REPORT ARAB REGIONAL SECURITY

Too Important to Give Up

Challenges and Opportunities for Middle East Regional Security Integration

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During U.S. president Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, his first overseas trip as president, some members of the new administration promoted the idea of creating an "Arab NATO" to help address the longstanding security challenges facing the broader Middle East.[1] According to senior administration officials, this new alliance would focus on countering the threats posed by terrorist organizations and Iran. But Trump never mentioned this idea in his speech in Saudi Arabia, and his trip itself produced few concrete results beyond bilateral and multilateral discussions with regional leaders like Saudi king Salman and Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

Soon after Trump returned from this visit, a new crisis broke out in the Arab Gulf states, one that underlined just how far the region is from having the foundations for such an alliance. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates became embroiled in a heated dispute with Qatar over Doha's general foreign policy and support for Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. As indicated by their demands to Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates regard Doha's foreign policy as little more than a subversion of their own domestic political orders and foreign policies.[2]

This series of events is only the most recent attempt by countries in the region to build a more unified approach to regional security, only to end in collapse and discord. Since the 1950s, several security initiatives in the region have failed because competition for influence among the leading countries has simply been too profound. Moreover, the idea that America's partners in the Middle East could share the burden of security in a more organized fashion, ranging from formal alliances to more modest steps to coordinate and integrate security, has been tried previously without real success.

The countries of the Middle East lack a fundamental consensus about the region's security priorities. Further, their tangle of competing interests has produced a complex multipolar security landscape in which no single state has the capacity to build a broad security consensus. If anything, the situation has grown worse in recent years. In addition to military confrontation in places such as Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, countries of the region have been embroiled in a complex struggle for power that has involved varied means of soft power projection and political and economic interference.[3] This new competition for regional power and influence, built on the wreckage of regional societies, is nothing less than a new Arab Cold War, with geopolitical lines more fluid but consequences just as important as they were in the first Arab Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s.[4]

Bland calls for regional cooperation like Trump's "Arab NATO" idea miss this history, and confuse hope with reality. For complex and extremely persistent reasons, the Middle East has been unable to establish meaningful security cooperation. However, it is equally important to recognize the costs that this lack of cooperation has had for the region, and the security and stability benefits that cooperation could bring. This report reviews the history of attempts at

security cooperation in the Middle East and outlines lessons for the prospects of broad partnerships in the near future. The prospects are dim, if they exist at all. Nevertheless, the potential gains from such cooperation, however distant, are too large to ignore. Incremental improvements and possibilities must be pursued where they exist.

Order from Ashes

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The Causes and Costs of the Regional Security Deficiency

Compared to other regions of the world, the Middle East lacks effective regional bodies that coordinate security policy. In Europe, the Cold War and subsequent conflicts in the Balkans helped build and shape the world's most developed regional security institutions. European collective and cooperative security organizations range from NATO to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). Though the Asia-Pacific region lacks the same sort of wide-ranging formal security institutions, the United States maintains a web of collective security agreements with countries like Australia, Japan, and South Korea that serves a similar function. The African Union has deployed peacekeeping forces across sub-Saharan Africa, often with American and European training and assistance, and aims to create a permanent standby peacekeeping force in the near future.[5] In the Middle East, by contrast, only the historically ineffective Arab League comes close to resembling other regional security institutions or arrangements.

Unlike Europe, the Asia-Pacific, and Africa, earlier efforts to establish a regional security force in the Middle East foundered on the shoals of the region's overarching strategic dynamics—especially the struggle between the Middle East's major Arab- and Muslim-majority states for status and leadership of the region. Whereas the broader geopolitical struggle of the Cold War forged and reinforced both formal and informal regional security institutions in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, the decades-long geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union had the opposite effect in the Middle East. Egypt, for instance, flipped from Soviet to American patronage between Gamal Abdel Nasser's ascent to power in the 1950s and the Camp David Accords in the late 1970s. In addition, the enduring Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to be a unique roadblock to regional security cooperation. Finally, the combination of the 1979 Iranian

Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) provided the impetus for the United States to establish and steadily grow its military presence in the Middle East, which discouraged countries in the region from building a more coherent regional security architecture.

One recurring dynamic that inhibited previous experiments in regional security was the worry that such forces might serve to subordinate less-powerful countries to more powerful ones. This fate befell Egypt and Syria in the 1950s and 1960s, when an attempted merger between the two countries fell apart as resentments in the Syrian officer corps over perceived Egyptian high-handedness put an end to the United Arab Republic (UAR).[6] A subsequent attempt to forge a unified Arab military command in the mid-1960s fell apart after the catastrophic Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. Similarly, since the 1980s, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has been unable to forge a subregional security force because of fears that Saudi Arabia would dominate any such force. As a result, the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force has been small and relatively ineffective, with its most successful operation being the 2011 intervention in Bahrain. That deployment aimed to secure critical infrastructure and was intended as a show of force in support of Bahrain's efforts to quash the Shia-led protest movement.

Moreover, the United States' dominant military position in the Gulf and the broader Middle East since the early 1980s[7]— a position that has only grown over the past three decades—created disincentives for the region's states to shoulder the burden of maintaining their own security. To a certain degree, this deepening U.S. military presence fostered regional powers' dysfunctional dependency on the American security umbrella, which may explain why those powers reacted so strongly albeit largely in complaints voiced behind closed doors—to the shifts made by President Barack Obama's administration to change the United States' strategic posture of engagement in the region's security.

