kuan-yew-on-islamic-terrorists>

<sup>5</sup> Brahma Chellaney, April 29, 2018, <https://twitter.com/Chellaney/status/990566409796313089>

<sup>6</sup> Yousaf Butt, "How Saudi Wahhabism Is the Fountainhead of Islamist Terrorism", *The Huffington Post*, March 22, 2015, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yousaf-butt/saudi-wahhabism-islam-terrorism\\_b\\_6501916.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-yousaf-butt/saudi-wahhabism-islam-terrorism_b_6501916.html)



## Unintended Consequences of US/Saudi War on Iran, Syria

The perennial problem with US decision-makers is the inability to see things from other actors' perspective. In denying agency to regional actors and failing to account for their interests and preferences, Washington's misguided policies end up harming US long-term interests.

For example, in the Levant, Iran is actually thriving thanks to US sectarian policy of backing Salafi jihadists to overthrow governments. As Fabrice Balanche, visiting fellow at the Hoover Institution, wrote<sup>7</sup> in a December 2017 article titled "Iran thrives in the Levant on weakened states threatened by Sunni radicalism," paradoxically, "theocratic Iran became the protector of non-Sunnis and even secular Sunnis against jihadism."

Balanche argued that the failure of the Arab nationalist development model and the emergence of Saudi Arabia as a geopolitical power led to a re-Islamization of Middle Eastern societies, "for which the Islamic State is arguably the supreme stage." Thus for the minorities, the secular Syrian regime was a guarantee of protection of minorities and even secular Sunnis, so the Syrian population's stronger support for President Bashar al-Assad became the unintended consequence of US policy to back the jihadi opposition.

Likewise, in Lebanon Balanche noted that "Syrian Islamist rebels pushed most of the Christians, however anti-Syrian, to Hezbollah's side" and contributed to the election of Michel Aoun as Lebanese president in 2016, and likely also to the gains by Hezbollah and its allies in the parliamentary election this May. A Maronite Christian, Aoun saw a role for Hezbollah<sup>8</sup> to defend Lebanon and protect minorities from radical Islam.

Balanche observed that the Syrian crisis "pushed into the Iranian camp those social categories that were pro-Western but have felt abandoned," and as such the more the US/Saudi axis fuels sectarianism and anti-Iran fanaticism, the more they may provoke non-aligned countries in Asia to side with Iran.

China for one will support the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah-Russia camp in Syria, given the grave security threat it faces from the Chinese al-Qaeda<sup>9</sup> that is based in Idlib and intermingled with Western-backed armed opposition, many of whom are from Asia.<sup>10</sup>

India also sees a role for Iran to counter Saudi Wahhabism<sup>11</sup> that is spreading domestically, and Asia Times contributor M K Bhadrakumar argues that Indian ties with Iran are a sovereign<sup>12</sup> prerogative to support energy

<sup>7</sup> Fabrice Balanche, "Iran Thrives in the Levant On Weakened States Threatened by Sunni Radicalism", *The Caravan*, Issue 1716, December 12, 2017, Hoover Institution, <https://www.hoover.org/research/iranian-corridor-middle-east-geopolitics-sectarianism-and-economic-integration>

<sup>8</sup> Aoun sees role for Hezbollah until threats to Lebanon cease", *Al Monitor*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/09/lebanon-president-aoun-unga-hezbollah-threat-syria-israel.html>

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Jocelyn, "The Turkistan Islamic Party's jihad in Syria", *The Long War Journal*, Foundation for Defense of Democracies, July 10, 2018, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2018/07/analysis-the-turkistan-islamic-partys-jihad-in-syria.php>

<sup>10</sup> Christina Lin, "Asian Rebels in Aleppo, Western Blindspot", *Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung (ISPSW)/CSS ETH Zurich*, February, 2016, <https://www.ethz.ch/content/specialinterest/gess/cis/center-for-security-studies/en/services/digital-library/publications/publication.html/196033>; "Risky Business: Is the U.S. supporting anti-Chinese militants in Syria?", *Institut für Strategie- Politik- Sicherheits- und Wirtschaftsberatung (ISPSW)/CSS ETH Zurich*, October 10, 2016, <http://www.css.ethz.ch/en/services/digital-library/articles/article.html/ef8263b0-24b1-4053-8dc5-7ac81a291e9b>

<sup>11</sup> Abhinav Pandya, "Does Saudi-funded Muslim Radicalization Threaten India?" *Ha'aretz*, April 16, 2018, <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/does-saudi-funded-muslim-radicalization-threaten-india-1.6008341>

<sup>12</sup> M. K. Bhadrakumar, "Ties with Iran are our sovereign prerogative", *The Deccan Herald*, July 21, 2018, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/sunday-spotlight/ties-iran-are-our-sovereign-682751.html>



security rather than “America First.”<sup>13</sup> The European Union and Japan<sup>14</sup> are similarly pushing back on US imposition of Iran sanctions that harm their economy and scrambling to save<sup>15</sup> the Iran nuclear deal.

