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The Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism: Structure, Mission, and Politics

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Abstract: This paper is a preliminary examination of the newly established Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI). IMAFI's membership includes Arab and Muslim states in the continents of Asia and Africa, and encompasses considerable military capabilities. The paper assumes that the advent of the Islamic Military Alliance is a significant event for both academic and empirical reasons, and employs insights gleaned from the International Relations literature on military alliances to analyse its structure, mission and politics. The discussion maintains that IMAFI sufficiently reflects the main conceptual aspects of military alliances, aims at performing vital collective security functions, and involves some of the immediate and potential issues typically associated with alliance politics. While the emerging alliance is yet to evolve towards institutionalised norms and procedures, the analysis shows that IMAFI is relevant for regional security politics and potentially conducive to addressing the growing global threat of terrorism.

Keywords: Military Alliance, Islamic Military Alliance, IMAFI, Collective Security, Counter-terrorism.

Introduction

On 15 December 2015, Saudi Arabia announced the establishment of the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI). Headquartered in Riyadh, the formation of the alliance is the product of Saudi Arabia's endeavours and operates under her leadership¹. While the initial announcement of the alliance mentioned 34 Muslim member states, additional states such as Indonesia, Azerbaijan, and Tajikistan supported the creation of the new alliance and therefore appeared likely to join.

The proclaimed objective of IMAFI is to bring together Muslim countries in joint efforts to fight terrorism throughout the Islamic World.² The targeted geographic area spans countries in the continents of Asia and Africa, including the critically destabilised Middle East region. While many governments around the world welcomed the Arab and Muslim

1 Browning 2015.

2 Batrawy 2015.

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governments' move to confront terrorism, the announcement of the creation of the alliance was nonetheless surprising.³ The emergence of a new military alliance is a serious matter in international politics, essentially because alliances embody significant interstate security associations. The fact that IMAFT is large in terms of military capabilities and significant in terms of strategic objectives adds to the importance of researching this new actor in Middle Eastern politics. Moreover, threats to the security of societies outside the Middle East caused by violent attacks committed by terrorist groups such as ISIS (Daesh) have increased in recent years. During the period from January 2015 to June 2016, 658 people died in 46 terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States, while 28,031 people lost their lives in 2,063 attacks in the rest of the world.⁴

The field of International Relations includes significant literature on the theoretical and substantive aspects of military alliances, and the practice of international relations involves numerous cases in which states have allied in order to increase their power capabilities. Military alliances enhance the credibility of threats through the application of deterrence and coercion diplomacy, and are therefore instrumental in influencing the bargaining behaviour of states. During the 20th and 21st centuries, for example, military alliances influenced major political events such as the First and Second World Wars, the Cold War, the two Gulf Wars, the Yugoslav Wars, the Bosnian War, and the Kosovo War. Therefore, this study benefits from the insights produced by relevant literature, supported by the belief that understanding IMAFT can prove useful for addressing important aspects of Middle Eastern security issues.

The fact that IMAFT is a newly established institution warrants investigating some of its preliminary theoretical and substantive aspects. Accordingly, the research questions concern exploring the structure of IMAFT, factors that have prompted its establishment, and the future issues that might influence its performance. Understanding these considerations should place the identity, performance, and potentials of IMAFT within proper perspectives by, first, linking it to the International Relations literature on military alliances, and, second, relating the new alliance to the Middle East politics. Therefore, this paper attempts to achieve the following research objectives:

1. Ascertaining the institutional nature of IMAFT, by exploring the alliance's main structural characteristics that determine its identity as a military alliance;
2. Discussing the milieu within which IMAFT has emerged, by determining the regional security issues that have influenced its establishment and the threats it aims to address;
3. Exploring key aspects of the politics of IMAFT, by discussing its regional and global relevance, and outlining some of the institutional issues expected to influence its behaviour.

3 *The Daily Star* 2015.

4 Lazaro and Meko 2016.

Theoretical Foundations

The International Relations literature on military alliances is vast, and therefore the following theoretical review pertains to defining military alliances, explaining their functions, and analysing their political dynamics. Insights gleaned from reviewing the above literature inform discussions of IMAFT in terms of institutional characteristics, security objectives and alliance politics.