Nevertheless, the primary obstacle to greater regional security integration in the Middle East comes from internal factors rather than external forces. Most critically, the governments of the region mistrust each other, and do not have a consensus on regional power-sharing or a shared definition of security priorities and threats. This lack of clarity about security priorities comes at a time when the nation-state system of the region is suffering significant strains. Within the past fifteen years, these dynamics have been heightened by two key events and their subsequent fallout: the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The 2003 Iraq War upended the strategic balance of the region by facilitating the rise and expansion of Iran's power in the broader Middle East. This shift ended the U.S. policy of dual containment of Iran and Saddam Hussein's Iraq, but it did not usher in a new American strategic approach as a replacement. American engagement shifted into a reactive, crisis-management mode. The biggest strategic implication of the invasion of Iraq and its immediate aftermath was Iran's growing influence inside of its neighbor, which generated new threat perceptions across the broader Middle East.

A second implication was the fracturing of the Iraqi state, which produced a vacuum that terrorist groups and other neighboring actors would exploit. The growth of terrorist networks with a regional and in some instances a global reach in the first decade of the twentyfirst century laid a major strain on the state system of the Middle East, further impeding efforts to build a regional security architecture. This rapidly mutating terrorist threat drew the United States and other external actors such as Russia into the region for extended military campaigns. At times, the terrorism threat motivated state actors in the region to move toward building coalitions of their own, such as the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism, announced by Saudi Arabia in December 2015,[8] or to join multilateral coalitions such as the anti–Islamic State coalition formed in 2014. But these coalition efforts have not yet produced significant results in terms of institutionalizing mechanisms for regional security cooperation.

In the current decade, new factors have joined these dynamics to create an even more chaotic regional security outlook. As a result of the 2011 uprisings and the internal conflicts that followed in countries like Libya and Syria, the overall Middle East state system has further fragmented. This trend toward increased political and security fragmentation can be seen in developments in Libya since 2011. Several Middle Eastern militaries, including the Emirates, Jordan, and Qatar, participated in the NATO-led air campaign against Muammar Qaddafi's regime.[9] Indeed, the United Nations–authorized intervention itself was precipitated in part by calls from the GCC and Arab League for a no-fly zone over Libya.[10] But in the years that followed Qaddafi's overthrow, regional states that had worked together under NATO auspices soon found themselves backing rival camps in Libya and abetting the country's fragmentation. Militias backed by regional powers violently sidelined the elected transitional government, leaving Libya divided between two rival governments.[11] By 2014, the Emirates was launching air strikes from bases in Egypt against Qatar-backed Islamist militias fighting for control of Tripoli.[12] This competition among regional governments for influence in Libya continued as of mid-2017.[13]

Although Qatar and the Emirates cooperated militarily in Libya when under NATO command in 2011, their geopolitical rivalry was never far from the surface. The failure of the United States and Europe to moderate this rivalry and effectively support the immediate post-Qaddafi transitional government allowed the Emirates, Qatar, and other governments to create an arena for regional geopolitical competition in Libya. Seeking power and status, regional governments effectively accelerated Libya's social and political fragmentation. Rather than work together to help Libyans build a stable and secure future, Middle Eastern governments preferred to make Libyans pay the price for Egyptian, Emirati, and Qatari geopolitical ambitions.

The Libya experience since 2011 presents the Middle East's historical security cooperation experience in microcosm. Early attempts at cooperation occur in extreme situations and with the encouragement or participation of external powers. In the Libya case, NATO and the United States provided the military muscle to overthrow the widely-loathed

Qaddafi regime—only for regional players to fall back into a competition for status and influence once the primary objective of the military campaign was achieved. Later, the competition itself becomes a source of conflict as regional powers support proxies to secure their interests in a given country. Security cooperation between regional governments and extraregional powers would likely have produced a better and more sustainable outcome in a country like Libya, but in all probability such an outcome would have required regional powers to sacrifice their ambitious quests for greater power and status.

Overall, these engagements have not produced greater security cooperation beyond episodic, ad hoc efforts by small coalitions of the willing. This environment facilitated the rise of nonstate actors ranging from terrorist groups like the Islamic State to subnational political formations like the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. In addition, relatively stable governments like the Emirates and Saudi Arabia on the one hand and Qatar and Turkey on the other jockeyed for geopolitical advantage in this newly unstable regional security situation. To better examine the current situation and divine the prospects for greater regional security cooperation, it is important to analyze past attempts to build a durable security architecture for the Middle East and the impact that global and regional geopolitical dynamics have had on those attempts.

Past Attempts at Middle East Regional Security Cooperation

Since the end of World War II, governments in the Middle East and outside powers have made multiple attempts to establish a stable, sustainable regional security cooperation system. These efforts have repeatedly failed to produce lasting results, often for reasons that continue to hold true in the Middle East today. Even when major regional powers theoretically agreed on the existence of a perceived security challenge—whether Israel from the late 1940s to the mid-1970s, or Salafi-jihadist terror and Iran today—they failed to effectively coordinate their security policies. Then, as now, the governments of major or otherwise influential Arab- and Muslim-majority countries in the Middle East viewed the competition for leadership and status in the region as far more important than security cooperation against common threats.

Over the past seven decades, countries of the Middle East have made various attempts to coordinate security policy. The overarching geopolitical context for these efforts from the 1940s until the early 1990s was the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. This geopolitical context shifted in the 1990s after the end of the Cold War and in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War. After 2001, the broader global context was largely defined by the global war on terrorism. Throughout these phases of global politics, the one factor inside of the Middle East that continued to

hamper the possibilities of greater regional security cooperation has been the ongoing mistrust and competition among countries within the region. What follows is a brief examination of eight different efforts at regional security cooperation in the Middle East, analyzing key lessons learned from these episodes.

Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation between the States of the Arab League, 1950

Regional security cooperation efforts began with the creation of the Arab League in 1945 and the war against Israel in 1948, at the time of that state's creation. Almost immediately, however, domestic political developments in the League's member states and geopolitical rivalries conspired to inhibit security cooperation in the Middle East. In 1950, shortly after their defeat at the hands of the Israeli military, seven Arab League member states—Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen—signed the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation between the States of the Arab League. Among other provisions, this treaty provided for collective defense against "armed aggression," with a newly created Permanent Military Commission made up of member states' general staffs responsible for planning "to deal with all anticipated dangers or armed aggression that may be launched against one or more of the Contracting States or their armed forces" as well as joint exercises.[14] In the event of armed conflict, the member state with the largest force deployed in the field would in theory command all Arab League forces.

This formal collective security arrangement remains in force today, though more as an artifact of the British-instigated post–World War II push for regional security cooperation than as an active military alliance. Over the decades, it has been as effective as its parent organization in achieving security cooperation between Arab League member states—which is to say, not very effective. Regional events quickly caught up with this formal attempt at security cooperation, as the Egyptian monarchy fell to a military coup in 1952 and the Arab Cold War hardened divisions between nationalist republics and conservative monarchies. A decade on, the original signers of the treaty could be split almost evenly between the two camps—Egypt, Iraq, and Syria in the nationalist column, and Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Yemen among the leading monarchies. Lebanon was caught in the middle.

Baghdad Pact, 1955

Many of the same problems faced by the Arab League's joint defense treaty afflicted the Baghdad Pact, also known as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO).[15] Like the joint defense treaty, the Baghdad Pact suffered chronically from tumultuous domestic political change in its member states that made it impossible for the treaty to serve as a foundation for regional security cooperation. Signed in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom, the Baghdad Pact was an attempt to extend the logic of containment of the Soviet Union to the Middle East. Unlike NATO or the U.S.-

Japanese alliance, however, the Baghdad Pact merely aimed for security cooperation among its member states, rather than collective self-defense.[16] In other words, an armed attack against one member of the Baghdad Pact would not be considered an attack against all members. Moreover, the Baghdad Pact suffered from its limited membership: the United States never actually joined it, and Iraq remained the only Arab-majority country in the organization until it withdrew in 1959.[17]

As with the Arab League joint defense treaty, events in the region soon overtook the Baghdad Pact. An Arab nationalist coup in Baghdad itself deposed the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, and the new regime took Iraq out of CENTO the following year. The Iraqi withdrawal left Iran and Turkey—two important and powerful but peripheral non–Arab-majority countries—the only Middle Eastern nations remaining in the Baghdad Pact. Still, the organization limped along until 1979, when it dissolved following the Iranian Revolution and Pakistan's withdrawal from the treaty. The Baghdad Pact's collapse represented the end of Britain's role as the Middle East's external security guarantor and the start of America's assumption of that same position. Regardless, the Baghdad Pact never lived up to even the limited ambitions of its founders.

United Arab Republic, 1958–61

The Arab League and Baghdad Pact security cooperation efforts foundered over political changes within the Middle East, but other regional efforts fared even worse. Such was the fate of the UAR, an abortive attempt to unify Egypt and Syria under a single Arab nationalist government led by Nasser. Instigated by Syrian military officers who hoped to solve their country's domestic problems by merging with Egypt, the UAR became a vehicle for Nasser's own designs for political hegemony over the wider Middle East.[18]

As part of the merger, Syria's military, intelligence, and foreign affairs institutions were effectively subordinated to Cairo. Unsurprisingly, this development did not sit well with Syrian defense and intelligence officials, and led to "growing Syrian resentment of the wholesale military changes and transfers directed at the Syrian officer corps."[19] After Egypt's viceroy in Damascus sacked the head of Syrian intelligence in September 1961, a military coup evicted the Egyptians and dissolved the UAR.[20]

It is doubtful that the UAR ever constituted a workable political project. But Nasser's desire to be seen as the paramount leader of a Middle East gripped by the Arab Cold War certainly contributed to his decision to accept the Syrian merger proposal in 1958. Nasser's regime was overwhelmingly concerned with the quest for regional power and status. But slights and resentments among Syria's officer class piled up thanks to Nasser's heavy-handed and one-way merger. In the end, Syrian military elites simply would not subordinate themselves to their Egyptian counterparts.

United Arab Command, 1964

The Arab League made another attempt at regionwide security cooperation in the mid-1960s. Unlike previous efforts that floundered in the face of domestic political change and regional rivalries, this attempt failed because of overwhelming external factors—namely, Israel's decisive victory in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War.
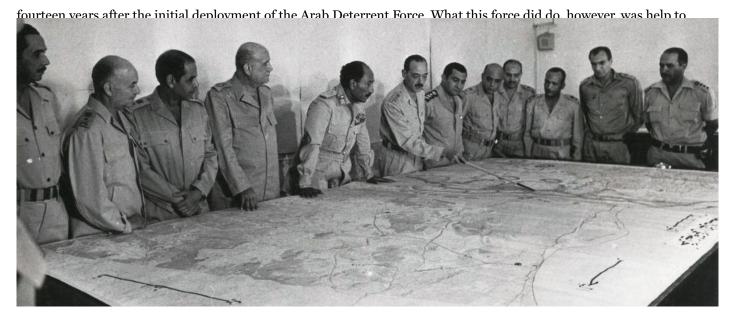
The Arab League's first-ever summit, held in Cairo in January 1964, agreed to create a United Arab Command to confront what was characterized as the Israeli threat.[21] This joint command failed to amount to much: only Jordan ever placed its military under anything resembling a joint military command, and only then after signing a mutual defense pact with Egypt in the week preceding the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Prior to the outbreak of hostilities, Egyptian and Iraqi troops were deployed to Jordan.[22]

With the colossal Arab defeat that followed, the United Arab Command suffered the same fate as the Arab League's initial joint defense treaty in 1950: irrelevance. In the next Arab-Israeli war in 1973, Egypt and Syria would pursue coordinated but largely independent military strategies. Jordan, having lost East Jerusalem and the West Bank to Israel in 1967 while its forces were under Egyptian command and still reeling from its internal conflict with the Palestine Liberation Organization during Black September in 1970, preferred to mostly sit out this round of Arab-Israeli fighting. Other Arab-majority countries did contribute token forces to the 1973 war, but many of these units arrived after the end of fighting.[23] In the end, Egypt and Syria fought to recover the territory and pride that they, and they alone, had lost in 1967. Cairo and Damascus planned and fought their 1973 war with Israel on their own.

