

THE ARAB NATO: CONTEXTS, CHALLENGES, AND CHANCES OF SUCCESS



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Introduction

The challenge of countering the conflicts and managing the crises created by Iranian meddling in regional countries such as Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon and some Gulf nations, has pushed the US President Donald Trump's administration and its regional strategic allies to reconsider their policies and strategies with regard to dealing with Iranian expansionism. Iran has undermined regional peace and security as well as contributing to the collapse of nation-states and the proliferation of terror groups in the region. Therefore, the Arab Gulf countries and the US administration aim to form a military and political alliance (an Arab NATO) known as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). The alliance aims to stand up to Iranian intervention in the Arab region. It would be part of the US administration's attempts to besiege the Iranian state in addition to its economic sanctions and political pressures aimed at changing Iranian behavior. Therefore, in the following analysis, we will detail the aims of the alliance, the phases of its evolution, its challenges, especially from the Iranian and Israeli point of view, its chances of success and its future prospects in light of the current complicated circumstances in the Middle East.

First: the Identity, Contexts, and Aims of the Alliance

MESA is also known as the Arab NATO since aggression against any of its member states constitutes an aggression against all of its parties, the principle of collective security referred to in the Riyadh Declaration⁽¹⁾ issued following the Arab-American-Islamic Summit hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia from May 20 to 21, 2017. The participants included, leaders of 55 nations, including US President Donald Trump. It was Trump's first foreign trip after he took office as US president. The proposal was approved by the 55 nations participating in the summit.

The Arab NATO, according to the remarks of US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Gulf Affairs Tim Lenderking, includes nine members: the United States, the Gulf Cooperation Council states (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar), as well as Egypt and Jordan. The Alliance focuses on the military, political and economic spheres.⁽²⁾

The aim of the Arab NATO, is to strengthen military cooperation among member states in order to build a strong shield against the threats facing the Arabian Gulf. In particular to shield the region from growing Iranian threats, and rising waves of terrorism, as well as to bring security and stability to Syria and Yemen and to offer support to Iraq.⁽³⁾ In other words, the Arab NATO is meant to create a balance of power and to build a force of deterrence as well as a joint defense system to stand up to Iranian threats in the Middle East through countering them politically, militarily and economically to stop Iran's expansion in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. This is in addition to countering the transfer of arms between Iran and its militias in the region, especially the weapons being transferred to Hezbollah in Syria. Washington believes that although there are some differences among the supposed members, coordination among them is not impossible. According to the US National Security Council, the Alliance's intentions are to launch an air defense shield made up of air defense systems that will protect the participating countries from Iranian ballistic missiles. If this happens, Iran's missile capability significantly loses its strategic and military significance. This is air

defense shield will be part of the system to besiege Iran and curb its influence regionally, which will deprive it of the ability to escalate militarily in the region.

Military experts expect that the Alliance's theater of operations will be the Gulf sphere, the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean. Other analysts say that the Alliance may evolve into a strong military partnership, which coordinates missile defense systems, military training and counterterrorism measures, as well as enhancing the security of strategic waterways through which oil supplies pass to different parts of the world. ⁽⁴⁾

The proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA)				
-1 the proposal is American and aims to establish a Nato-like alliance	2-formation It is made up of 9 nations- the US, the GCC plus Egypt and Jordan	3- the aims Curbing Iranian influence in the region Countering terror organizations Bringing security and stability to Syria, Yemen, and Iraq	4- the theater of operations It is expected that the theater of operations will be in the Arabian Gulf, the Arabian Sea and the Red and Mediterranean seas	Principle of collective security Any aggression on any of its members constitutes aggression on the entire alliance

The issue of establishing the Alliance dates back to the first presidential term of US President Barack Obama, especially after the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011. But this Alliance did not come to light since US President Barack Obama's administration adopted a strategy of gradually withdrawing from the Middle East and embracing an eastward looking policy.

The issue of reestablishing the Alliance was revived in US policy discussions when US President Donald Trump came to power in January 2017. This aligned with his strategy to deal with Iranian schemes in the Middle East, which is totally different to that of his predecessor. The Trump strategy aims to change the behavior of the Iranian government in order to curb its influence in the Arab countries, to cease its missile program and to amend the nuclear deal in a way that prevents it from accomplishing its uranium enrichment program by 2025. This could happen through three tenets:

- 1- The first tenet: mobilizing regional powers, concerned by Iranian behavior, against Iran
- 2- The second tenet: undermining the nuclear deal and reinstating the maximum sanctions on Iran
- 3- The third tenet: forming political and military alliances to curb Iranian influence in the Middle East.

