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**SECURITY PLANS TO ADDRESS IRAN'S  
DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR IN THE ARABIAN GULF**

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# SECURITY PLANS TO ADDRESS IRAN'S DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR IN THE ARABIAN GULF

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**I**n the last decade, a growing body of literature on the Middle East has intensively reviewed Iranian affairs. This has become a prominent topic in most security and political research articles, overshadowing significant regional issues, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. This is clearly due to Iran's engagement in various hotbeds of tension across the region endangering Arab national interests, regional security and stability, and international maritime navigation.

Therefore, the Arab countries have become quite serious in forging plans to confront Iran's growing threat across the Middle East and in the Arabian Gulf region in particular. Iran's dangerous behavior has been increasing, and its expansionist policies have extended across many fronts. This is in addition to the intersection of interests on the world stage, which has created a new worrisome balance of power.

Despite the fact that Arabs still enjoy their longstanding cooperative platform under the umbrella of the Arab League which is supposed to pave the way for national security, the league has proved unable to address threats and cope with challenges.

The other small Arab regional councils and unions have also been unable to curb Iran's imminent threat.

New initiatives have emerged to implement measures that are more effective in curbing Iran's threat. This study aims to review the initiatives and security plans undertaken to confront the danger posed by Iran which has increased sharply during the last decade – following the eruption of the Arab Spring and the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. This study also seeks to evaluate these initiatives, analyzing their stages and effectiveness in confronting Iranian threats.

### **I. Iran's Security Approach in the Arabian Gulf Region**

Iran insists that its Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE) proposed by President Hassan Rouhani can establish peace and security in the region even though Tehran itself is the biggest security dilemma in the region. Objectively speaking, Iran's security approach in the region, represented by its so-called 'coalition of hope,' aims to:<sup>(1)</sup>

- Establish a new security system in the region, led by Iran.
- Bring the Arab countries under Iran's political and military influence.
- Completely expel all foreign forces – fleets, military bases – from the Arabian Gulf region; in particular from territories bordering Iran.
- Limit defense spending by Gulf states to bridge the gap between these countries and Iran.
- Recognize Iran's right to acquire nuclear technology, serving its national security objective of possessing a relatively advanced nuclear program for deterrence purposes.

Ensuring security and stability, according to Iran's approach, is a mission to be carried out solely by the regional countries without any foreign interference, which Tehran sees as a threat to regional security.

Through analyzing Iran's security approach, it becomes apparent that it seeks to establish the first stage of the international Islamic state. Iran's security approach is a threat rather than an attempt to establish security and development in the region because it mainly aims to achieve the following:

### **1. Thwart Saudi Arabia's Efforts to Establish Regional Security**

Iran is fully aware of the fact that Saudi Arabia acts as a safety valve in the region and balances regional relations, initiatives and military coalitions. Thus, Iran works to boost its relations with Gulf states like Oman, Kuwait, and Qatar. Its aim is to create a gap between countries in the region that over time will widen further and thwart all regional initiatives conducted to isolate and blockade Iran and curb its expansionist drive.

### **2. Break Iran's Regional Isolation**

Iran's regional isolation has concerned Iranian decision makers. It threatens the stability of Iran's political system and disturbs its internal peace, particularly after the revolutionary waves, popular demonstrations and student movements that the country has experienced. These uprisings have escalated sharply, raising great concern among the country's decision makers.

### **3. Entrenchment of Iran's Presence in the Gulf and Middle East**

Iran can further entrench its presence in the region if the Arabs officially recognize its political and military influence. If this happens, the region will experience a radical demographic change, leading to the emergence of ethnic identity conflicts. The recognition Iran seeks is not only political and diplomatic but also includes social and identity recognition, which could be gained once Tehran stops interfering in the internal affairs of regional countries.

### **4. Attempts to Rebuild Trust**

Recently, Iran's political discourse has reflected its desire to strengthen trust with the Gulf states and resolve their disagreements. To achieve this end, Iran proposed many initiatives, most prominently the Hormuz Peace Endeavor in 2019. All Iranian initiatives aim to position Tehran as a vital actor in the region to implement its agenda in relation to the most sensitive regional files whether in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq or in regard to the Palestinian cause and the US presence in the region. By pursuing these initiatives, Iran targets the position of Saudi Arabia in the region, potentially relegating Riyadh to an ineffective actor in the new regional security system.<sup>(2)</sup>

### **5. Eliminate the US Presence in the Gulf**

Iran adopted a paradoxical and unreasonable position when it emphasized via its peace initiative and Foreign Ministry statements that the US military presence in the region must end, in particular in Iraq and the Gulf. Yet, at the same time, Iran through the aforementioned initiatives aims to pave the way to enhance its own ambitions and regional influence. While Iran strengthens its military and security relations with its ally, Russia, which continues to use Tehran's airspace to save the Syrian government, Iran criticizes the security coordination between the Gulf and the United States. By giving access to Russia to use its airspace to launch

strikes against Syrian targets, Iran accepts its role as an actor serving Russia's regional strategy.

