

The Washington Times

Trump's 'Arab NATO' faces skepticism, commitment issues

Dan Boylan

August 9, 2018

President Trump's plan to bring America's top Arab Middle East allies to the White House this fall in a bid to forge a military alliance against Iran and radical terrorism groups has the potential to transform the military balance in one of the world's most unstable regions — if the putative allies can find a way to get along.

Officially known as the Middle East Strategic Alliance but widely referred to the “Arab NATO,” the developing military coalition would be a Saudi-led effort and would include the six Arab states of the Gulf Cooperation Council along with Egypt and Jordan.

It would mark — if successful — a major payoff of Mr. Trump's policy of cultivating Arab states since virtually the beginning of his presidency to advance U.S. interests in the region and confront Iran.

Although White House officials have been tight-lipped about details, a Washington summit has been tentatively set for Oct. 12-13 and could significantly ratchet up regional pressure on Iran. The gathering will be held just weeks before a second set of U.S. sanctions goes into effect in an attempt to shut down Iran's critical oil and natural gas exports.

But before the Arab NATO can function effectively, the members must resolve a major diplomatic divide.

“In theory, it is a good idea because such an alliance would push back in Iran's expansion and ambitions,” Ahmad Majidyar, head of the Washington-based Middle East Institute's IranObserved project, said in an interview. “The problem is there are very deep divisions within the countries which would form the alliance.”

The Gulf Cooperation Council has been badly split since June 2017, when Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar over accusations that Doha supported terrorists and was too close to Tehran. Qatar has repeatedly rejected the accusations, and both sides have launched robust lobbying campaigns trying to sway the Trump administration to their side in the dispute.

Security analysts say that if diplomats untangle the Gulf Cooperation Council crisis, then the member countries could fashion a robust military partnership that coordinates missile defenses, military training and counter-terrorism measures. Buttressing security along strategic Gulf shipping lanes that carry much of the world's oil supply has also been discussed.

Additionally, Saudi and UAE officials have said publicly that they share U.S. goals in the civil wars in Yemen and Syria, where Iran has been supporting anti-U.S. forces.

Analysts also note an irony in Mr. Trump's push for an "Arab NATO" after shaking the traditional NATO alliance in Europe, questioning its post-Cold War mission and publicly calling out allies who Mr. Trump says have failed to honor pledges to raise their defense budgets.

A National Security Council spokesperson told The Washington Times that the alliance "will serve as a bulwark against Iranian aggression, terrorism, extremism, and will bring stability to the Middle East," which will "help reduce the financial burden the United States bears and build partner capacity in the Middle East."

The NSC also says the rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council will not stand in the way of coordinated action.

'Even one NATO is too many'

The idea has generated considerable skepticism, in part because past efforts to unify Arab defense and political agendas have repeatedly foundered.

Doug Bandow, a former special assistant to President Reagan and senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, said the concept of a NATO-like alliance in the heart of the Middle East is inherently flawed.

He cited the U.S.-led Baghdad Pact from the 1950s, which morphed into the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), after a coup in Iraq caused Baghdad to withdraw. Neither did much.

Writing last week in The American Spectator, Mr. Bandow argued that Tehran's threat to the West, other than Iran's missile program, is overstated. The region's real problems, he said, are internal.

"The chief challenges facing the Gulf States come from within, not from Iran," he wrote. "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?"

"The Trump administration should move in the opposite direction, exiting what has become a conflict that is both endless and purposeless," Mr. Bandow argued. "Today even one NATO is too many."

The Trump administration's hopes could founder on another factor: the hostility of many of the proposed Arab NATO participants to Israel, the top U.S. ally and top military power in the region. An editorial in The Jordan Times last week said the core mission of any Arab NATO should be to oppose Israel.

“Israel, after all, remains the biggest threat to Arab security and stability, and as long as there is no honorable, peaceful resolution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Arabs everywhere will continue to view Israel as enemy number one and not Iran,” the editorial said.

Iran has also belittled the idea. It said history has shown that its regional adversaries cannot come together in any coherent way.

“What we notice in the inter-Arab relations is a lack of integrity and consensus and indeed the existing gaps between the [Arab] countries,” Iranian government spokesman Bahram Qassemi told reporters in Tehran late last month.

But beyond containing Iran, a pan-Arab military-political alliance could address two of the biggest issues in the post-9/11 era”: counterterrorism and coordinated military spending to bring stability to governments around the region.

For years, various Gulf States have supported America’s most sought-after enemies in the Muslim world.

Qatar has either provided sanctuary or supported the Muslim Brotherhood, Hezbollah, the militant Palestinian group Hamas and the Taliban, whose leaders have also stayed in the UAE, Oman and other Gulf Cooperation Council countries. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has long been associated with exporting the strict Wahhabi form of Islam that many see as an incubator of radical Islamist movements.

Counterterrorism analysts say an Arab NATO could open significant backdoor channels between U.S. intelligence and the leaders of terrorist groups who use the Gulf Cooperation Council as a base.

During Mr. Trump’s precedent-shattering May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, the first overseas visit of his presidency which also included the Vatican and Israel, the issue of fighting Islamic State and other regional terrorist threats factored heavily.

Mr. Trump’s trip to Riyadh was seen across the Middle East as a highly symbolic gesture to repair ties with Riyadh that had suffered under President Obama.

Saudi officials had lamented that the final years of the Obama administration were “a period of difference of opinion” that stemmed from deep Saudi hostility to the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and U.S. concerns for the Saudi-led military campaign against Houthi rebels in neighboring Yemen’s civil war.

For two days in Riyadh, Mr. Trump received a festive welcome. He also signed a major weapons deal, a major boon for U.S. arms manufacturers that have great success selling in a region that spent an overall \$167 billion on defense in 2017, according to the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

The centerpiece of the summit, however, was a major speech Mr. Trump delivered on Islam that framed the global battle against terrorism as one the region needed to lead.

During the talks, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who also serves as defense minister, pledged that a 40-member anti-terrorism coalition that the Saudis launched in late 2015 — which included Turkey, Pakistan, Malaysia and Egypt — could provide up to 34,000 troops for anti-terrorism operations in Iraq and Syria.

Observers note that the wars against terrorists in Iraq and Syria have largely wound down, raising the question of whether the crown prince would tap those troops for other missions, including confronting regional archrival Iran.

Mr. Majidyar and others say this presents another massive obstacle to the Arab NATO concept. The Gulf Cooperation Council countries all have different relationships with Iran.

“The Saudis and Emirates (UAE) have taken a hawkish and strong stance against Iran, but Kuwait wants to better relations,” he said.

Since the crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council, he said, Qatar has moved much closer to Iran and Turkey.

“It remains to be seen if Washington can bring all these actors together,” he said.