The Concept of Military Alliance: Formation of alliances is a salient practice in international politics. Assertions like “It is impossible to speak of international relations without referring to alliances”⁵ and “alliances are apparently a universal component of relations between political units, irrespective of time and place”⁶ validate the importance of military alliances. However, critical observations regarding the contribution of studies within the literature include lack of definitions that precisely capture the essence of such alliances,⁷ gaps that disrupt knowledge produced by research done on military alliances,⁸ and lack of systematic studies that explain the causes of alliance formation.⁹

In the aftermath of the end of the Cold War and the demise of the bipolar international system, the literature considered the decreased importance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as a military alliance.¹⁰ Some studies argued that non-permanent coalitions have replaced institutionalised alliances,¹¹ and others maintained that decreased levels of perceptions of threats lowered states’ motivation to ally, while the diminishing benefits of alliances for major powers like the U.S. have reduced the significance of military alliances.¹² The endurance of NATO despite the end of the Cold War, however, created a scholarly interest in researching the institutional persistence of alliances and the additional roles they assume once their primary security purposes have expired.¹³

Definitions of the concept of military alliance vary between constructing precise definitions, distinguishing military alliances from other related interstate security associations, and conceiving broader theoretical conceptualisations. A conceptual study that reviewed the definitions used by major researchers in the field observed that authors do not agree on a single definition of the concept of alliance, have not developed a theoretically useful and practical definition, and that most of the existing definitions are overly vague and

5 Liska 1968, 3.

6 Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan 1973, 2.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Ward 1982.

9 Walt 1987, 6.

10 Waltz 1993.

11 Menon 2003. Also, Campbell 2004.

12 Tertrais 2004.

13 Hellmann and Wolf 1993; Noetzel and Schreer 2009; Kuperman 2013.

broad. Therefore, the study proposed eight elements in the concept of military alliance that result in defining it as “an explicit agreement among states in the realm of national security in which the partners promise mutual assistance in the form of a substantial contribution of resources in the case of a certain contingency the arising of which is uncertain”.¹⁴

A straightforward definition of a military alliance refers to “a formal agreement among independent states to cooperate militarily in the face of potential or realized military conflict”.¹⁵ Definitions of military alliances provided by earlier scholarship similarly emphasised the component of formal association among partners in the alliance.¹⁶ Although military alliances generally involve signing formal treaties, an inclusive informal sense of the term also exists in the literature, citing the strong security commitment between the U.S. and Israel in spite of the absence of a formal alliance agreement between the two countries.¹⁷ Generally, formal alliances express greater commitment to honour security obligations, and therefore reflect greater credibility of the alliance.¹⁸

Some scholars distinguish between the concept of military alliance and other related concepts. For example, Robert Kann differentiates between alliance arrangements and ententes, stressing that the latter presupposes less formal and more flexible relations among a set of states.¹⁹ Coalition is another concept that is qualitatively different from alliances and performs fewer power-based functions in comparison.²⁰ Interestingly, however, it is perfectly reasonable for a study that uses expressions like ‘threatening coalition’, ‘winning coalition’, and ‘coalition-of-the-whole’ to view alliances as embodying coalitions when analysing the politics of alliance configurations.²¹ Alignment is yet an additional relevant concept, which appears appropriate as an umbrella concept that encompasses all forms of interstate security associations.²²

Theorisation of Military Alliance: In a characteristically anarchic international setting, states’ best bet is to resort to self-help strategies in improving their power capabilities.²³ The literature provides various theorisations of the essential function of military alliances.

14 Bergsmann 2001, 29.

15 Leeds 2005, 4.

16 Wolfer 1968; Kann 1976; Snyder 1990.

17 Walt 1987, 12.

18 Morrow 2000.

19 Kann 1976.

20 Snyder 1990.

21 Niou and Ordeshook 1994.

22 Chidley 2014.

23 Waltz 1979.

The Balance of Power theory maintains that states decide to join alliances in order to prevent the emergence of a dominant state, thus achieving power equilibrium.²⁴ However, according to the Balance of Threats theorisation, states decide to form alliances against the states they perceive as threatening to their security, but they infrequently may also decide to bandwagon by allying with the threatening state.²⁵ Yet a third strand of theorisation advances the idea of the Balance of Interests, and argues that states decide to bandwagon in the interest of capturing the opportunities of joining the threatening state, and that the cost of bandwagoning is lower than that of balancing.²⁶ A study that assessed the extent to which neorealist theory can explain the history of international relations since 1648, nonetheless, concluded that the postulation that states live in structural anarchy which motivates them to apply balance of power strategies does not provide historians with a valid theory for understanding international politics.²⁷