Iran's strategic geographical location has helped it to increase the level of threat that it poses to the security system in the Middle East and North Africa. Abroad, Iran's strategy depends on soft power where it targets peoples and not governments. This use of soft power breaks its conventional use in international relations. This can be clearly seen in countries such as Pakistan, India, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Algeria, and Sudan. However, Iran has never given up on the use of hard power in the framework of regional and international relations. It has continued to develop its nuclear program, boost military capabilities, increase popular mobilization, and strengthen military and logistical support to Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Shiites in Iraq, the Houthis in Yemen, and the Assad government in Syria.

## **II. The Danger of Iran's Approach to the Security of the Arabian Gulf Region**

Iran's actions in the region undermine all official statements issued in relation to regional stability and security because its security approach exposes its threats and dangers. Its hostile and offensive behavior have made it a threat not only to the Gulf security system but to the whole Middle East. Iran poses the following prominent threats to regional security:

### **1. Iran's Military Expansionist Tendencies**

Iran's military doctrine is based on military supremacy as well as strategic and regional superiority. Iran believes that it is the greatest regional power dominating the Arabian Gulf. This is the reason behind its successive naval drills and military parades in the Arabian Gulf, which are a blatant threat to the regional countries. Iran's drills usually include the display and firing of short-range missiles, clearly threatening the Arabian Gulf states and their vital interests in the region.

The danger posed by Iran to the region was clearly apparent before the 1979 revolution. The Shah had evident expansionist ambitions in the Arab region, reflected in his occupation of the three UAE islands: Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb (a territory of the Emirate of Ras al-Khaimah) and Abu Musa (a territory of the Emirate of Sharjah). Iran's nationalist expansionist policy that the Shah adopted continued with the same vigor and decisiveness but with a new political system, i.e., the Islamic revolution. The current Iranian ruling elite often employs historical and geographical references in its political discourse. Iran's rulers passionately recall the Iran-Iraq War in a very systematic way to embed it in the national mindset.<sup>(3)</sup> The ruling elite have also crafted a national narrative which justifies the government's ongoing interference in the internal affairs of neighboring countries and the huge and endless funding of proxy militias and allied governments, resulting in a great burden on the country's budget. Iran's elite claims that their interference and funding of militias is a hedging strategy to

eliminate the sources of danger confronting Iran. Iranian officials have insisted that their direct intervention in Syria and Yemen is to defend Iran's border.<sup>(4)</sup>

The occupation of the three Emirati islands is not the only sign of Iran's expansionist behavior and serious military threat. Iran still claims that Bahrain is part of the Iranian republic, proclaiming that until the end of 1970 it was the country's 14<sup>th</sup> province. Therefore, Iran encouraged Shiites to rebel against their government in the 2011 Bahraini protests. The Arab countries severely condemned Iran's policy. They saw it as a blatant violation of the national sovereignty of an independent state, adding that Iran's claim is based on historical fabrications. This Iranian mindset conflicts with its calls to strengthen trust and establish peace, security, and stability in the region.<sup>(5)</sup>

Iran's ferocious expansionist ambition has created several conflicts across the region. The demarcation of the Iraq-Iran boundary is still unresolved, particularly in relation to the Shatt Al-Arab. Also, the dispute over the Dorra gas field – located in the divided zone between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – since the 1960s, remains unresolved due to Iran's claim of a certain portion of the field. The dispute resumed once again in 2015.

The source of danger in Iran's military doctrine is that it intends to restore the Iranian empire. Ali Younsi, adviser to President Hassan Rouhani said on March 2015, "Iran is once again an empire, as it was in the past, and its capital, Iraq [...] it is the center of Iranian heritage, culture, and identity."<sup>(6)</sup> Stemming from its desire to restore the glory of the Sassanid Empire, Iran redrew the boundaries of its national security, which, according to Iran's perspective, starts from the Arabian Gulf through the Red Sea stretching out to the Mediterranean Sea. This would be achieved through Iran conquering four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sanaa.