With Imran Khan as the new prime minister of Pakistan, this may finally open a new chapter for improved India-Pakistan ties, and allow for a comprehensive regional strategy for peace and economic development in Afghanistan and South Asia.

Thus the US preference for military solutions in foreign policy and its push for a Saudi-led “Arab NATO” seem ill-fated, and may have the unintended consequence of galvanizing regional actors to coalesce against further war and destruction. The concept itself is already problematic, as Arab Gulf states are plagued with internal rivalry between Doha and Riyadh, and with Egypt<sup>16</sup> and Jordan<sup>17</sup> reaching out to reconcile with Syria in order to protect their own economies and domestic stability.

If the Trump administration truly wants to extricate the US from Mideast quagmires, plunging the region into further war and chaos is probably not the way forward. Training and equipping an Arab NATO to conduct regime change in Iran would likely meet the same failure as US efforts to train and equip “rebels” to conduct regime change in Syria.

Instead, as former White House official Professor Charles Kupchan<sup>18</sup> has exhorted, “America First” means Washington should support dialogue and political settlements in the region, transitioning its role from the world’s *policeman* to one of an *arbiter* of great-power peace. And as Syria expert Joshua Landis has said,<sup>19</sup> current US policy of keeping Syrians and Iranians poor in the hopes they will demand regime change will only usher in more wars, bitterness and extremism to the region.

Instead of blocking reconstruction aid to Syria and conducting “democracy by bombing” to contain Iran, the US should recognize a new security architecture<sup>20</sup> in the northern Middle East and let the region stabilize and rebuild on its own.

Failing that, regional actors will conduct countermeasures to protect their legitimate security interests. For the first time, China,<sup>21</sup> Russia, India and Pakistan will join four Central Asian republics to conduct war games<sup>22</sup> under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The mission is counterterrorism, and

<sup>13</sup> M. K. Bhadrakumar, “Mercenary U.S. over neighbourly Iran”, *The Week*, July 15, 2018, <https://www.theweek.in/columns/mk-bhadrakumar/2018/07/05/mercenary-us-over-neighbourly-iran.html>

<sup>14</sup> “Japan is talking with the U.S. to try to avoid adverse impacts from Iran sanctions”, *Reuters*, June 27, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/06/27/japan-talking-with-us-to-try-to-avoid-iran-sanctions-adverse-impacts.html>

<sup>15</sup> John Lloyd, “Commentary: Trump’s Iran nuclear decision ends era in U.S.-Europe ties”, *Reuters*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lloyd-europe-commentary/commentary-trumps-iran-nuclear-decision-ends-era-in-u-s-europe-ties-idUSKBN1IC2GA>

<sup>16</sup> Mohamed Maher, “Egypt and Assad: Calculations, Pragmatism, and Morality”, *Fikra Forum*, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 25, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/egypt-and-assad-calculations-pragmatism-and-morality>

<sup>17</sup> Nabih Bulos, “As Assad tightens grip on Syria’s south, Jordan rethinks rebel support”, *Los Angeles Times*, July 12, 2018, <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-jordan-border-20180712-story.html>

<sup>18</sup> Christina Lin, “Trump, NATO and the emerging multi-order world”, *Asia Times*, July 15, 2018, <http://www.atimes.com/trump-nato-and-the-emerging-multi-order-world/>

<sup>19</sup> Joshua Landis, “Syria, Deterrence of Chemical Weapons and U.S. Policy in the Middle East”, *Syria Comment*, April 12, 2018, <https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/syria-deterrence-of-chemical-weapons-and-u-s-policy-in-the-middle-east-by-joshua-landis/>

<sup>20</sup> Christina Lin, “China and the New Mideast Security Arc”, *Food for Thought*, NATO Defense College Foundation, December 2016, <http://www.natofoundation.org/food/china-and-the-new-middle-east-security-arc-christina-lin/>

<sup>21</sup> Teddy Ng, “China to send strategic bombers, fighter jets for war games in Russia”, *South China Morning Post*, July 13, 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2155224/china-send-strategic-bombers-fighter-jets-war-games>

<sup>22</sup> “Pakistan, India, China Russia to take part in SCO war games”, *The News*, April 26, 2018, <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/309153-pakistan-india-china-russia-to-take-part-in-sco-wargames>



should Washington and Riyadh proceed with the anti-Iran "Arab NATO," they may find themselves confronting not just Iran,<sup>23</sup> but a coalition of four nuclear powers in Eurasia.

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### About the Author of this Issue

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<sup>23</sup> "China Threatens United States With World War Three To Protect Iran..." July 15, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkQJ\\_iEzZEK](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkQJ_iEzZEK)