In order to function as credible devices of deterrence and coercion, military alliances need to signal their security commitments. Signalling aims at reducing foes' uncertainty about the credibility of the threats the alliance levels at them in case of noncompliance. The essence of the issue is "that for leaders who are indeed willing to defend their allies with military force, the central challenge is to convince others of this fact without actually having to fight".²⁸ A study concerned with investigating the link between state's internal arms and its reliability for prospective allies shows that states' decisions to bolster armies through conscription signal their increased commitment to form alliances and willingness to honour alliance contributions.²⁹ Another study that explores conflict processes within military alliances argues that, to increase the duration of peace within the alliance, alliance treaty should signal commitment to peaceful relations and settlement of disputes among the allied states.³⁰

Alliance cohesion is the third aspect of the politics of military alliances, and concerns the level of agreement among alliance members over strategic issues and their ability to foster cooperation necessary to achieve the alliance's goals.³¹ Tensions arise from the clash between member states' autonomous interests and the requirements of the collective security behaviour of the alliance. Acute crises can hinder the intra-alliance agreement and therefore seriously test the cohesion of the alliance itself. The cohesion of the alliance also

24 Wright 1942; Morgenthau 1967; Waltz, 1979.

25 Walt 1988.

26 Schweller 1994.

27 Schroeder 1994.

28 Fuhrmann and Sechser 2014, 919.

29 Horowitz, Poast, and Stam 2017.

30 Long, Nordstrom, and Baek 2007.

31 Holsti, Hopmann, and Sullivan 1973, 16.

involves the endurance and termination of the alliance,³² as well as various mechanisms that cause military alliances to either collapse or endure.³³

Numerous studies have also linked alliance cohesion to institutional considerations.³⁴ Institutional assets, norms, rules and procedures can influence security associations even after the external threats that prompted the formation of the alliance have disappeared. Scholars of alliance cohesion used institutional factors to explain why major cotemporary alliances have persisted, primarily in the cases of NATO³⁵ and the U.S.-Japan alliance.³⁶

The formation of IMAFT presents a valuable opportunity for linking theoretical knowledge to empirical realities, specifically through ascertaining the structural characteristics of IMAFT, explaining the security motivations for its formation, and discussing some of the immediate and future aspects of its alliance politics.

The Structural Characteristics of IMAFT

Saudi Arabia's initial declaration of the establishment of IMAFT made no precise reference to a founding agreement, but stated that 34 countries had decided to form the alliance in accordance with Islamic faith teachings, international laws, the United Nations Charter and the Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.³⁷ IMAFT, therefore, is a formal intergovernmental structure comprised of Arab and Muslim states that have agreed to fight terrorism through coordinated military efforts. The announcement of the formation of IMAFT generated welcoming as well as skeptical responses from many countries around the world.³⁸ Pakistan, a major military power in the region, initially appeared surprised by its inclusion in the new alliance,³⁹ but Riyadh later appointed Pakistani retired army chief Raheel Sharif as the commander-in-chief of IMAFT.⁴⁰

The wording of IMAFT's title overtly specifies the character of the alliance as an alliance of Muslim states that commits military capabilities for the objective of fighting terrorism. The title of the alliance is lucid. In comparison, this starkly contrasts with the establishment of NATO and Warsaw Pact in 1949 and 1955, respectively. NATO and Warsaw involved formal treaties among signatory states, and their titles did not explicitly reflect a military character or designate an ideological affiliation or mission. Therefore, the blunt-

32 *Ibid.*

33 Walt 1997.

34 Keohane 1984; Helga Haftendorn, Keohane, and Wallander 1999; Weitsman 2004.

35 Tuschhoff 1999; Wallander 2000.

36 Kim, 2011.

37 KSA Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015.

38 Black 2015.

39 Syed 2015.

40 Boone 2017.

ness of IMAFT's cultural identity, its military genre and shared mission amply overshadow the lacking formal contractual association among its member states.