Iran's military danger is not limited to its desire to occupy Arab oil fields. A much more serious danger: Iran has been recruiting, training, funding and arming militias with missiles and advanced weapons, endangering the stability of the Middle East. According to the Foundation for Defense of Democracies' report, Iran spends \$16 billion annually to support its militias and regimes. The report mentioned, "The greatest cost, but also the hardest to estimate, is the deployment of troops to protect Assad."<sup>(7)</sup> Nathan Sales, an expert on counterterrorism at *The Washington Institute* reported that Iran spends nearly \$1 billion a year to fund terrorism.<sup>(8)</sup>

## 2. Inciting Sectarian Conflict and Threatening the Security of Neighboring States

Putting at risk the social security of a country is no less dangerous than undermining its military security as it directly impacts the country and the people. It poses a danger to a country's social cohesion and to the values and ideas of the people. Despite its danger, a well-conducted security initiative can contain or, at least, mitigate the ramifications of a country's military security strategy. But the social danger cannot be easily confronted if it penetrates deeply inside a country's social structure, values, and institutions. Iran bets on the latter. It has exploited the use of soft power via the media, and has raised sectarian slogans that have had a significant psychological impact on Arabs who have been suffering, in developing nations particularly. These people are drawn to Iran's revolutionary slogans: 'mark the victory of the oppressed against the oppressors' and 'liberate Jerusalem.' This use of soft power will, partially, cause societies to break up, and will also lead to sedition and sectarian conflict, and aggravate the domestic crises that these countries suffer from.

## 3. Export of the Revolution and Weakening Governments and States

Here, we refer to the political threat which endangers the political security and ruling philosophy of Arab political systems. Given the extent of the transformations resulting from it, the political threat is one of the most perilous threats a state may face. In this context, Iran's export of the revolution is the most serious and blatant threat to the Gulf political systems. The export of the revolution, particularly the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*, has been the bedrock of Iran's expansionist plan. Iran's global Islamic state passes through three main phases:

A. Green: The project starts to expand first from Iraq and the Gulf states heading to Indonesia then reaching out to Moscow.

B. Red: It is the phase when the *Velayat-e Faqih* state (Iran) starts its battle against the Marxist and Communist systems.

C. Black: It is the last battle for the *Velayat-e Faqih* state; starting with Western Europe, leading to the eventual toppling of the *Great Satan* (a term Iran uses to stigmatize the United States). When this phase has been completed, the universal *Velayat-e Faqih* state led by Iran's supreme leader who undertakes the tasks of the prophets and messengers, establishes justice and peace for humankind.<sup>(9)</sup>

Iran's unexpected position on the Arab Spring exposed its latent political danger as it described it as an extension of the 1979 revolution, and the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called it the "Arab Awakening." Iran attempted to exploit the Arab Spring to promote its revolutionary model. It worked hard to trigger its loyal Shiite groups in Bahrain to rebel against their own government.<sup>(10)</sup> In the same vein, Iran explored the possibility of inciting rebellions in Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia and to re-enact the Lebanese experience of the 1980s.<sup>(11)</sup>

#### **4. Intelligence Incursions and Cyber Attacks**

To establish a successful strategy, a state needs to obtain information. This explains the reason behind Iran's ambition to increase its efforts to establish espionage and intelligence networks. Iran seeks to obtain military and economic information, in addition to detailed and accurate data and files detailing US military capabilities, its covert agreements, and military installations in the region. Developed countries run their espionage networks covertly. Ironically, Iran explicitly and officially supervises espionage networks in the Gulf states and several Arab countries, to highlight that it is well informed of the military, economic, and political plans and programs in the region. This is a blatant violation of a state's sovereignty and information security. Kuwait tops the list of countries with the most Iranian intelligence incursions. In September 2012, the largest spy-cell to be found in Kuwait, consisting of 39 IRGC officers and 58 members of variant ranks, was captured. The Kuwait authorities seized advanced spy devices and Iranian made weapons and bombs. In 2015, an Iranian spy cell, known as the 'Abdali cell' equipped with the most advanced spy technology to stay in contact with Iranian intelligence and armed with light weapons and ammunition, was also captured in Kuwait.<sup>(12)</sup>

Trials of IRGC-backed spy cells in the Gulf have become quite common, indicating that Iran has strengthened its intelligence network in the region. We can understand the full extent of Iran's threat level via its aggressive expansionist ambitions and intervention in the internal affairs of other countries by financing terrorism and destabilizing regional security.

#### **5. Threatening International Maritime Navigation and Targeting World Trade**

According to Iranian decision makers, the geo-strategic dimension of the region, including its waterways, is a highly significant bargaining chip. Whenever Iran faces political pressure or economic sanctions, it directly and flagrantly hinders maritime navigation in the waterways of the Gulf. This is a blatant violation of international law, particularly the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This convention mentions in detail the freedom of navigation in international waterways, confirming that all ships enjoy the right of transit passage and this shall not be violated.<sup>(13)</sup>

Iranian decision makers are fully aware of the ramifications of targeting trade and military ships as well as of the international response to this blatant and deliberate violation of freedom of navigation. As a result, they resorted to supporting armed militias and directed them to attack ships and oil tankers in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf, posing a serious danger to maritime navigation in the region. Using proxy militias is Iran's best strategy to place pressure on regional countries while evading sanctions. The attacks carried out in the past have proven that it is not easy to hold Iran accountable for these terrorist and

belligerent actions, because of the fluid and active movements of terrorist groups and armed militias.