Arab Deterrent Force, 1976

With the end of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the start of U.S.-backed negotiations between Egypt and Israel, security threats in the Middle East slowly began to evolve away from conventional war. Nonetheless, regional geopolitical rivalries continued to shape attempts to resolve thorny security problems. The outbreak of Lebanon's civil war in 1975, for instance, led the Arab League to bless a largely Syrian military deployment there—theoretically in order to support a cease-fire. Of the roughly thirty thousand troops in the Arab Deterrent Force, some twenty-seven thousand were Syrian and the remaining three thousand a mixture of small contingents from the Emirates, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and South Yemen.[24] Though the Lebanese government requested the termination of the Arab Deterrent Force in 1982, Syrian troops remained in Lebanon for a further twenty-three years.

From the perspective of security cooperation in the Middle East, the Arab Deterrent Force was another regional failure. It failed to halt Lebanon's civil war or even to reduce the level of violence. Indeed, the Lebanese Civil War ground on for fourteen years after the initial deployment of the Arab Deterrent Force. What this force did do, however, was help to

EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT ANWAR SADAT (5TH FROM LEFT) AND ARMY OFFICIALS (INCLUDING HOSNI MUBARAK, 7TH FROM LEFT) REVIEW A MAP BEFORE THE 1973 WAR WITH ISRAEL.
SOURCE: WIKIPEDIA/EGYPTIAN ARMED FORCES.

resounding success.

Peninsula Shield, 1982

After the 1978 Camp David Accords between Egypt and Israel, the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, the geographic focus of regional security cooperation shifted from the Levant to the Gulf. Geopolitical competition between regional states both spurred and inhibited moves toward greater security cooperation. But the entrance of the United States as the Gulf's external security guarantor allowed Gulf States to nurture their fears of political domination at the expense of more cooperative security arrangements.

Feeling threatened by the trends of the late 1970s—and the new Iranian regime's promise to export its revolution across the Middle East—the six Gulf Arab monarchies banded together under the aegis of the GCC in 1981. The GCC began pulling together the Peninsula Shield Force, its main security cooperation mechanism, the following year.[25] By 1986, a seven-thousand strong, permanent Peninsula Shield Force under the command of a Saudi general was in place.[26] However, when confronted with actual threats—such as Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990—Peninsula Shield proved ineffective as a means of collective self-defense.

Nonetheless, Peninsula Shield and the GCC as a whole have evolved over the decades. In the Joint Defense Agreement of 2000, for instance, the GCC states formally committed themselves to collective security, stating that "member states consider any attack against any one of its members to be an attack against all."[27] By 2013, the GCC announced the creation of a unified military command structure for a force of roughly one hundred thousand troops, half of which would be contributed by Saudi Arabia.[28] However, little progress appears to have been made in creating this unified command or assigning forces to it. Peninsula Shield's only major operation occurred in 2011, when a combined 1,800 Saudi and Emirati security forces entered Bahrain to shore up the embattled Khalifa monarchy.[29]

Two main obstacles prevent Peninsula Shield from becoming an effective security cooperation mechanism: political disagreements within the GCC itself and the presence of the United States as the Gulf's security guarantor. The GCC's political disagreements largely stem from the composition of its membership: one significant regional power (Saudi Arabia) and five small but wealthy countries (Bahrain, the Emirates, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar). These smaller states chronically worry that if they bind themselves to an effective GCC security cooperation mechanism, they will only subordinate themselves to Saudi Arabia. Instead, some GCC members like the Emirates choose to follow the Saudi lead on regional issues, while others like Kuwait and Oman are able to distance their foreign policies from Riyadh's. Above all else, the current schism between Saudi Arabia and Qatar illustrates just how politically difficult any sort of cooperation can be in the GCC—much less in an area as sensitive as security cooperation.

Even if the GCC were more politically unified, the continued U.S. presence in the Gulf blunts any incentive that GCC member states might have to cooperate more closely on security. Under the American security umbrella, GCC states focus more on persuading and lobbying the U.S. government to support their own interests rather than working toward greater security cooperation among themselves. This state of affairs should provide the United States with a strong degree of leverage to shape the GCC countries' policies, but despite recent efforts to establish military interoperability between GCC members, the United States has never effectively exercised this leverage to influence its partners' trajectory. From the perspective of GCC member states, it is less expensive in virtually every respect—politically, financially, and militarily—to have the United States take care of the Gulf's security problems, at least as defined in the capitals of the Gulf Arab monarchies.

Arab League Joint Force, 2015

Believing the Middle East needed a unified Arab military force to combat militant groups, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah el-Sisi proposed the latest iteration of the idea of an Arab League joint military force at the March 2015 Arab League summit at Sharm El Sheikh. But this latest attempt at regional security cooperation failed to gain traction as

regional geopolitical divides intensified and a superficial agreement on the nature of the Middle East's security threats masked differing priorities among regional governments.