The original announcement of IMAFT clearly indicated intentions to use all methods necessary to fight terrorism, including stopping the terrorist groups' sources of funding and confronting extremism. As Saudi Foreign Minister described the mission of the alliance at a news conference in Paris, "nothing is off the table. It depends on the requests that come, depends on the need, and it depends on the willingness of countries to provide support that is necessary".⁴¹ Hence, IMAFT directly targets Daesh and other terrorist groups, and is at least indirectly poised to target states that the alliance's leadership perceives as supporting terrorism.

Terrorism is presently a major national security threat for a large number of countries around the world, and IMAFT is an intergovernmental association purposed for a security arrangement. Therefore, despite its seemingly atypical inception and objective, IMAFT adequately reflects the defining essence of the concept of military alliance. Although limiting IMAFT's mission to the specific objective of fighting terrorism may suggest that this is a coalition association, the task of fighting widespread international terrorism requires sustained interstate cooperation. By committing itself to fighting terrorism, IMAFT's mission does not appear to have a definite term. Therefore, it is not a provisional coalition meant to address a specific transient security threat; rather it is a military alliance set for a broad and long-term security mission.

In order for IMAFT to function as a collective security arrangement, it needs to use military force against terrorist groups that operate from strongholds in a number of Arab and Muslim countries. From the standpoint of international law, Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter prohibits the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, and the restrictive interpretation of this ban had constrained the international community's ability to deploy extraterritorial military force against terrorist groups. Growing international pressure against terrorism since 2009, however, has resulted in relaxing the constraints placed on states' legal right to fight terrorist groups stationed in foreign countries, especially when states exercise this right through multilateral action.⁴²

In addition, our knowledge on military alliances mostly derives from the historical and theoretical analysis of the European context, in which the threat environment involves interstate conflicts, not conflict with non-state actors such as terrorist groups. Therefore, the structural and behavioural particulars of terrorist groups require adjusting the conventional understanding of why alliances form and how they function to accommodate the imperatives of fighting terrorism.⁴³ This consideration is relevant to IMAFT, because

41 DeYoung 2015.

42 Tams 2009.

43 Byman 2006.

the terrorist groups it plans to confront are more elusive and less intelligible than nation states. Indeed, counterterrorism measures have largely had the form of military war and criminal justice approaches,⁴⁴ thus ruling out diplomatic bargaining methods. Accordingly, IMAFT will most probably deploy military power to fight wars against organised terrorism. IMAFT, however, is likely to use military threats to deter and coerce states it accuses of supporting terrorist groups such as Daesh and al-Qaeda.

Eleven Arab countries, all of which are members of IMAFT, have submitted a letter to the UN Secretary General on 27 October 2016 accusing Iran of supporting terrorist groups in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and throughout the entire Middle East region.⁴⁵ This situation introduces the problematic issue of whether IMAFT is targeting Iran in reality or in perception, especially in view of the reservations Iran had expressed about the formation of the new alliance. What is clear is that the Saudis have never said that IMAFT is against Iran, and the prospect of Pakistan and Turkey working together to help bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia and Iran is a possible scenario.⁴⁶ The member states of IMAFT differ greatly in many important respects related to power capabilities. Table 1 presents some of the main relevant national indicators of these countries. Information in the table provides basis for broadly identifying the structural characteristics of IMAFT.

44 Rineheart 2010.

45 UN Watch 2016.

46 Abbasi 2017.

Country	HDI rank (2015) ^a	Population (millions) ^b	GDP (millions of US Dollars) 2014 ^c	Military capabilities (2015)		
				Total personnel ^d	Main battle tanks ^e	Combat aircraft ^f
Saudi Arabia	39	31.6	746,249	251,500	1,210	722
UAE	41	9.60	399,451	63,000	545	515
Kuwait	48	3.80	163,612	22,600	368	106
Qatar	32	2.40	210,109	11,800	92	86
Bahrain	45	1.40	33,851	19,460	180	104
Yemen	160	26.7	35,955	137,900	1,260	170
Turkey	72	78.2	798,429	612,800	3,778	1,007
Egypt	108	89.1	286,538	835,500	4,624	1,133
Jordan	80	8.10	35,827	115,500	1,250	270
Lebanon	67	6.20	45,731	80,000	295	62
Palestine	113	4.50	12,738	-	-	-
Morocco	126	34.1	110,009	245,800	1,215	282
Tunisia	96	11.0	48,613	47,800	180	141
Libya	94	6.30	41,143	7,000	340	57
Pakistan	147	199.0	243,632	947,800	2,924	923
Bangladesh	142	160.4	172,887	220,950	680	150
Malaysia	62	30.8	338,104	133,600	74	227
Sudan	167	40.9	73,815	264,300	330	178
Maldives	104	0.30	3,062	n/a	n/a	n/a
Mauritania	156	3.60	5,061	20,850	n/a	n/a
Somalia	n/a	11.1	5,707	11,000	140	n/a
Chad	185	13.7	13,922	34,850	60	37
Djibouti	168	0.90	1,589	12,950	n/a	n/a
Nigeria	152	181.8	568,508	162,000	148	105
Guinea	182	11.0	6,624	12,300	n/a	n/a
Ivory Coast	172	23.3	34,254	n/a	5	5
Benin	166	10.6	9,575	9,450	n/a	n/a
Comoros	159	0.80	624	n/a	n/a	n/a
Gabon	110	1.80	18,180	6,700	n/a	33
Mali	179	16.7	12,037	11,800	24	15
Niger	188	18.9	8,169	10,700	0	17
Senegal	170	14.7	15,658	18,600	n/a	n/a
Sierra Leon	181	6.50	4,838	10,500	n/a	n/a
Togo	162	7.20	4,518	9,300	n/a	n/a