Without a shadow of a doubt, Iran's danger imposes significant costs, economic losses and burdens considering the arms race in the region. The economic growth rate has dramatically declined. This is in addition to armed conflicts, proxy wars, and the disruption of regional investment by Iranian-backed militias. Their latest recorded attack was against Saudi Arabian oil facilities in Buqayq in September 2019.

## **6. Supporting Militias and Exporting Arms**

When Iran and the P5+1 concluded the so-called Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, (JCPOA) in 2015, the UN Security Council (UNSC) adopted Resolution 2231 which imposed an arms embargo on Iran. The resolution prohibits Iran from supplying, selling, or exporting all types of weapons (light and heavy) without the approval of the UNSC. However, Iran, still, continues to send military supplies to its proxies deployed on several fronts across the region, in a blatant violation of the UNSC resolution.

Moreover, Iran, through its direct connections, supports and finances terrorism and supervises the operations of many militias and terrorist organizations in the region such as: the Houthis in Yemen, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Al-Ashtar Brigades in Bahrain, and some armed organizations in Palestine.<sup>(14)</sup> Iran's support of terrorism violates international law and breaches the agreements on counterterrorism which Tehran still refuses to join.

The US Department of the Treasury released a report in 2018 unveiling the extent of Iran's danger in the Middle East. According to the report, Iran was accused of exploiting the international financial system to support and fund terrorism, violating human rights and strengthening the Syrian regime. Iran was also accused of exploiting aviation companies to transport illegal goods and shipping precious metals for illicit transactions.<sup>(15)</sup> Meanwhile, Iran claims that it adopts the so-called 'economy of resistance' which in effect is a pretext to justify its illicit trade and transactions which have enabled the Iranian government to survive its economic crises resulting from international sanctions.<sup>(16)</sup>

## **III. Failure of Conventional Security Strategies and the Arab Security System**

Since the early 1990s, many Arab political and security analysts, most prominently Amin Huwaidi, have doubted the existence of Arab national security. They claim that creating a unified Arab national security system is more than a mere concept or a driving ambition. It is a project based on a strong belief and political will. However, other analysts who support establishing the aforementioned unified Arab national security system believe that it would be unable to address Iran's growing danger in the Middle East, and in particular in the Gulf region. This

fragile system is suffering from a crisis of consensus and the absence of executive decision making not only at the Arab national level but also at the level of local councils in every country. The Arab League, the umbrella Arab body sponsoring Arab security, suffers from poor performance;<sup>(17)</sup> an inability to implement mechanisms to cope with the current challenges, a failure to unify Arab political will to confront the current challenges and discuss common issues in a way that would better thwart the current security threats, most prominently the Iranian threat to the Arabian Gulf region.

The failure of the Arab League in this regard is not due to a lack of regulations because the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation of the Arab League (June 17, 1950) came into force in 1952. The treaty led to the creation of the Joint Defense Council and the Joint Economic Council, which later was changed to the Economic and Social Council in 1980.<sup>(18)</sup> In reality, the Arab joint defense that was concluded was not actually instrumental. It was not implemented on the ground to aid regional security and stability. The strategies of Arab armies seriously conflicted and were completely variant leading to a chaotic situation which risked regional security.

The poor performance of the Arab League cannot be explained merely from an institutional and legal perspective but a behavioral explanation is important as well. For many decades, the Arab League has neglected the rules of collective action. Its performance has been marked by:

- Disagreement over common interests and multiple sources of threats have made it difficult to identify the top priority for Arab security;
- The collective Arab national will is weak when compared to the individual wills of Arab countries;
- Conflicting opinions have led to ties being cut and enmity, negatively impacting the effectiveness of initiatives and recommendations;
- A lack of security and political mapping which helps in distributing regional roles;
- The communication level between the Arab countries, to identify goals and conduct strategies, was under the level needed to confront regional security threats — despite of the danger arising from the Israeli occupation, Iran's danger, radical Islamic movements, terrorism, economic stagnation, Turkey's interventions, and organized crime;
- A lack of political awareness about the crisis and elite mismanagement;
- Rivalry over leadership and minor countries fearing major powers.<sup>(19)</sup>

The logic of threats in international relations is due to the invalidity of traditional security frameworks and arrangements to confront new threats in case these traditional structures and institutions are unable to adapt to the nature of the new circumstances and variables.

The NATO alliance, for example, succeeded in doing this after the end of the Cold

War and transforming its mission to protect the interests of its members, showing concern for human rights and ensuring international peace and security. It was dedicated to thwarting Soviet danger and the threat stemming from the Warsaw Pact. Arab national security does not have this flexibility to adapt to confront the new regional threats and dangers. This has made it imperative to find new security approximations and initiatives which would be more effective in confronting the current threats, on top of them being the growing Iranian threat in the region.