Some observers believe that the main motive behind the United States' keenness to launch the Alliance is its lack of confidence in NATO, especially after the US administration announced that NATO countries had failed in meeting their promises to raise its security and defense budget. If Trump succeeds in launching this Alliance, it will be a tremendous accomplishment during his first term in the presidency. The Alliance will create a military balance to counter the Iranian danger.⁽⁵⁾ Observers state that the Alliance will have three traits:

The first trait: defense agreements to enhance collective security.

The second trait: a collective charter for a collective defense agreement to expand the scope of the member states' defense capabilities.

The third trait: an integrated military command structure comprised of member states.

The US President Donald Trump immediately appointed retired US Marine Anthony Zinni as the US special envoy to resolve the Gulf crisis and to manage the discussions on the proposed Alliance. His administration began intensive meetings with the Alliance's proposed member states. In September 2018, Lenderking conducted shuttle tours in the Arab region to prepare the atmosphere and to hold

talks on the ways to launch the Arab NATO at the summit hosted by the United States in January 2019. The US position did not stop at this point. The US Secretary of State met with all the foreign ministers of the Alliance's proposed member states on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in October 2018.⁽⁶⁾

The US Secretary of State held a meeting including a Qatari official and officials from the Arab quartet boycotting Qatar since the middle of 2017 (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt). No quarrels broke out among the parties, perhaps because the meeting took place behind closed doors away from the media attention.

The Commander of the US Central Command, General Joseph Votel, met with the GCC Chiefs of Staff - including the Qatari Chief of Staff - in addition to their Egyptian and Jordanian counterparts, as well as the Commander of the Joint Peninsula Shield Forces and the Assistant Secretary-General for Military Affairs of the GCC Secretariat in Kuwait on September 10, 2018. The meeting aimed to discuss the development of the Alliance's essential vision. Sources in the Pentagon said that the meeting touched on the development of plans to respond to any emergency conditions or any possible regional wars. In addition, they noted that "officers are assigned to follow up these joint plans, which are a nucleus for joint military command." The sources added that "coordination has reached advanced stages regardless of the political differences among the governments of these countries."⁽⁷⁾

Part of the Manama Dialogue, held in October 2018 in the Kingdom of Bahrain with the participation of the defense and foreign ministers of the Alliance - except for Qatar - and the outgoing US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, was to complement the meetings of the Chiefs of Staff of the member states in Kuwait in order to discuss a vision for the role of the Alliance. This came after the remarks of the Saudi Foreign Minister on the sidelines of the Manama Dialogue on October 27, 2018 that, "The dispute with Qatar will have no impact on the development of the Alliance." "There has been discussion regarding this Alliance with Qatari officials. We have exercises in the GCC including Qatar. There are Saudi officials at Al-Udeid base. There is security cooperation and military cooperation within the

GCC. We have become certain that the Alliance would not be affected by a political conflict with Qatar.”⁽⁸⁾

Adel Al-Jubeir’s comments came three days after the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced during the Saudi Investment Forum on October 24, 2018 that, “Even Qatar, despite our differences with them, has a strong economy and will be different after five years.”⁽⁹⁾

Addressing the 73rd session of the United Nations General Assembly on September 25, 2018, President Trump said that his country is working with the Gulf States, Jordan, and Egypt to form a regional strategic alliance so that the Middle East can promote prosperity, stability, and security throughout its region. He pushed for the Alliance by saying, “Countries in the region must decide the quality of the future they want for themselves and their children.”⁽¹⁰⁾ According to sources close to US decision-making circles, Trump focused on the military aspects of the Alliance, particularly, in the fields of missile defense, military training and counterterrorism.

In the same context, some experts believe that the US withdrawal from Syria announced on December 19, 2018,⁽¹¹⁾ and the Pentagon’s announcement on September 27, 2018 to withdraw four anti-aircraft and anti-missile batteries from Jordan, Kuwait and Bahrain, is part of the US strategy to push these countries forward and to encourage them to speed up the formation of the Alliance, especially as the proposal is still under discussion without practical steps and implementation on the ground. This happened as a result of the outbreak of the diplomatic crisis due to the boycott of Qatar by the Arab quartet, namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain⁽¹²⁾ and Egypt on June 5, 2017. The US administration sent its Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to the Arab countries participating in the hoped-for Alliance from January 8 to 14, 2019 to reassure them about the US strategy to confront Iran’s threat after its decision to withdraw from Syria, which was later amended by the Trump administration on February 23, 2019. In this amended decision, Trump decided to keep 400 US troops and to coordinate consultations with Arab and Gulf countries to remove the obstacles hindering the rapid launch of the Alliance that will confront Iran’s regional activities, and to resolve the Qatar-Gulf

crisis. On more than one leg during his Arab tour, Pompeo stressed the importance of launching an Arab NATO pact to the Gulf states. During his stop in Egypt, he called on the Arab countries partaking in the Alliance to take new steps, including resolving crises and rising above differences as one of the necessities for launching the Alliance. He asserted that the US is intent on disentangling Syria of Iranian influence, saying, "It is time to face up to the Ayatollahs."⁽¹³⁾

