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An Arab NATO Would Be Two NATOs Too Many

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Doubling down on Washington's manifestly failed Mideast strategy.

Fresh off a summit where he was deeply critical of NATO, President Donald Trump has now made known that he would like there to be two NATOs. A spokesman for the National Security Council declared that the Middle East Strategic Alliance “will serve as a bulwark against Iranian aggression, terrorism, extremism, and will bring stability to the Middle East.”

The president reportedly hopes to host the October meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council in Washington, at which he will unveil his proposal—to nations that have turned dependence on the U.S. military into an art form, a point Trump made before he was elected.

The administration hopes to bring together the six Gulf states along with Egypt and Jordan. The idea of a Middle Eastern NATO is not new, but its history gives little cause for optimism. In 1955, the U.S. developed the Baghdad Pact, or Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), which was later renamed the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) after Iraq—where a coup had just overthrown the monarchy—withdraw. Achieving little of note, CENTO formally staggered along until 1979, when Iran's new revolutionary Islamic government withdrew.

That may explain the attempt to revive the idea with reference to NATO instead of METO/CENTO, but this subterfuge ignores the fact that the Mideast in 2018 is nothing like Europe in 1949. Washington viewed preventing hostile domination of the latter as a vital interest, significant enough to justify U.S. entry into World War II. The Western European nations, ravaged by the worst conflict in human history, faced a militarily empowered totalitarian state whose victorious armed forces occupied much of the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe. Absent creation of an American defense shield for the continent's unconquered west, the Soviet Union seemed destined to dominate Eurasia.

The Persian Gulf was never vital, or even as important as past presidents assumed. And today the region matters even less. The U.S. has emerged as the world's biggest energy producer, and along with other sources has broken the Gulf's oil stranglehold. Washington's ally Israel is a nuclear-armed regional superpower, capable of defending itself from all comers. No great hegemonic power threatens the Mideast, let alone America.

This point deserves emphasis. Although Iran is treated as the fount of all evil, it is a military midget incapable of reaching the United States. Nor does Tehran field forces sufficient to

conquer its neighbors. The country is in a shambles rather like the Soviet Union, although unlike the USSR it lacks the nuclear and conventional capabilities that forced the world to listen when Moscow talked.

The Islamic Republic is an economic wreck riven with political divisions. The revolutionary elite lacks legitimacy, protesters target foreign adventurism that occurs at the expense of economic reform, the young look westward. Iran's military is decrepit. While decrying Iran's leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, as the new Hitler, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman dismissed Tehran's potential: "Iran is not a rival to Saudi Arabia. Its army is not among the top five armies in the Muslim world. The Saudi economy is larger than the Iranian economy. Iran is far from being equal to Saudi Arabia."

So why can't Riyadh and its neighbors contain Tehran?

Iran trails many of its neighbors in conventional military strength. Its defense outlays last year were about \$16 billion. In contrast, Saudi Arabia spent \$77 billion, the United Arab Emirates around \$25 billion, and Oman roughly \$9 billion. Unsurprisingly, the militaries vary greatly in quality. The UAE has the most effective armed services. Riyadh's forces are more for show. Egypt's army is essentially a privileged caste tasked with defending the regime. Oman, Bahrain, Jordan, and Kuwait have modest militaries. Still, Iran is in no position to launch a blitzkrieg attack against any of them.

Tehran's supposed empire of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen is anything but. Tehran has influence in Baghdad, courtesy of the U.S. ouster of Saddam Hussein, but Iraq is no puppet. Lebanon is a desperately dysfunctional country; Hezbollah gives Iran a possible weapon against Israel, but it's useful mostly as a deterrent since the latter possesses overwhelming military strength. Syria and Yemen are impoverished ruins, the former a convenient buffer and the latter a useful tool to bleed Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Whatever geopolitical advantage has been won by the Iranians' foreign forays, they are still economically destitute.