Except for the success of the deployment of the Peninsula Shield Forces to halt Iranian threats to the stability of Bahrain in 2011, which was an important success for the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) concept of collective defense led by Saudi Arabia, the developments that have followed have highlighted the growing security problems and challenges as a result of Iran's presence in the region. These problems and challenges require a broader security approach, with new and different perspectives and dimensions.

#### **IV. The Alternative Regional Approximations to Counter the Iranian Danger**

*The most important initiatives are as follows:*

##### **1. The Arab NATO**

This security project dates to 2013. The GCC states proposed a joint defense project including Jordan and Morocco under the leadership of Saudi Arabia. The project intends to establish a regional security structure to counter the security threats in the region following the tensions fostered by the so-called Arab Spring, the growing Iranian danger in Yemen and Syria, and increasing asymmetrical threats, such as a surge in the illicit arms trade across borders which have become insecure, and extremist and armed Islamist movements increasing the intensity of their operations.

Although the timing is important for this initiative, it has made little progress, due to the variant positions of the GCC states toward Iran's threat in the region.

At a time when Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider Iran the main source of danger and a great threat to the Gulf and the Middle East, Qatar and Oman have refrained from entering any agreements that seek to counter Iran.

In addition, the foreign policy considerations of the countries involved in this project diverge in relation to the Muslim Brotherhood, which Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider as a security threat, but other countries do not share this view. The positions also diverge on the Syrian conflict. Jordan and Morocco are not enthusiastic about the initiative, and there is a lack of joint action as well as differences in the military doctrines of the countries participating in this project.<sup>(20)</sup>

##### **2. The Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen**

The coalition was established in March 2015 and represented a qualitative transformation in the foreign policy orientations of the Gulf states. The coalition

launched a military campaign led by Saudi Arabia with the participation and support of more than 10 countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The coalition was motivated due to the worrying Iranian presence in Yemen, which grew stronger after the central government in Sanaa was weakened in 2019. Iran took advantage of the situation, given the fact that Yemen is easy prey and a low-cost opportunity compared to Iraq and Lebanon, to further spread its influence and exert pressure on Saudi Arabia in particular.<sup>(21)</sup>

The intensity of events and threats contributed to a major transformation in the foreign policy orientations of Saudi Arabia. The situation strengthened its conviction about the need for a decisive military intervention to curb the dangerous growth of the Houthi militia, which has become a genuine regional danger after threatening navigation in the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandab Strait.<sup>(22)</sup>

The coalition began its military intervention in Yemen on March 25, 2015 in its first operation codenamed 'Storm of Resolve.' The operation was conducted with the participation of fighter jets from Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Sudan, the UAE, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Qatar, which was later excluded in 2017. Somalia also contributed via opening its airspace and territorial waters and putting its military bases at the disposal of the coalition. For its part, Pakistan participated via providing warships to help the coalition tighten the blockade on arms sent to the Houthis. The coalition also took advantage of the important logistical support the United States offered such as the sale of weapons, intelligence assistance, and the refueling of fighter jets as well as the direct contribution to the command and control center in charge of the airstrikes.<sup>(23)</sup>

The coalition pursued its military intervention in Yemen in phases for the sake of periodic assessment and to adapt to new developments. The coalition announced on April 21, 2015, an operation dubbed 'Restoring Hope.' As part of this operation, the prioritized protecting civilians, halting the Houthis from advancing and paralyzing their movements via targeting Sanaa Airport. On May 14, 2015, the coalition ushered in its third operation dubbed 'Golden Arrow' which was basically a ground operation with air and naval cover, in which Yemeni forces trained in Saudi Arabia participated. The operation began in Aden with hundreds of Saudi and Emirati armored vehicles and tanks and managed to drive the Houthis out of Aden and large parts of the southern provinces. At the same time, other forces pushed ahead from Saudi Arabia in the north to take back the two governorates of Marib and al-Jawf.<sup>(24)</sup>

The announced objectives of the coalition included quelling the Houthi rebellion and restoring legitimacy in Yemen represented in President Abdrabu Mansour Hadi. As a result, the coalition provided the pro-Hadi Yemeni fighters with the required weapons and military hardware. Also, hundreds of Yemeni fighters took advantage of the much-needed military training for operating the different types of sophisticated weapons and equipment.

### **3. The Joint Arab Force**

This initiative surfaced in April 2015 as part of the outcomes of the 26<sup>th</sup> Arab League Summit held in Sharm El-Sheikh. Given the timing and circumstances of its announcement, the initiative is considered an important step in establishing a Joint Arab Force to counter regional threats; foremost among these threats is terrorism and the growing Iranian danger in the region.