The US administration held a meeting in Washington on February 22, 2019. It included officials from the Arab countries participating in the Alliance to coordinate and consult on the mission of the Alliance and the possibility of applying the principle of collective security that any attack on a member state constitutes an armed attack against all members. The Wall Street Journal believes that there are divisions among the countries involved in the Alliance on the mission of the coalition and its principle because the US administration does not give the principle of collective security priority and instead focuses on concluding business deals and establishing military training centers. This has dampened the enthusiasm of the participating countries towards the launch of the Alliance. This is in addition to the lingering diplomatic crisis because of the Arab boycott of Qatar and the resistance of some Arab countries to the efforts to include Israel in the coalition, according to the Journal.⁽¹⁴⁾

Second: the Iranian Vision and the Chances of Launching and Rendering Successful the Arab NATO

Iranian politicians, diplomats, and thinkers have agreed on two issues concerning their vision on the Arab NATO. The first is that there is "little chance of creating the Arab NATO" given the obstacles facing its launch, such as the Gulf crisis with Qatar, the divergent positions of the Arab Gulf states towards Iran, the divergent agendas, objectives and interests of all the member states in the Alliance towards Iran. Additionally, this Alliance will result in the Arabs focusing on the Arab-Iranian conflict instead of the Arab-Israeli conflict. This will shift the threat and danger posed by Israel to Iran so that Tel Aviv remains the prevalent, dominant and qualitatively superior force in the region.

One example can be cited here, on July 30, 2018, the Iranian Foreign Ministry Spokesman Bahram Qasimi described the Arab NATO project as “old and renewed” slogans. “The matter is just a slogan,” he said. “In the past, some institutions and intellectual circles have raised this issue, but it is raised today with a louder voice.”⁽¹⁵⁾

While remarking on MESA, Maj. Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari, Commander of the Revolutionary Guards, asserted, “Four decades have passed since the victory of the revolution, and the threats of the enemies have reached their peak.” He dismissed the threats of those he described as enemies of Iran, in reference to the US, to be hollow and worthless. “The only thing they could not do in practice is the military threat because it will cost them a very high price.”⁽¹⁶⁾

Sayed Hussein Mousavian, a visiting security researcher at Princeton University, and a former diplomat as well as a member of the Iranian negotiating team, ruled out the success of any military alliances in the Middle East, citing several obstacles to forming MESA:⁽¹⁷⁾

Obstacles to launching MESA from the Iranian perspective				
Excluding the regional actors	The continuation of the Gulf crisis with Qatar	Divergent positions of Gulf states towards Iran	Divergences between the Alliance's member states	Increasing sectarian division between Sunnis and Shiites

1- Excluding some regional actors such as Iraq which has a 58-kilometer coastal strip overlooking the Arabian Gulf. Also, it is a member of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). Turkey, which is an influential country in the Islamic world and the region, is also excluded. On the other side, Egypt and Jordan, which do not belong to the Arabian Gulf region, have been allowed to join the Alliance. Also, the Alliance did not pay attention to the interests of superpowers such as the European Union, China, India,

and Russia.

2- The continuation of the Gulf crisis with Qatar: in June 2017, four countries, including three Gulf nations, participating in the Alliance - Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt - announced their boycott of Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and meddling in the affairs of other countries. They called on Qatar to sever relations with Iran, a demand rejected by Qatar.

3- The divergent positions of the Gulf States towards Iran: Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait are trying to strike a relative balance in their relations with both Riyadh and Tehran. The Omani government often acts as a mediator between the United States and Iran. Doha, in turn, has relations with Tehran that have been strengthened after the Gulf crisis. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain have cut off diplomatic ties with Iran since the attack in Tehran on Saudi diplomatic headquarters in 2015.