Table 1: IMAFT Country Profile

- a. Retrieved from <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries>. Accessed on 30 March 2016.
- b. Retrieved from, http://www.prb.org/pdf15/2015-world-population-data-sheet_eng.pdf. Accessed on 30 March 2016.
- c. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>. Accessed on 30 March 2016.
- d. Retrieved from <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.TOTL.P1>. Accessed on 31 March 2016.
- e. Retrieved from <http://www.globalfirepower.com/armor-tanks-total.asp>. Accessed on 31 March 2016.
- f. Retrieved from <http://www.globalfirepower.com/aircraft-total.asp>. Accessed on 31 March 2016.

First, the list of 34 countries mentioned in the initial announcement of the formation of the alliance had some notable omissions, mainly Oman, Algeria, and Indonesia.⁴⁷ The exclusion of Iran should be understandable given the strategic rivalry between Riyadh and Tehran, which consequently resulted in excluding Iraq and Syria as well. Explaining the absence of Iran from IMAFT membership, Saudi Brig. Gen. Ahmed Al-Assiri said “we are now talking about actions to defeat terror, and if Tehran is willing to become part of this coalition, it must stop its interference in Syria and Yemen and quit supporting terrorism in Lebanon and Iraq.”⁴⁸ The exclusion of Iran and Iraq, two Muslim states with Shiite population majority, from a military alliance dominated by Sunni countries can create the impression that IMAFT has a sectarian foundation, and may even set the stage for escalating strategic hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that Gabon, Benin and Togo are included in IMAFT despite the fact that they, at best, only have significant Muslim population minorities.⁵⁰

Second, the alliance members reflect widely varied human development rankings, ranging from ‘Very High Development’ countries to ‘Low Development’ countries. Three member states – Somalia, Libya, and Yemen – are currently severely politically troubled, while Palestine is not a sovereign state in the proper sense of the term. This brings into question the extent of power capabilities the underdeveloped alliance members can actually contribute, and introduces concerns over their ability to engage in intra-alliance politics in relation to more powerful member states. Burden sharing and free-riding are common concerns in military alliances, the issue revolving around the distribution of the burdens of collective security between the dominant and smaller states within the alliance.⁵¹ Fifty of the 65 countries in the U.S.-led coalition to fight Daesh, for example, have never conducted air strikes in Iraq or Syria, and only 24 states constitute the core group

47 Nearly one year later, Oman decided to join IMAFT. Overall, since its establishment, IMAFT’s membership has grown to 41 states.

48 Majalla 2017.

49 Aziz 2016.

50 Chibarirwe 2015.

51 Plumper and Neumayer 2015.

of members that meet on a quarterly basis.⁵² Nonetheless, IMAFT includes militarily powerful and diplomatically influential countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey, the UAE, Morocco, Pakistan, Kuwait and Jordan. Considering the combined magnitude of its member states' fighting capabilities, IMAFT represents a considerable military might.