Parties to the initiative agreed to forming a top-quality military force made up of 40,000 troops of the elite forces in Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, and the Gulf states. This is in addition to a 1,000- strong air force, a 5,000- naval infantry, and a 35,000-soldier ground force. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is to provide the finances and bear the cost of arming and supplying equipment while Egypt is responsible for providing the coalition with most of the soldiers. This initiative stipulated that the joint force shall be headquartered in Cairo under the leadership of Saudi Arabia, with the possibility of rotating the chairmanship between Egypt and Saudi Arabia thereafter. But the initiative, like the preceding arrangements, did not come to light due to the non-compliance of parties, weak political will, conflicting visions and differences in perspectives in relation to the sources of threats.<sup>(25)</sup>

## **V. The International Security Approximations to Counter the Iranian Danger**

*These are the following:*

### **1. The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)**

The coalition was established in December 2015 following an initiative from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The coalition is made up of 41 Islamic countries. The first of its meetings was held in Riyadh in March 2016 and it aims to coordinate efforts to fight extremism and terrorism in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Afghanistan. The coalition is to coordinate intellectual, media and military efforts to combat terrorism and its sources of funding. It depends on the UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy for its criteria and platforms.<sup>(26)</sup>

### **2. The Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA)**

The coalition is known as MESA and is known symbolically as the Arab NATO. The idea of establishing it dates back to the Riyadh Summit in 2017<sup>(27)</sup> where parties to the summit agreed to hold an annual meeting intended to coordinate efforts and boost security and energy cooperation to counter security threats and strengthen economic cooperation.<sup>(28)</sup>

The intellectual roots of the Arab NATO go back to the security intellectual Michael Flynn and historian Michael Ledeen and their book titled 'The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies' published in July 2016. The 208-page book, with a great deal of accuracy and detail reviews the scope of the Iranian danger in the Arabian Gulf and the Middle East in

general. Accordingly, Flynn believes that the United States cannot alone confront the Iranian danger and threat in the long run, which requires establishing a regional alliance under US supervision, which includes the GCC states, Jordan and Egypt named the 'Arabian Gulf and Red Sea Alliance.'

After the proposals of Flynn and the Saudi initiative in 2017, the joint drills dubbed the 'Shield of Arabs' hosted by Egypt from November 3 to November 6, 2018 were an important step on the path to boost relations between the GCC states, Egypt and Jordan. Lebanon and Morocco partook in the drills as observers. The drills were conducted at Mohammed Naguib military base on the Mediterranean flank of Egypt in the presence of the naval, ground and air force personnel of the participating countries as well as their elite forces.

The US State Department sought in the second meeting in 2018 to intensify communications and diplomatic visits to prepare the groundwork for a summit bringing together the GCC states, the United States, Egypt and Jordan in January 2019. But the efforts of the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Tim Lenderking, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Gulf Affairs, failed. The matter has become more complicated after the Egyptian retreat, Jordanian hesitation, and divisions in the ranks of the Gulf states as well as Oman's lack of enthusiasm in joining the alliance as it mainly targets Iran.

### **3. The Strategic Partnership Between NATO and the Arabian Gulf States (the Istanbul Initiative)**

After the Cold War, NATO began to adapt to the international variables by shifting from its status as a purely military organization tasked with defending Western Europe and the countries overlooking the Atlantic Ocean to a global military and political force whose mission is to dominate the capitalist Western world under the leadership of the United States. Considering this transformation, the nature of dangers and threats, along with strategies and plans, changed.<sup>(29)</sup>

NATO's adaptation in light of the new security environment in the world led the Middle East to fall within the scope of its interests and future interventions. This alliance, especially after the Washington Summit in 1999, has been working actively in accordance with a new strategic approach based on a shift from defending the geographical borders of the alliance to defending the interests of the partners and members of the alliance worldwide and not linking its behavior and interventions with the resolutions of the UN Security Council resolutions.<sup>(30)</sup>

The beginning of the NATO-Gulf dialogue dates back to the Doha Forum in April 2004 titled 'NATO Transformations and Gulf Security,' and the forum held by the General Diplomacy Department in NATO in Rome in March 2005 titled 'NATO and the Broader Middle East,' as well as the forum held in Doha in November 2005 titled 'NATO and the Greater Middle East.'

But the most important symposium was the one held in Istanbul in 2004, which is considered the mainstay of the cooperation between NATO and the Gulf

states. The forum was ostensibly, and in the media, dedicated to the Middle East and North Africa, but its main focus was the GCC, according to the statements and speeches of the engineers of the symposium.