The regional leaders assembled at Sharm El Sheikh agreed in principle to Sisi's proposal, which called for a forty-thousand-strong force with armor, air, and naval capabilities.[30] The force would be headquartered in Egypt but commanded by a Saudi general.[31] Though regional military chiefs of staff held initial meetings in April and May 2015, by August that year the Arab League announced that the final meeting to approve the force had been postponed indefinitely at the request of Saudi Arabia, the Emirates, Kuwait, and Qatar.[32]

It remains unclear why the four GCC members put Sisi's proposed joint Arab military force on hold. The ongoing Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen—which had just begun when the Arab League agreed to pursue Sisi's proposal at Sharm El Sheikh—may have been a factor. But in the absence of widely shared threat perception among the twenty-two Arab League member states,[33] the potential effectiveness of any joint Arab League military force remains unclear at best. What threats this force would address and when it would be deployed would likely have remained questions the Arab League would not have been able to answer through consensus.

Ad Hoc Coalitions, 1991, 2011, 2014, and 2015

Ad hoc coalitions assembled to achieve a specific goal have been more common and effective modes of security cooperation in the Middle East. These coalitions have assembled under the convening authority of a major global or regional power. This convening power gives the new coalition a strategic direction and typically provides the majority of the military forces deployed for a given campaign. As a result, these coalitions have been able to overcome, albeit temporarily, the centrifugal domestic and regional political forces that thus far have been impossible for formal security institutions and arrangements to overcome.

Since the end of the Cold War, five major military coalitions have been formed to achieve specific objectives: the United States-led coalition to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991, the NATO-led intervention against the Qaddafi regime in Libya in 2011, the Saudi-Emirati intervention in Bahrain that same year, the global anti–Islamic State coalition formed by the United States in 2014, and the Saudi Arabia–led coalition that has prosecuted the war in Yemen since 2015. In three cases—the 1991 Gulf War, the Libya intervention, and the anti–Islamic State campaign—the United States was the convening power and provided much of the military muscle involved. Saudi Arabia organized and militarily led its own interventions in neighboring countries, first on a relatively small scale in Bahrain and then on a much more destructive scale in Yemen.

By and large, these coalition efforts have had some success in achieving their limited military objectives. But they have

also proven transient, and unable to provide a foundation for a wider program of security cooperation in the Middle East. These coalitions were formed for a specific purpose and dissolved once their goals were achieved. Only after the 1991 Gulf War did the convening power—in that case, the United States—attempt to leverage the coalition's success into regionwide security cooperation at the Madrid Peace Conference. However, the resulting Madrid framework, which included several multilateral regional tracks of discussions, fell apart as Israelis and Palestinians failed to negotiate a settlement to their decades-long conflict. It remains to be seen if the cooperation among the sixty-nine nations of the U.S.-led global coalition currently fighting the Islamic State will meet the same fate after the liberation of Mosul and Raqqa.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia announced the creation of an Islamic military counterterrorism alliance in December 2015. This alliance existed mainly on paper staff.[34] Though it now has a commander, the exact structure, composition, and mission of this forty-one-nation coalition remains unclear at best.[35] The threat posed by Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups like the Islamic State has forged a shared threat perception by default, but key members—notably Saudi Arabia and Pakistan—continue to disagree over the nature of the terrorist threat posed by Iran. As the ongoing crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar illustrates, the coalition itself faces serious questions regarding its general political viability. Should other political disputes take precedence, as they historically have in the GCC, the Saudi-led counterterrorism coalition will find it difficult if not impossible to take root.

Regional Security Integration Today: Lessons Learned and Achievable Steps

Looking back at the history of security cooperation efforts in the region and observing the Middle East's current political and security dynamics, it is safe to say that regional security cooperation—much less full-blown regional security integration along the lines of NATO—remains elusive. The prospects for thorough, regionwide security cooperation in the Middle East appear dim for at least the near future. A brief look at the lessons of past regional security cooperation attempts, however, can evaluate what obstacles to greater cooperation persist and where short-term, incremental gains might be made. The best the United States can realistically hope for at present is to set the stage for greater and more durable progress further down the road.

Geopolitical Competition Overrides Cooperation

Attempts to forge some sort of practical security cooperation arrangements in the Middle East have repeatedly failed since the end of World War II. Persistent and enduring geopolitical rivalries and fears prevented greater regional security cooperation in the past, and they remain the main barrier to enhanced security cooperation in the Middle East today. Even when regional states agreed on a common threat—as they did about Israel from the late 1940s to the early 1970s—they could not find the political wherewithal to band together to achieve shared security objectives, due in no small part to the Arab Cold War between Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Nor did the twin threats of Saddam Hussein's Iraq or revolutionary Iran push the Arab monarchies of the Gulf into real and effective security cooperation arrangements in the 1980s and 1990s. Since 2011, a new, chaotic, multipolar competition for regional power, status, and influence has emerged to prevent security cooperation in the region.

A clear and widely recognized regional political leader could allay this new competition for power and chart a path forward on security cooperation. But in the Middle East today, no such regional leader exists, and none appears likely to emerge in the near future. Jordan and the Emirates are influential, but small in population and, especially in the case of the latter, appear to have calculated that it is in their interests to generally follow Saudi Arabia's lead. Morocco is too geographically distant from the core of the Middle East to be an effective regional leader. Both Egypt and Saudi Arabia lay claim to regional leadership through history and culture, but neither actually possesses the political or economic capacity to lead. In any event, Cairo's and Riyadh's competing claims to regional leadership tend to cancel each other out. But in the absence of a clear and recognized leader, the United States' partners in the Middle East are unlikely to overcome their mutual geopolitical suspicions any time soon.