4- The divergence among the member states of the Alliance: there are deep differences among the members of the Alliance towards various crises and issues in the region, as well as differences regarding the sources of threats and security arrangements. This makes the issue of forming an Alliance by bringing together these countries a daunting mission given their divergent perspectives, objectives, tools, interests and agendas. Every alliance has a doctrine and an enemy for which it is established.

5- Deepening divisions between Sunnis and Shiites: the proposed members in the Alliance realize that this Alliance will deepen sectarian divisions, reducing the likelihood of its launch. Sunni Arab states in the Gulf region will be in confrontation and conflict with its Shiite neighbors such as Iran.

Moreover, it revolves around the notion that if this Alliance is successfully launched, it will serve US interests in the Middle East in general and the special objectives of President Trump in particular such as concluding arms deals with the Alliance's member states. Hence, the US President Trump would make two gains, according to the Iranian narrative. The first is that Trump would shift the financial burden related to regional peace and security onto America's circle of regional strategic allies. The second is that President Trump in the

run-up to the presidential elections in 2020 would be able to create new jobs for American citizens through investing billions gained from selling arms into the US economy.

Third: The Israeli Perspective on the Chances of Launching and Making Successful the Arab NATO

By reviewing Israeli statements, we discover that the Israeli official vision rules out the success of the Arab NATO, even if it is supportive of forming and launching it in the short and medium term to counter mounting Iranian influence as well as its terror groups.

In a study published by the Israel Institute for National Security Studies, researchers Yoel Gugensky and Kobi Michael questioned the chances of an effective and successful Arab force, citing the successive Arab failures in launching effective alliances, with an exception being the Arab Alliance for Legitimacy in Yemen. The Baghdad Pact, which the United States called for in the 1950s, failed. The Arab League also failed to launch a joint military force and its Saudi-led Islamic counterterrorism coalition launched in December 2015 failed in terms of its effectiveness.

The two researchers also played down the approach of the common enemy taken by the US administration as a main tenet in forming this Alliance through which it will renounce responsibility in the Middle East, according to them. They cited the multiple conflicts within the Arab nations and their divergent positions towards Iran, in addition to the biggest and most dangerous obstacle which could constrain the launch of the Alliance, which is the hidden competition among member states over leading the Alliance.

The researcher and orientalist at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs Pinhas Anbari said in an article published by the Israeli website Davar Rishon that Turkey under the leadership of Erdogan will also be an obstacle to the formation of the Arab NATO, in view of Erdogan's growing ambitions to revive Ottoman glory. The success of such an alliance would diminish Erdogan's aspirations, which have gained momentum during his tenure.

This vision does not represent an opposition to the formation of the Alliance. On the contrary, the two researchers believe that the success

of this Alliance will be a big bonus for Israel in the short and medium term to counter Iran and its increasing influence in the region as well as its efforts to become a leading regional power. This Alliance, at the very least, will preclude low-level Israeli participation in the intelligence field. In the long run, the Alliance may pose a threat to Israel. In other words, the two researchers state that in the long run, there will be an Arab military bloc threatening Israeli security.

Fourth: Chances and Possibilities of Success for the Hoped-for Arab NATO:

Despite the regional realities, the nature of relations among the Arab and Gulf countries, their divergent positions towards Iran, the possible differences over leadership among the heavyweight members in the would-be Alliance, the controversy about its objective and the logistical problems facing some member states, there are several arguments and premises indicating the chances of success for this hoped-for Alliance:

Chances and Possibilities of Success for MESA		
1- The success of cooperation among Gulf states in security matters	2- The Alliance's members realization that Iran undermines regional security	3- The US umbrella to turn the idea of the Alliance into reality

1- The Success of cooperation among Gulf States in Security Matters

Despite the ongoing issues with regard to Gulf cooperation at the political level with some countries giving precedence to their own interests over the collective interest of member states, the Gulf experience in the area of security has become an example to follow. The Gulf model has set a precedent for cooperation on counterterrorism, extremist groups, sectarian thought and thwarting schemes and foreign interventions in the Gulf states. The emerging threats to the Gulf nations, including the Iranian nuclear deal with the West and the rise of ISIS, have contributed to an increase in unity among the members of the Gulf bloc. This increased unity within the Gulf bloc, prompted by new security challenges, has contributed to its success.

With the failure of most of the Arab collective security cooperation models, the Constitutive Statement of the Gulf Cooperation Council of 1981 has managed to remain in force since its inception to the present day. This endorsed the principle of collective security, joint defense, and a defense strategy. The Peninsula Shield Force was established in 1984, and in 2006 the force was further developed to become the Peninsula Shield Joint Force. This was reinforced with naval and aerial equipment according to multiple operational concepts to raise its combat efficiency. In addition, the Gulf Police Force was established in 2015. The Gulf nations also participate in counterterrorism international alliances. This is in addition to participating in the Islamic Alliance to Combat Terror, leading the Arab Alliance to support legitimacy in Yemen as well as partaking in joint military drills and maneuvers on a regular basis.