The objectives of the symposium focused on the security of the Gulf. Although the responsibility of Gulf security falls on the shoulders of the Gulf states themselves, the world powers also share a responsibility in this regard.<sup>(31)</sup>

According to The First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Qatar, Muhammad bin Abdullah Al-Rumaihi, the Istanbul Initiative aimed to establish a strategic partnership between the Gulf states and NATO. As for the issues and challenges, Rumaihi summed them up as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, rogue states, human trafficking, drug trafficking and the Palestinian cause. This prompted NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to comment in relation to the Palestinian cause, saying, "In general, I can say that NATO as an organization is not directly involved in the Middle East peace process but allies attach a great importance to a just and lasting peace and comprehensive settlement in the Middle East, and especially in the Israel-Palestine conflict."<sup>(32)</sup>

NATO managed to establish its first headquarters in the region in Kuwait in January 2017 with the aim of advancing cooperation and consultation, and boosting the level of coordination in the fields of peacekeeping, security, defense and countering the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, according to its secretary general. However, the main actors in the Gulf are opposing this initiative since it does not consider their basic interests.

#### **4. The International Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation**

It is also called the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways. It is an international alliance which was created in November 2019 and is headquartered in Bahrain. The alliance aims to protect and secure maritime navigation against attacks and piracy in the waters of the Arabian Gulf, through the Strait Hormuz, the Sea of Oman to the Strait of Bab al-Mandab in the Red Sea. This is in addition to working on advancing the free flow of trade and deterring the threats facing ships.<sup>(33)</sup>

The alliance consists of six countries plus the United States: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, the UK, Australia, and Japan.<sup>(34)</sup>

The idea of establishing an international military alliance to protect the security of maritime navigation in the waters of the Arabian Gulf and its routes dates back to July 2019. It came after Iran's unprecedented hostile behavior targeting oil tankers in the waters of the Gulf following the tightening of US sanctions on it.<sup>(35)</sup>

Tensions and differences between the United States and Iran have been accelerating since May 2019, when the United States sent a jet carrier and bombers to the Middle East. Immediately after that, Iran announced it would be

easing some restrictions imposed on its nuclear program. This came before US intelligence obtained information that Tehran was planning to mount attacks targeting navigation in the Gulf, which happened thereafter.<sup>(36)</sup>

Given the major strategic significance of the region, the United States began communicating and holding talks with more than 60 countries, including Germany, Britain, France, Norway, Japan, South Korea and other countries to participate in the initiative and discuss its mechanisms<sup>(37)</sup> to guarantee the safety of navigation in one of the most important maritime routes. Over one third of the oil transported by sea across the world passes through the Strait of Hormuz, which Iran threatened more than once to shut down. But the US efforts failed in attracting a large number of countries due to the idea being new and the lack of readiness to engage in an all-out dispute in the region.

Although several countries expressed reservations about the initiative, given the enormity of the threat, the alliance officially began its mission on November 7, 2019 under the leadership of the United States in Bahrain and consists of six countries. It has completely clear objectives expressed by the commander of the US Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT), who said, "The focal objective is the commitment to joint collective defense against the attacks which could target the ships of the Alliance's member states. The operational structure is based on the principle of dealing with the threat, not threatening."<sup>(38)</sup>

Contrary to all the previous initiatives and security approximations, the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways is considered the only initiative which manifested itself on the ground via directly starting international multinational naval drills dubbed 'IMX-19' during the period from October 26 to November 14, 2019, with the participation of 56 countries and six international organizations, making it the biggest naval operation worldwide in terms of the number of participants. The US-led maneuvers kicked off in the northern Arabian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman and the Gulf of Aqaba, the Arabian Sea, and the coast of Djibouti. There were multiple comments made by the leadership of the alliance in relation to the variant diplomatic positions taken by the international powers in regard to the alliance's objectives. But the main objective of it was to curb the growing Iranian danger in the region, which also indicates the reason why Germany, France, Qatar and Oman did not join the alliance. It is also the variable explaining the reason behind the accession of Saudi Arabia and the UAE after the Aramco facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais came under attack in mid-September 2019. The Houthi rebels in Yemen claimed responsibility for the attack which was masterminded and financed by the Iranians. This made this approximation the most successful and effective initiative to curb the growing Iranian threat in the region, especially after the targeting of Saudi petroleum facilities and ships in the Gulf waters.<sup>(39)</sup>

## **VI. Assessing the New Security Initiatives in the Arabian Gulf Region**

Several problems in relation to some of these initiatives, whether of a regional or an international nature have surfaced, such as the following:

### **1. The Withdrawal of the US Protection Umbrella and the Return of International Competition to the Region**

The United States no longer has the same level of enthusiasm which existed in the past to support security initiatives and maintain balances in the region. The United States has adopted the policy of withdrawing its forces and redeploying some of them as part of a comprehensive strategic vision to reposition its military on the international stage. This is part of its eastward focus to counter the Chinese threat. The vacuum that the United States has left behind has opened the door for some international rivals. Iran has taken advantage of the presence of some of these rivals such as Russia and China, with whom it has good relations. Therefore, new security arrangements have been formed within a more complicated reality, in which US influence and Western influence has diminished. At the same time, several world powers are vying for powerful positions which do not serve the objective of stability which countries seek in the region, on top of them come Russia and China. This poses a real challenge to any new security arrangement.