Fear of Geopolitical Domination Inhibits Regional Security Cooperation

For smaller states as well as larger ones, fear of geopolitical domination has repeatedly prevented regional security cooperation initiatives from gaining traction. The ill-fated attempt to unify Egypt and Syria, for instance, failed because the Syrian military resented the political domination of officials from Nasser's government. Syria's own domination of Lebanon from the late 1970s to 2005 presents the region with a cautionary tale well within recent memory. More important from the American perspective, fears of Saudi domination have prevented the GCC from taking greater steps toward real security cooperation.

Given the events of the last six years, regional states will remain reluctant to risk political subordination for the sake of security cooperation so long as they regard such cooperation as a back door to domination by other regional governments. Iran's powerful influence in Iraq and Saudi Arabia's draconian demands on Qatar only reinforce these fears. Until these concerns are conclusively addressed, regional security cooperation in the Middle East will remain illusory.

Shared Threat Definitions Mask Differing Priorities and Interests

On several occasions during the post–World War II history of the Middle East, many regional states seemingly agreed that they all faced the same threats. But this apparent consensus masked deeper and more important differences in priorities and interests that inhibited more robust security cooperation between regional governments. The shared perception of an Israeli security threat from the 1950s to the 1970s, for instance, counted little when it came to actual regional security cooperation. Indeed, Egypt's intervention in Yemen in the mid- 1960s offered a clear indication of Cairo's real geopolitical and security priorities at the time.

Today, the disjuncture between the threats that regional governments perceive and the strategic priorities that they pursue in practice has become even more apparent. Egypt, the Emirates, Jordan, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, for instance, all appear to share similar views about the threats posed across the region by Salafi-jihadist terrorists like the Islamic State. In large measure, this threat perception drove both Egypt's call for a joint Arab League military force and Saudi Arabia's creation of an Islamic counterterrorism coalition. Similarly, many regional states—in particular a majority of GCC countries—view Iran as a regional menace. This apparent consensus on the danger of Salafi-jihadist terrorism and Iranian subversion, however, masks deeper disagreements on the nature and scope of these threats, not only between regional governments but also within them. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has been called "both the arsonists and the firefighters" of Salafi-jihadist terrorism.[36] The foreign policies of Saudi Arabia and other American regional partners reflect this lack of strategic priorities. There appears to be no clear and discernable strategic rationale, for example, behind Riyadh's decision to instigate a diplomatic crisis with Doha—or for the way in which the Saudi-led coalition has prosecuted its military campaign in Yemen.

Outside Powers' Security Guarantees Discourage Cooperation

More often than not, security guarantees from external powers—primarily the United Kingdom from the end of World War II to the 1970s, and then the United States since 1979—tend to discourage regional security cooperation more than encourage it. From the Baghdad Pact to the Obama administration's GCC summits, external security guarantors have sought to foster greater security cooperation in the Middle East with little success. The United States' willingness to shoulder the burdens of regional security allows its regional partners to pursue policies that fragment regional societies without worrying that they will bear the brunt of the costs for either those policies or their side effects. After all, these partners assume, the United States can and will bear these costs instead.

This assumption makes sense for Washington's regional partners. Since 1979, the United States has only assumed more and more responsibility for the Middle East's security. Rather than come to a workable collective security arrangement, for instance, the states of the GCC instead depend on the United States to guarantee their security. American actions, from the "tanker war" phase of the Iran-Iraq War and the 1991 Gulf War to containment of Iran and support for the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen today, reinforce this dysfunctional dependency. Of course, the United States has had its own reasons to pursue the security policies it has had in the Middle East since 1979. Evicting Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and defeating the Islamic State, for example, directly served America's regional and global security interests. But by and large, these policies have had the unintended consequence of fostering a dysfunctional security dependency on the United States among its regional partners—particularly those in the Gulf.

American presidential administrations have recognized this unintended consequence of their security policies, however belatedly, and taken measures to address it. Under President George W. Bush, for instance, NATO launched the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative with the participation of four of the six GCC states.[37] More recently, the Obama administration held two summits with GCC governments that attempted to foster greater practical security cooperation on issues like counterterrorism, cybersecurity, and missile defense.[38] However, geopolitical competition within the GCC itself has undermined even these modest initiatives. Notably, the recent blockade of Qatar led by Saudi Arabia and the Emirates was enabled by the Trump administration's unqualified embrace of Saudi Arabia during the American president's May 2017 trip to Riyadh.[39]

Ad Hoc Coalitions Tend to Dissolve after Achieving Their Immediate Goals

Historically, ad hoc coalitions have managed to resolve acute regional security problems but have then broken up after achieving their immediate objectives. As a result, these coalitions fail to provide a foundation on which to build deeper and more formal regional security cooperation mechanisms. Ad hoc coalitions have been most successful when convened by major powers external to the region, most often the United States and its European allies. By contrast, the Saudi-led coalitions that intervened in Bahrain in 2011 and Yemen since 2015 have a track record that is mixed at best. The Bahrain intervention was able to shore up the Khalifa monarchy, but the Saudi-led military campaign in Yemen has ground on for more than two years with few signs of success, or even a clear idea of what success would look like.

Though U.S.-led coalitions have had greater success in achieving their immediate goals, they have not produced lasting regional security cooperation. The most serious attempt to transform an ad hoc coalition into a lasting regional security architecture came in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, when the Madrid Peace Conference convened by the George H. W. Bush administration led to the creation of a multilateral working group on arms control and regional security. However, this working group stalled along with negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, and last met in 1995.[40] The anti

Islamic State coalition assembled by the United States—composed of sixty-nine nations and four major regional institutions, including NATO and the Arab League—possesses the same latent potential for regional security cooperation, and could be leveraged in a similar way going forward.