Security cooperation among the Gulf states played a major role in pressuring the former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's regime during the invasion of Kuwait in 1991. It also played a role through the Peninsula Shield Force in thwarting Iranian interventions in Bahrain during the attempted coup staged by Shiite groups in Bahrain against the government resulting in the events at the Pearl Roundabout in 2011. Gulf security cooperation has also helped in frustrating several terror and espionage operations in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia. This is in addition to dismantling several terror cells in the GCC states and handing over wanted suspects due to the cohesive security action among the GCC states. But the Council still requires greater coordination among the security services in these countries to protect their security, maintain stability and to preserve their gains as well as their development accomplishments.

2- Members of the Alliance Realizing that Iran is Undermining Regional Security

A-Iran Undermining of Regional Security

The regional geopolitical context reveals that the Iranian threat to regional security is mounting and is permanent, direct and imminent. It is a permanent threat due to Iran's political outlook on the Arab region. Iran's outlook is ideological, pragmatic, political

and historical. It is a direct threat due to its geographic adjacency, its military capabilities (its ballistic missiles), its continuous threats and planting of terrorist cells in Arab and Gulf states, as well as its occupation of three Emirati islands. It is an imminent threat due to its soft and hard maneuvers in the Arabian Gulf and the Arab region, its continued occupation of three Emirati islands and its incessant interventions in Bahrain, Kuwait, and other Gulf and Arab nations.

The snowballing Iranian threat and its fueling of sectarian conflicts were clearly evident in Iran providing its allies with money, fighters and weapons in what is called 'the national state crises.' Some Arab countries, due to mounting Iranian threats, are witnessing two phenomena:

First, there are countries suffering from total collapse such as Syria and Yemen where the crises of these countries have turned out to be an unprecedented deadlock. In these countries, the institutional and social structure has collapsed. These countries also lost control over their borders and Sectarian or country-backed entities depending on terrorism and threatening geographical borders emerged. This in addition to groups seeking separation from the central state in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen as well as actors relying on outside parties to maintain influence at home, such as Assad's regime resorting to Moscow and Tehran. The Syrian opposition sought help from Turkey and the Kurdish factions in Syria vested much hope on Washington to resolve all their problems, as is the case with the Kurds in Iraq.

Second, countries which are suffering from political deadlock as the case with Lebanon. In Beirut there is a political deadlock between the official state apparatuses tasked with maintaining national security and Hezbollah, which is Lebanese but Iranian in orientation, due to the encroachment of the party, which receives money, weapons, and fighters from Iran, on the apparatuses of the state. The party refuses to lay down its arms and interferes in the affairs of Arab countries through participation in the ongoing fighting in Syria, Yemen and Iraq or by creating affiliated groups in Bahrain, Kuwait and other countries to implement Iran's agenda. It bypasses Lebanese official decision-making processes and undermines the roles that should be played by official institutions. The statement by the Prime Minister-

designate Saad al-Hariri on November 13, 2018, that Hezbollah is undermining the formation of the Lebanese government, is a case in point.

The concerns of the members of the would-be Alliance due to the threats resulting from the collapse of other nation-states in the region may constitute a motive for launching the Alliance and rendering it successful at this time as opposed to past historical circumstances. The Alliance comes in a world governed by alliances and international blocs. Single countries in a certain geographical region are unable to foster regional security and to rebuild states. Thus, there should be an Arab bloc and alliance that faces the Iranian threat and uproots it.

B- The Alliance Members' Realization of the Enormity of Dangers and Threats

Despite the pessimistic readings and perspectives of several Iranian, Israeli and even European commentators towards launching the Arab NATO, especially from the angle of divergences among member states on several issues related to the Alliance such as who deserves to lead the Alliance from among the major powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the existing realization by all members of the enormity of dangers and mounting threats and challenges may constitute a motive for every member to abandon some of their private calculations for the sake of forming the Alliance and rendering it successful to protect collective interests. These interests include creating and sustaining the political and economic stability of each country, protecting their social fabric against division, protecting their political systems, protecting their borders, security sovereignty, and maintaining their achievements, accomplishments and development gains against loss. But this collective matter requires predetermined understandings among member states and ending their differences in favor of collective interests such as:

- 1- An understanding on all regional issues and files.
- 2- An understanding on the issue of political Islam.
- 3- An understanding on the divergent positions towards Iranian threats.
- 4- An understanding on distributing roles based on the relative

weight of each country in the Alliance.