### **2. Divergence in Determining the Level of the Iranian Threat**

The countries participating in these initiatives diverge when determining the level of the Iranian threat. This has impacted the effectiveness and success of some security initiatives. These differences exist at the level of the Gulf. For example, the assessment of Qatar and Oman towards the Iranian threat is low compared to the viewpoint of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Also, Kuwait has a different assessment, given the sensitivity of its relations with Iran. Perhaps this has paralyzed the security mechanism of the GCC which has long been a positive model for cooperation to counter security threats since its establishment. As a result, Qatar and Oman refused to join the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways.

Other countries such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have a different assessment of the Iranian threat. These countries from the Arab world are engaged the most in the regional and international initiatives to counter the Iranian threat from a geopolitical perspective. These countries are situated far from the direct security and military threats posed by Iran, so they are less enthusiastic about engaging in new arrangements.

At the international level, the divergence in relations with Iran and the dangers it poses can be seen. Countries such as Germany and France did not join the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways and preferred to lay out initiatives at the European level. This is due to the differences with the United States on the latter's policy towards Iran.

### **3. Focusing on Countering the Security Threats**

Most of the outlined initiatives focus on countering military and security threats, while ignoring other sources of threats. Some countries in the region are facing the danger of Iran's encroachment and its impact on their stability, the integrity of their territories and social cohesion, as is the case with Iraq. Meanwhile, dealing with these threats is limited to the concern of some parties of confronting the Iranian threat, such as the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, without activating any collective mechanism, whether traditional or new, to confront this danger.

However, when the interests of some major countries were threatened following the targeting of maritime navigation in the Gulf and Iran seized and attacked some battleships, these major powers rushed to establish an alliance, which took effect within weeks. This came as the region was suffering from looming dangers, prevailing chaos, and rampant terrorism. All the initiatives are incapable of curbing Iranian behavior and its various social, political, cultural and cyber threats.

### **4. The Lack of Cooperation and the Absence of a Collective Strategic Vision**

Several important security initiatives were outlined to counter the Iranian danger in the Gulf region, most of which expressed the Saudi desire to maintain security in the region and to ensure political stability. However, the ground reality reveals fragile approximations lacking sufficient cooperation and a collective strategic vision. Also, these initiatives were characterized by participants not complying with the roles and functions needed to render these initiatives successful.

Arab countries in general and Gulf states in particular are facing a major Iranian danger, but most of the security arrangements and approximations, apart from the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways, did not achieve any strategic gain and failed to advance prospects for ensuring regional security. These multiple initiatives lacked enthusiasm and political will to carry out the assigned roles, which are usually in line with the weight of the countries and their regional position.

### **5. Multiplicity of Initiatives and the Failure of Some of Them**

Laying out several initiatives in a short period of time indicates that the countries of the region are still outlining a unified security vision. They are still in the phase of testing these initiatives. Although some of these initiatives have been successful, some of them did not come to light. For example, despite the clear objectives of the Global Coalition Against Terrorism and its regional and international legitimacy, along with the large number of members joining it, it did not perform a significant role at the regional level, except for organizing some meetings which addressed the developments in the region. The coalition was expected to inherit the differences which faced the previous initiatives.

## **Conclusion**

Some security initiatives such as the Alliance for the Safety and Protection of Maritime Navigation and Insurance of the Safety of Seaways succeeded in curbing the danger posed by Iran's interventions to undermine maritime navigation and Iranian threats against oil tankers. The Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen also partially succeeded in stopping the spillover of Ansarallah (the Houthis) and its control over Yemen. However, several other initiatives faced difficulties and challenges and some of them did not come to light at a time when Iran's hostile behavior in the Arabian Gulf was mounting and its interventions in the Middle East files were increasing. This leads to further complications and causes the region to incur huge financial and human losses in the short and medium term.

Therefore, the matter requires an immediate strategic review to determine the variables preventing the formation of a regional security initiative which could provide insight into the failure of past approximations. No Gulf or Western strategy could face the Iranian danger without a genuine and deep understanding of Iranian security approximations and implementing countermeasures in line with the following elements:

1. Redefining the concept of regional security by reviewing priorities and unifying positions on sensitive issues, on top of them comes the Iranian threat in the region.
2. The need to reconsider the regional roles of Arab countries and for them to work as one front to confront external threats and domestic challenges. This requires addressing regional differences.
3. No successful regional security or military balance can be built to stand up to the Iranian danger without a significant military and security presence from Western powers which have a strategic interest in the region, especially the United States and the UK.
4. Security flaws are not always addressed via establishing alliances. Instead, the functional theory of international integration could be adopted, as outlined by Ernst Haas, through an approximation incorporating the positions of Arab states, which could be a worthwhile outcome for all parties. This could later develop into a powerful security initiative.

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