Third, states essentially decide to join military alliances in order to secure protection from perceived or actual enemies, or obtain some political dividends through maintaining close associations with the hegemon state leading the alliance. These two motivations have probably influenced the decision of many states to join the new alliance, and may influence the decision of additional countries to join it in the future. The Sultanate of Oman decided to join IMAFT on 29 December 2016, citing the "importance to achieve peace, security, and stability in regions dominated by armed terrorist violence".⁵³ Oman, although a member of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has traditionally adopted independent foreign policies, which resulted in strained relations with Saudi Arabia. As Omani Foreign Ministry explains, the decision to join IMAFT "comes within the common understanding of the Islamic countries and in particular the role and leadership of the sisterly Kingdom of Saudi Arabia".⁵⁴

As suggested by practices within NATO in the aftermath of the disappearance of the Soviet Union,⁵⁵ there is a real possibility for the emergence of a multi-tiered military alliance that reflects variations in the countries' willingness and capability to contribute to combat and security efforts. Given the vast diversity in the national calibre among its members, it is possible that IMAFT expects different security roles from various sets of its member states. Plausibly, therefore, for a core group of member states willing to commit long-term military capabilities to handle unspecified security situations, the essence of IMAFT association is a military alliance. For the second set of member states, capable of committing short-term military force to address more specific security situations, the essence of IMAFT association is a coalition. For yet a third group of member states, with high uncertainty regarding their actual contributions to the military power assets of IMAFT, the association constitutes an entente arrangement that involves sharing consultations over terrorism and security issues. Succinctly, it is possible that IMAFT connotes three simultaneous meanings of collective security structures: a military alliance, a coalition, and an entente. In addition to the sketchy contractual nature of the association, the large number of member states in IMAFT, the considerable disparity in the national power capabilities among these states make this triple-tiered interpretation a potential, if not an inevitable, structural arrangement.

52 Baker 2015.

53 Gambrell 2016.

54 AlKhereiji 2017.

55 Korski and Williams 2008. See also Schmidt 2006.

Regional Security Context

Military alliances perform collective security functions. As the realist perspective of international politics argues, anarchy—i.e. the absence of an internationally recognised central ruling power—is a salient feature of international politics that influences states' decisions to form military alliances. Therefore, the emergence of IMAFT reflects its member states' attempt to respond to the following three main security issues.

Increased Terrorism: The Middle East is presently associated with growing terrorism. The activities of Daesh exploit political instability in Iraq and conflict in Syria to gain territorial control, and al-Qaeda and its affiliate terrorist groups take advantage of fractured political contexts in Yemen, Iraq, and African countries.⁵⁶ Contrary to the belief that Daesh is interested in conquering territory while al-Qaeda is interested in killing the largest number of westerners, al-Qaeda and its branches and allies have actually controlled territories in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Mali, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Libya.⁵⁷

Islamic extremists conducted terrorist attacks in a number of European cities, such as Madrid in 2004, London in 2005 and Paris in 2015. Some of the deadliest attacks in Europe in 2016 and 2017 took place in Brussels, Nice, Berlin, St. Petersburg, and Stockholm. Although the number of deaths and casualties caused by terror attacks in Muslim countries such as Pakistan and Nigeria is far greater than in the Western societies,⁵⁸ the fact remains that the threat of terrorism has affected many countries around the world.

The existence of Islamist terrorist groups is related to psychological factors, historical background, and socioeconomic structures of Arab-Muslim countries.⁵⁹ Terrorist groups motivated by religious beliefs consider inflicting violence against a broadly defined enemy a sacred duty ordained and legitimised by religious teachings.⁶⁰ Islamic extremism is also linked to the context of widespread forces of globalisation.⁶¹ Terrorism is a serious security threat that has had dire effects on the security of societies in the Middle East and other parts of the world. Accordingly, the U.S. President Barack Obama called upon the Muslim countries to become actively involved in fighting terrorism.⁶² The formation of IMAFT, therefore, reflects a concerted response by Muslim governments to assume this task. Ash Carter, the then U.S. Defence Secretary, commented that IMAFT is “very much in line with something we’ve been urging for some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISL by Sunni Arab countries.”⁶³

56 U.S. Department of State 2014.

57 Roggio 2015.

58 *The Economist* 2015.