5- An understanding on the nature and objective of the Alliance and deciding whether it aims to stand up to Iran or to all regional threats.

This was explained in the speech of the Secretary-General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Dr. Abdul Latif Al-Zayani at the 27th Annual Conference of US Policymakers at the National Council on American-Arab Relations in Washington on November 31, 2018 on the principle of “interconnection and interdependence” and its role in shaping the future of the region. This happens through applying a set of frameworks, networks, standards, and mechanisms that bring together national or personal interests and regional benefits and gives cooperation precedence over conflict, emulating the European experience. “The supreme objective to be achieved from interconnection, interdependence and regional cooperation must be attractive, and the expected gains and benefits should be tangible to all,” he said, referring to Iran’s “behavior undermining the security and stability of countries in the region.” He added, “The regime in Iran is determined to export its revolution and extremist religious ideas, and threaten its neighbors, violating all international conventions and norms.”

There are two important indicators highlighting the Alliance’s members determination in launching it:

The first indication is related to the number of member states which officially declared support for launching the Alliance (see Table No. 2). Four members out of nine officially declared their support for the launch of the Alliance in January 2019. These countries were the United States, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain. Egypt, Jordan and Oman - have not declared their official position on whether they support or oppose the Alliance. The position of Kuwait and Qatar, is unclear. This can be considered a positive indication, not a negative one, as these countries have not rejected the idea of an alliance and considering the military nature of the Alliance and its sensitivity in the current phase that the Middle East is going through. This is in addition to their participation in all the meetings related to the possible launch of the Alliance with US officials, such as participation

in the meetings of US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly meeting in 2018⁽¹⁸⁾ and their meetings with the US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Gulf Affairs Tim Lenderking during his shuttle tour of the Arab region to find ways to launch the Alliance in 2019.

Positions of the Alliance's Members on MESA		
<p>The first group countries which declared support</p> <p>1-The US, the country which first launched the proposal</p> <p>2-Saudi Arabia</p> <p>3-The UAE</p> <p>4-Bahrain</p> <p>5-Kuwait</p>	<p>The second group countries which neither declared support nor opposition</p> <p>1-Egypt</p> <p>2-Jordan</p> <p>3-Sultanate of Oman</p>	<p>The third group countries whose position is unclear</p> <p>Qatar</p>

As for the United States, it is the country which launched the proposal and pressed for establishing the Alliance in January 2019. Regarding Saudi Arabia, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir announced on October 28, 2018 the Kingdom's support for the Alliance. He said, "We strongly support the strategic alliance of the Middle East. We held meetings in Saudi Arabia with all the GCC countries plus Egypt. Discussions are continuing and we are focusing on outlining a framework." He added that there are continued discussions between Egypt and Jordan to outline ideas and to reach the key objective, which is ensuring the region's security. For his part, the Bahraini Foreign Minister pointed to the importance of establishing the MESA as it shall contribute to enhancing security and prosperity in the region.⁽¹⁹⁾ He also stressed the importance of alliances and partnerships among the countries supportive of stability in the region and their foreign

allies to ensure regional stability. Kuwaiti media outlets quoted the Deputy Foreign Minister of Kuwait as saying his country welcomes the proposals related to establishing the Alliance. This indicates that discussions have taken place in Kuwait on establishing a strategic alliance in the Middle East and that these proposals are welcomed and are being considered by the Kuwaiti leadership.⁽²⁰⁾

The Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani declared an ambiguous position towards acceptance or rejection by saying, “Respect for the sovereignty of states must be part of the policy of any alliance.” At the Munich Security Conference⁽²¹⁾ on February 17, 2019, the Qatari Foreign Minister said that the Alliance is doomed to failure unless the Gulf crisis is resolved, even though he said, “We are ready to join the Alliance and support the idea as long as it does not contradict international law.”⁽²²⁾

Egypt, a heavyweight and influential country along with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, has not declared its position. However, President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi’s call for the need to form a joint force to protect Arab national security⁽²³⁾ during the Arab Summit in Sharm el-Sheikh in 2015 could be understood as a positive indication from Egypt towards the formation of the Alliance to protect Arab countries from external threats. In addition, Egypt is participating in the Arab Coalition for Supporting Legitimacy in Yemen and in the Islamic Military Alliance to counter-terrorism.