The Way Forward: Seizing Practical Opportunities Where They Exist

The Middle East has considerable obstacles to regional security cooperation. A superficial consensus on regional threats among Washington's security partners masks the reality of a region riven by intense geopolitical competition and societal fragmentation. Making matters even more difficult, the Middle East's dysfunctional dependence on the United States for regional security makes cooperation a less urgent and attractive proposition than it might otherwise be. Despite recent modest attempts by multiple American presidential administrations to foster practical cooperation on specific security issues, regional security cooperation remains elusive. Even though such cooperation will likely prove out of reach for the foreseeable future, the United States can and should look for pragmatic and functional opportunities to lay the groundwork for greater cooperation further down the road.

Build on the Anti–Islamic State coalition

With the Islamic State largely defeated in Iraq and losing ground in Syria, the future of the coalition assembled by the United States to fight it appears uncertain and unclear. This impressive coalition could meet the same fate as the one assembled to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in 1991: dissolution following the completion of its primary task.

However, the task facing the anti–Islamic State coalition differs substantially from the one faced by the coalition of 1991. Whereas the threat posed by Saddam Hussein's regime diminished dramatically after a decisive coalition military victory, the threat posed by the Islamic State will not totally recede, even if it does change substantially after the terrorist army loses its final major urban strongholds. As its predecessor groups did a decade ago, the Islamic State will likely revert to terrorism and insurgency. In other words, in Iraq especially, the Islamic State will be down but not out, as far as the coalition fighting it should be concerned.

As the threat posed by the Islamic State evolves, the coalition's mission should evolve with it. The multinational air campaign that proved crucial in rolling back the Islamic State's territorial gains may fade away as the group loses its remaining ground, but the coalition's advisory mission will only grow in importance. In particular, Iraq's elite special operations forces need to be rebuilt after suffering heavy losses over nearly three years of relentless combat against the Islamic State.[41]

MARINE CORPS GEN. JOSEPH F. DUNFORD JR., CHAIRMAN OF THE JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF, JARED KUSHNER, SENIOR ADVISOR TO PRESIDENT DONALD J. TRUMP,TOM BOSSERT, THE PRESIDENT'S HOMELAND SECURITY ADVISOR, AND DOUGLAS A. SILLIMAN, U.S. AMBASSADOR TO THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ, AND LT. GEN. STEPHEN J. TOWNSEND, COMMANDER, COMBINED JOINT TASK FORCE – OPERATION INHERENT RESOLVE, MEET WITH THE PRESIDENT OF IRAQI KURDISTAN MASOUD BARZAN NEAR ERBIL, IRAQ, APRIL 4, 2017. DOD PHOTO BY NAVY PETTY OFFICER 2ND CLASS DOMINIQUE A. PINEIRO.
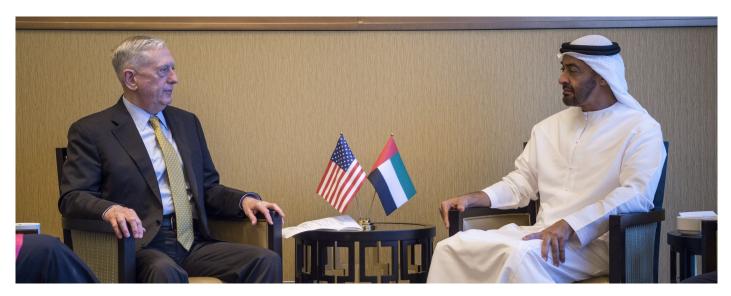
mission in Iraq focused on rebuilding Iraq's military as the Islamic State threat reverts to its earlier form. In practice, this

Utilize Partner Capabilities to Build New Relationships between Regional Security Forces

Over the past decade and a half, several of America's smaller but more capable regional security partners—namely, the Emirates and Jordan—have established significant security training capabilities and capabilities with U.S. assistance. In 2003, for instance, the United States and the Emirates established the U.S. Air Force's Central Command (AFCENT) Air Warfare Center at Al Dhafra Air Base just outside Abu Dhabi.[43] This facility has provided training opportunities for American, European, and regional fighter pilots that paid off in the air campaign against the Islamic State.[44]

Similarly, Jordanian facilities have been involved in U.S.-led efforts to train Iraqi police and Palestinian Authority security forces. The Jordan International Police Training Center, for example, was established in 2003 to train Iraqi police,[45] and subsequently has been a training site for the Palestinian Authority's National Security Forces. Some 60,000 Palestinian security service members went through training in Jordan between 2007 and 2012.[46] Moreover, in 2009

Jordan opened the King Abdullah Special Operations Training Center, a facility for special operations forces from around the Middle East and the world.[47] This facility was used to train Iraqi soldiers ahead of the battle for Mosul, and serves as a main location for the annual Eager Lion exercise of U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM).[48]

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE JIM MATTIS MEETS WITH THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES' CROWN PRINCE MOHAMMED BIN ZAYED BIN SULTAN AL NAHYAN IN ABU DHABI, UAE, FEB. 18, 2017. FLICKR/DOD PHOTO BY U.S. AIR FORCE TECH. SGT. BRIGITTE N. BRANTLEY.

Moving forward, the United States could work with its Emirati and Jordanian partners to expand the scope and nature of the training offered at these facilities to include additional exercises and more partner militaries. Other functional training facilities could be established elsewhere in the Middle East, keeping in mind the problems created by the region's intense ongoing geopolitical competition. With U.S. financial and program assistance, comparable facilities focusing on maritime security or missile defense could be established in countries like Kuwait or Oman that remain relatively neutral in regional disputes. These facilities should aim to establish new relationships between regional militaries and solidify existing ones. Since the prospect of a wider regional security cooperation arrangement appears remote at present, these facilities may be able to enable the sort of functional cooperation that can establish a web of personal and professional ties that will make security cooperation more viable in the future.