59 Romero 2007.

60 Hoffman 1995.

61 Doge 2002. Also: Lutz and Lutz 2015.

62 Black 2014.

63 Browning and Irish 2015.

Saudi-Iranian Relations: Before the Iranian Islamic Revolution in 1979, Saudi Arabia and Iran had workable collaborative relations despite the sectarian differences between Saudi's Sunnism and Iran's Shi'ism. After the revolution, however, Iran started to pursue strategic goals that aimed to change the status quo and bring the region under the influence of Khomeinism. Saudi Arabia responded by promoting Wahhabism domestically and abroad, and practically adopted religious-nationalism to consolidate the Saudi state. The animosity between the two sides intensified in the mid-1980s when both countries began to employ sectarianism to challenge one another's religious authority and national security. The ramifications of the Iraq-Iran war, the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, and the fragile political context in the Arab World caused by the five Arab uprisings since 2011 have further contributed to the long-term rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran.⁶⁴

Certain aspects characterise the Saudi-Iran rivalry. These include ideological religious rifts between Sunni and Shia Islam, strategic contest for regional dominance, frequent exchanges of inflammatory quarrels between the Saudi and Iranian governments, and engagement in surrogate wars. Syria currently appears as "mainly a battlefield where Saudi Arabia and Iran are waging a proxy war, with devastating sectarian repercussions."⁶⁵ The present conflict in Yemen is evidently a proxy war influenced by the Saudi-Iran rivalry, in which Saudi Arabia, along with other Gulf and Arab allied forces, decided to conduct the 'Operation Decisive Storm' military campaign against the Iran-backed Houthi Shi'ite militias.⁶⁶

Diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran have recently been strained, and Riyadh eventually decided to sever ties with Iran over the Iranian rioters' attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in the aftermath of Saudi Arabia's decision to execute Saudi Shi'ite cleric Nimr al Nimr.⁶⁷ Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that Saudi Arabia is attempting to win over the largest number of Muslim and Arab states possible by placing them under the security umbrella of IMAFT. Through leading a military alliance that involves more than three dozen countries, Saudi Arabia has enough reasons to believe that it can project a powerful posture in any potential confrontation with Iran.

Security Relations between the U.S. and Arab Gulf States: Over the previous decades, the U.S. and Arab Gulf states have been engaged in very close alliance-like relations. The U.S. military commitment and presence in the area have contributed to reassuring Arab Gulf states' perceptions of security against foreign threats, most importantly those that revolutionary Iran is perceived to have been posing since 1979.

The U.S. shares worries with the Arab Gulf states over Iran's nuclear program, but President Barack Obama preferred the policy of 'Pressure coupled with engagement', with-

64 Grumet 2015.

65 Gerges 2013. .

66 Browning 2015a. .

67 BBC News 2016.

out ruling out the option of military action against Iran's nuclear facilities.⁶⁸ However, the nuclear deal that the U.S. and Iran reached in summer 2015 dismayed the Arab Gulf states, because they believed that the deal would not curb Iran's efforts to possess nuclear weapons, and feared that lifting the economic sanctions would enable Tehran to use unfrozen assets to finance its policies of meddling in Arab countries' affairs. In response, the U.S. attempted to calm Arab Gulf states' worries, pledging to increase arms sales to them, share intelligence, and bolster their missile defence systems.⁶⁹

Arab Gulf states have hoped to establish formal security relations with Washington in order to improve regional security arrangements. The UAE Ambassador to the U.S. Yosef Al Otaiba told a forum at the Atlantic Council think tank: "We are looking for some form of security guarantee, given the behaviour of Iran in the region, given the rise of the extremist threat. We definitely want a stronger relationship."⁷⁰ However, divergent political values and interests hampered the institutionalisation of security relations between the U.S. and the Arab Gulf states into a formal military alliance. The Obama Administration perceived the GCC countries' actions in relation to the conflicts in Syria, Yemen and Libya as a deviation from the interests of the U.S, and believed that the Gulf countries were lacking in terms of liberal values and democratic institutions. Therefore, elevating formal defence commitments with Arab Gulf states did not seem as a viable course of action from the American perspective.⁷¹

Additionally, the United States is presently repositioning its strategic interests from Europe and the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific focus. The Obama Administration already has invested in the policy of transforming the U.S. into a Pacific power in order to harness the growing security and economic potentials of that region.⁷² Moreover, President Obama described the Arab Gulf states as 'free riders' who are reluctant to contribute effectively to collective security arrangements, and advised Saudi Arabia to share the Middle East with Iran,⁷³ thus making it clear that Washington was not keen on formalising the security ties with Arab Gulf states into a military alliance. Therefore, Arab Gulf states perceived the Obama Administration's stances as potential signals of Washington's abandonment of its traditional Arab allies. Within the context of a unipolar international system, the formation of the self-reliant Islamic Military Alliance appears as an attractive alternative. In the absence of a formal and solid U.S. commitment to the security of the Arab Gulf states, and in view of the rising security threats caused by terrorism and Iran's search for regional dominance, Arab Gulf states and Sunni Muslim countries could indeed see that establishing IMAFT was a viable foreign policy option.