The second indicator is the participation of all member states, especially the Gulf and Arab states, including Qatar, despite the crisis resulting from Doha being boycotted by four members of the hoped-for Alliance namely Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain, as well as Egypt, in all the joint military exercises and maneuvers held during 2018, including:

1- The Arab Shield-1 Military Drills

This was hosted by Egypt from November 3 to 6, 2018. It is the largest joint military exercise of its kind in the region, with the participation of the forces of eight Arab countries (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain and Jordan with Morocco and Lebanon as observers). It was held at the Mohammed Naguib Military Base and the joint air

and sea training areas falling within the Mediterranean.⁽²⁴⁾

2- The Maneuvers Codenamed Operation Bright Star

This was a joint Egyptian-American military exercise hosted by Egypt from September 8 to 20, 2018 at the Combat Training Complex of the Mohammed Najib Military Base, with the participation of forces from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the United States, Greece, Jordan, Britain, Italy, France and 16 other countries as observers.⁽²⁵⁾

3- The Gulf Shield-1 Military Drills

This was hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in April 2018. It is the largest exercise of its kind, in terms of the number of participating countries and the military equipment used in it. The drill is regarded as one of the largest mobilizations of diverse forces, with the participation of 24 Arab and Western countries including Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Sudan, the United States, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Britain, Turkey, and Malaysia. The exercise consisted of two different types of military operations, including regular war operations. These were carried out through coastal defense operations. This is in addition to the unconventional war operations carried out through the encirclement and storming of villages and industrial facilities, freeing them of hostile elements.⁽²⁶⁾

4- The US Umbrella and Turning the Idea of the Alliance Into Reality

Some analysts have drawn a link between the United States' call for forming the Arab Alliance in 2019 with its call to form the Baghdad Pact in 1954. There was a bipolar world order in the 1950s consisting of the United States and the Soviet Union, which curbed the United States' ability at the time. Today, the United States is dominating the unipolar world order though there are other countries vying to challenge the United States. Despite this challenge to its power, the United States is still solely governing the world order given its military capabilities with the most powerful army in the world, the deployment of its military fleets and warships across the world, as well as having the strongest economy in the world. Also, the United

States has incomparable political and cultural capabilities and it has a distinguished and strategic relationship with all the members of the hoped-for Alliance.

Despite the arguments of some observers on the negative impact of the US decision to pull out troops from Syria on its strategy to change the Iranian regime's behavior, the US decision is considered to be a strong motive for Washington to push the countries participating in the Alliance to quickly form and launch it to counter the Iranian threat and its terror groups in the Middle East.

Fifth: The Expected Scenarios for the Hoped-for Alliance

In light of the study's axes represented in the definition of the Alliance, its objectives and characteristics as well as the Iranian and Israeli perspectives on the opportunities for launching and rendering the Arab NATO successful, the following scenarios can be considered:

1- The First Scenario: Postponement Until Its Freezing

This scenario is backed up by several proofs, some of which are related to the divergent viewpoints of the member states on forming the proposed force, its tasks, objectives, the way it will work, the leadership hierarchy and the calculations of each member with its own domestic and external considerations when joining the Alliance, taking into account its military nature.

In the same context, the Alliance's member states maintain divergent positions on Iran. For example, four members of the Alliance have cut off relations with Iran Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and Bahrain. - Kuwait downgraded its relations with Tehran following the case of the Abdali terror cell in its territory and Doha maintains good relations with Tehran. The Sultanate of Oman maintains neutrality in its foreign policy. In other words, Riyadh sees Tehran as the source of the main threat to both Gulf and Arab security with its expansionist projects and colonial plans, while Doha, and Kuwait to a lesser extent, do not agree with Riyadh on the Iranian threat.

Some GCC countries still suffer from a complex of variation in

their relative capabilities and have considerable differences on some regional and international issues. The Gulf countries are unable to agree on several common issues such as who is their enemy and who is their friend, as well as the threats facing the GCC countries and their sources. There are also differences on the issue of political Islam. Qatar does not deem this issue to be a threat, but Saudi Arabia and the UAE see it as a threat to their governments resulting in the Gulf states' continued boycott of Qatar.

There are some manifestations related to the shaky confidence of the Alliance in the US administration when it comes to the system of encircling Iran following the hasty and sudden US withdrawal from Syria. The pullout came during a delicate juncture of the Syrian crisis, which led to the resignation of US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and US Envoy for the International Coalition to Fight ISIS Brett McGurk. In addition to the foregoing, the Arab collective mind is filled with unpleasant historical precedents when it comes to forming military alliances in the Arab region. Even some proposals to establish security bodies in the region to face up to the security threats following the outbreak of the so-called Arab Spring in 2011 have gone nowhere. This includes the Gulf proposal to establish the Gulf NATO in 2013 for jointly defending the GCC countries plus Jordan and Morocco, and the Egyptian proposal in 2015 to establish the Joint Arab Task Force to face up to regional security challenges.