Recognize and Avoid the Allure of False Opportunities

As the United States takes modest steps to lay the groundwork for future regional security cooperation, American policymakers should recognize and resist tempting but ultimately false opportunities for regional security cooperation. These opportunities appear favorable to American goals of greater regional security cooperation, but in reality undermine these goals by supercharging the intertwined processes of geopolitical competition and societal fragmentation that have wrought havoc in the Middle East since 2011, and even earlier. In other words, such

opportunities are one step forward but two or more steps back when it comes to creating the conditions for regional security cooperation. The Saudi-led coalition's war in Yemen provides the starkest and most recent example of a false opportunity for such cooperation. Riyadh's campaign not only exposes the limitations of many of the Middle East's militaries, but also illustrates the caution with which the United States should approach security cooperation initiatives that arise from the region itself.

First and foremost, the coalition's strategic objectives remain unclear at best. Saudi leaders say that they want to reinforce and strengthen the Middle East's crumbling state structures,[49] but the coalition's military campaign in Yemen contradicts these stated concerns. Though Riyadh backs the internationally recognized Yemeni government of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi, Saudi warplanes—many built by American companies, some dropping Americanmade bombs—have struck hospitals, schools, markets, and general infrastructure across Yemen.[50] The nature of the campaign suggests that Riyadh remains more concerned with the perceived advance of Iranian influence over what remains of the Yemeni state than with the state's actual stability. Worse, the military campaign has helped create a massive humanitarian disaster: at least two million Yemenis have been internally displaced, and a quarter of the population relies entirely on external food assistance for basic nutrition.[51] By late July 2017, a cholera epidemic affected more than 400,000 Yemenis.[52] Moreover, an anticipated offensive against the Red Sea port of Hodeida could cause even greater humanitarian suffering.[53]

From the beginning, the United States quite literally enabled the Saudi-led coalition's military campaign in Yemen. Under Obama, the United States provided advice to Saudi pilots, intelligence gathered by American surveillance drones, and refueling to Saudi coalition jets over Yemen.[54] This material assistance failed to give the United States any apparent influence or leverage over the conduct of the campaign. In the end, Obama wound up blocking the sale of 16,000 smart bomb kits to Saudi Arabia because of an October 2016 funeral hall bombing that left more than a hundred Yemenis dead.[55] Since taking office, the Trump administration has lifted this restriction and others on American assistance to the Saudi campaign in Yemen.[56]

In the future, the United States should take great care to avoid enabling strategic quagmires like Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen in the name of regional security cooperation. No potential security cooperation benefits that might arise from the campaign in Yemen could possibly justify its appalling humanitarian cost. If wars like the one in Yemen are the price for forging stronger regional security cooperation, the United States ought not to pay it. Security cooperation in the Middle East ought to leave the region more stable and its people more secure—not less so, as the Saudi-led campaign has done in Yemen.

As a result, the rhetorical interest in security cooperation indicated by many of the United States' partners in the Middle East should be viewed with a strong dose of skepticism. Since 2011, regional partners have talked with varying degrees of seriousness about forming joint military forces capable of tackling the Middle East's security challenges—whether Sisi's standing Arab League military force or Saudi Arabia's Islamic counterterrorism coalition. According to one line of thinking, the United States might seize the opportunity to work proactively with interested regional partners to actually create the theoretical joint force that its partners have discussed. However, as the war in Yemen ought to have demonstrated, the United States gains little strategic, operational, or tactical leverage by enabling security cooperation schemes developed in the region itself. Instead, it should use whatever leverage it already possesses to prevent its regional security partners from making unforced and disastrous strategic errors. American policymakers should focus less on encouraging the initiative among these geopolitically insecure partners and more on laying the functional groundwork for more robust security cooperation initiatives in the long run. But first, the United States should do no harm.

Conclusion

Regional security cooperation in the Middle East remains as distant a prospect as ever. Geopolitical competition between and among the United States' regional security partners has risen to new and dangerous heights. A shared but superficial consensus exists on the security threats the region faces, but regional governments have substantially different priorities and interests. The continued engagement of the United States as the Middle East's ultimate security guarantor fosters a dysfunctional dependency that makes security cooperation within the region an unattractive proposition. In other words, the dynamics and conditions that have historically prevented security cooperation in the Middle East remain in place.

As a result, the Middle East remains unlikely to see a workable regional security cooperation arrangement emerge any time soon—and the United States should not expect one to emerge. Through small pragmatic and functional steps, however, the United States can lay the foundation for a future regional security cooperation arrangement. These steps can build on existing security cooperation mechanisms like the coalition assembled to fight the Islamic State and the various security training facilities established in regional partner states in the past fifteen years. Even if the overall picture for regional security cooperation is bleak, the United States nonetheless has some basic building blocks it can use to shape and support future progress.

In the end, only the United States' security partners in the Middle East can resolve the geopolitical tensions and differing threat perceptions that undermine regional security cooperation at present. Pragmatic and functional security cooperation measures cannot be made to take more responsibility than they can reasonably be expected to bear. The United States should not remain a passive bystander to the Middle East's increasingly intense conflicts, but it should bear in mind that the security cooperation tools at its disposal cannot resolve this contest on their own. These tools should be put in the service of a wider regional diplomatic strategy that can alleviate the Middle East's geopolitical strains and forge a real consensus on security threats.

In the absence of such a strategy, however, the political obstacles to greater regional security cooperation will likely remain insurmountable. At their core, these obstacles are fundamentally political—not military or security ones. The United States cannot dictate political outcomes in the Middle East any better today than it could in the recent past. Yet by recognizing the limits of its still very real and substantial power in the region, the United States can focus its attention on the ways that power can be used to make tangible progress toward the now-distant objective of a more secure and integrated Middle East. Tragically, regional security cooperation in the Middle East has never been more necessary—and never so frustratingly out of reach.

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