Iran's only military edge is in its missile program, which offers more deterrent than offensive power. Rather than purchase the sort of expensive and prestigious military equipment that fill Egypt's and Saudi Arabia's arsenals, Tehran has focused on acquiring city-busting weapons for possible use against what amount to desert city-states. This is a policy of necessity.

The chief challenges facing the Gulf States come from within, not from Iran. To begin with, none of them have political legitimacy. How can seven monarchies, typified by Saudi Arabia's totalitarian absolute rule, plus one dictatorship (Egypt), appeal to disaffected young Arabs? Only mass repression can preserve these regimes.

Serve the royals so they buy another luxury yacht or build a new palace? Not good reasons to fight and die. Bahrain and Egypt are especially brutal tyrannies, while Jordan and the other Gulfdoms are better, but all are still notably unfree. Kuwait offers the greatest popular participation with an elected assembly and vibrant press, but it's a rare exception in a region of autocracies.

Moreover, the Gulf countries perceive the Iran threat very differently. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain are implacably opposed to Tehran. Jordan's relationship is difficult, but not particularly confrontational. Egypt's perspective has varied over time, but Cairo has never seen Iran as a security threat. Oman and Qatar cooperate with Tehran, and Kuwait has maintained

friendly contact, including diplomatic relations. So whatever might unite these eight nations, it isn't fear of Iran. This will make common defense difficult and an Arab NATO virtually impossible.

MESA would be particularly problematic because it would be dominated by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, which would use the organization to promote their, not their fellow members' or America's, ends. They have the biggest militaries, with Bahrain and Egypt on their payrolls. And the Saudis and Emiratis last year launched a campaign to turn Qatar into a veritable puppet state (in response, Turkey deployed troops in support of Qatar). A U.S.-backed security system would provide Riyadh and Abu Dhabi with another means of pressing their neighbors to comply with their wishes.

Indeed, Riyadh, often in conjunction with the UAE, has demonstrated more aggressive ambitions than Iran: backing the Khalifa family's authoritarian rule in Bahrain with troops and cash, financing the oppressive al-Sisi dictatorship in Egypt, underwriting radical jihadists in an attempt to overthrow the al-Assad government in Syria, kidnapping Lebanon's prime minister on a visit to the Kingdom in an attempt to destabilize that government, and launching a murderous, aggressive war against Yemen to reinstate a pliable ally. The Saudis and Emiratis would use MESA to manipulate their neighbors and, most importantly, the U.S.

In contrast, Europe has several nations capable of significant military exertions: Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. Despite differences among them, they share a broadly liberal outlook. Political and economic unity, though promoted through the European Union rather than NATO, have encouraged security cooperation. No European nation can dominate geopolitically, even Germany, despite its economic advantages.

The most important argument against a Mideast NATO is that it would harm U.S. security. Washington would issue formal, permanent security guarantees in a region of at most modest interest to America, in which no nation, including Iran, threatens America in any meaningful way.

Moreover, Washington would be attempting to direct nations with radically different threat perceptions and wildly varying military capabilities, but uniform determination to conscript U.S. military personnel as regime bodyguards. American troops would likely end up manning garrisons across the region as defense "tripwires." And the entire process would enhance the role of the most aggressive, repressive, and self-serving powers, Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates.

For what again?

Nowhere else have Washington's expectations and practical consequences been as divergent as in the Middle East. Decades of U.S. involvement have left America hostage to the counterproductive policies of irresponsible allies, such as Israel. Our meddling has birthed hostile governments, most notably in Iran, and groups, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State; it has entrenched brutal tyrants, ranging from Egypt to Saudi Arabia, and created instability, even chaos, as in Iraq and Libya. Virtually every Middle East problem today that elicits cries for more American involvement resulted from misguided U.S. interference a year ago, a decade, or more.

Creating MESA would double down on Washington's manifestly failed Mideast strategy. Instead, the Trump administration should move in the opposite direction, exiting what has

become a conflict that is both endless and purposeless. Today even one NATO is too many. We can't afford another one in the Middle East.

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