In addition to this, there are divisions among the participating countries on the efforts to include Israel in the Alliance and the principle of collective security as the main principle for the Alliance as is the case with NATO. The US envoy in charge of resolving the Gulf crisis and managing the talks on the Alliance and senior White House official and Director of Gulf Affairs at the US National Security Council Kirsten Fontenrose submitted their resignations in January 2019 as they realized the impossibility in resolving the Gulf crisis in light of the insurmountable differences and the lack of readiness by the Arab quartet to accept mediation to ease the deadlock, which has thwarted efforts to launch the Alliance.

2- The Second Scenario: Launching the Alliance Without Effectiveness

This scenario revolves around launching the Alliance with all its members, but without all of them being effective members. This is due to the members' awareness of the acuteness of the situation following the US withdrawal from Syria or the US pressure to form the Alliance to stand up to the Iranian threat. This scenario is backed by several manifestations, including the success of some Arab and Islamic countries in launching some political and military alliances which are still in their early stages such as the Islamic Military Alliance to counter terrorism led by Saudi Arabia. This is in addition to the outstanding differences among the member states on the files and issues in the region, especially the issue of political Islam and the issue of the Iranian threat as well as their failure to reach a formula which satisfies all parties when it comes to the nature of the Alliance, its purposes and leadership.

3- The Third Scenario: Launching the Alliance Depending on certain members or With All Members and Full Effectiveness

This scenario revolves around the possibility of launching the Alliance by depending on certain members such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, Jordan, and the United States or depending on all its members. This scenario is backed by several signs including the success of some Gulf states in establishing some effective military alliances to protect regional security such as the Saudi-led Arab coalition which continues to support the legitimacy in Yemen. It played a major role in enabling the legitimate Yemeni government led by President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi to recapture 85 percent of the Yemeni territories from the clutches of the Houthis backed by Iran. It managed to thwart Iran's scheme to take control of the Yemeni equation as Iran adopts strategies seeking to undermine regional security.

Furthermore, there are examples of successful cooperation in the 1980s between the Gulf states after the establishment of the GCC. These successes cover the fields of counterterrorism, the handover of wanted persons, dismantling terror cells, protecting the Gulf states

against Iranian plots such as thwarting the Iran-backed attempted coup against the regime in Bahrain by sending the Peninsula Shield Force to protect the government in 2011 in addition to supporting Kuwait and Bahrain against successive espionage operations committed by Iran.

There are several proofs indicating the success of Gulf cooperation in the field of security, including the statements by the Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al-Jubeir when he highlighted that the political divergences among the Gulf States have not affected the establishment of military alliances, including the differences with Qatar. This is in addition to the participation of the Arab and Gulf states, including Qatar, in several joint military drills in 2018 such as the Arab Shield-1, the Bright Star 2018, the Joint Gulf Shield-1 and the participation of all members including Qatar in all the meetings whether on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting or in the meetings between the officials and ministers of the Alliance's member states to outline the vision, framework, and objectives ahead of launching the Alliance in January 2019.

These signs also include the mounting Iranian threat in the Arab region in a way that undermines regional security at an unprecedented level and which has led to catastrophic consequences for the Arab region. This includes the crisis of the nation state as is the case in Syria and the creation of political deadlocks in some Arab countries such as Lebanon and Iraq as well as the creation of extensive crises as is the case in Yemen. This is in addition to the spread of the phenomenon of terrorism in some Arab countries such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, and the crisis of irregular mass displacement whether to Arab or European countries. Moreover, the arms race and conflicts among regional actors, the aggravation of crises, threatening international navigation in the Strait of Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab, which could affect the flow of commercial ships, trade, and strategic commodities globally such as oil from exporting nations to importers in the Western industrial world, are additional signs.

We conclude by asserting that the third scenario, which is launching the Alliance depending on certain members, or its full members with effectiveness, is the likeliest in light of the rapid shifts

witnessed across the region and the world due to the complicated crises, multiple disputes, and changing alliances in an unprecedented manner. This makes it difficult to decisively determine which scenario is the likeliest. The world today is full of crises and conflicts and uncertainty prevails with the rise to power of volatile politicians in influential capitals who can make sudden decisions on global issues and questions.

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