68 Katzman 2016.

69 Solomon and Lee 2015.

70 Khan 2015.

71 Ashford 2015.

72 Clinton 2011.

73 Goldberg 2016.

The experience Muslim and Arab states have gained in carrying out military interventions further reinforces the feasibility of this option. Specifically, on 10 September 2014 the U.S. announced the establishment of a global coalition “to degrade and ultimately defeat” Daesh, and many Arab and Muslim states that later joined IMAFT have participated in the U.S.-led military efforts in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁴ In addition, some of the major members of IMAFT, mostly Arab Gulf states, have already demonstrated the ability to assemble military coalitions and intervene on two occasions, first in Bahrain in 2011 and again in Yemen in 2015. Moreover, Major Arab and Muslim countries that have decided to join IMAFT, such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, Morocco, Jordan, Pakistan, Turkey and Nigeria, are among the 30 founding members of the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF), which was established in 2011 as a mechanism to develop strategies to counter terrorist threats worldwide. Therefore, many members of IMAFT have developed sufficient capacity for collective security engagement that is necessary to confront the imperatives of the security context in the Middle East.

The Alliance Politics of IMAFT

Analysing the alliance politics of IMAFT involves discussing its regional and global relevance, and examining issues that can influence its future performance. The Regional and Global Relevance of IMAFT: As the logic of game-theoretic analysis demonstrates, interdependence and uncertainty within the interactive context of international politics influence the outcomes of foreign policy decisions. The quality of information that states signal about their power capabilities invokes reciprocal behaviour. Using uncertain and incomplete information results in biases that can undermine rational decision-making processes.⁷⁵

IMAFT pools together the otherwise fragmented military power of individual Arab and Muslim states. The formal announcement of the objectives of IMAFT and the availability of information about its combined military power describe what this alliance stands for and what it can achieve. Therefore, the creation of IMAFT reduces uncertainty over the collective military power of the alliance, and thus helps adversaries make informed calculations when considering their policy alternatives.

Arab Gulf states consider sectarian terrorism an essential security threat,⁷⁶ and are accusing Iran of threatening regional security by pursuing regional dominance, supporting terrorism, and destructively interfering in the domestic affairs of Lebanon, Iraq, Syria and Yemen.⁷⁷ Therefore, IMAFT appears as a security structure that signals the Arab and Muslim states’ decision to deploy military power to defeat terrorist groups and address

74 McInnis 2016.

75 Mintz and DeRouen 2010.

76 Binhuwaidin 2015a.

77 Kinninmont 2015.

Iran's perceived antagonistic behaviour. Consequently, terrorist organisations and countries accused of supporting terrorism may now be in a better position to assess the potential costs of their policies and actions.

Indications of reduced U.S. involvement in the Middle East coincide with signs that the Arab Gulf states increasingly assume autonomous roles in managing regional security issues. Arab Gulf states have engaged in military missions on a few occasions in the recent years, and their recent engagement in Yemen appears as a unilateral action over which they did not consult the United States.⁷⁸ Political instability in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya has increased the relative strategic significance of the GCC countries and bolstered their roles in addressing security issues in the Middle East. In addition to efforts to circumscribe political Islam, economic aid, development projects, and business investments made by Saudi Arabia and the UAE in Egypt and Tunisia, for example, aim to stabilise these states amidst the political turmoil they have been experiencing since 2011.⁷⁹

The creation of IMAFT suggests that Arab Gulf states now assume greater responsibilities in handling security issues in the Middle East. The establishment of the alliance potentially implies reduced Arab Gulf states' dependence on Western security assurances. In view of the security dilemma in the relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran,⁸⁰ the establishment of IMAFT indicates that the Saudis have achieved important strategic gains in the protracted struggle for regional dominance. As rising terrorism threatens the security of many societies around the world and Muslim countries attempt to curb Iran's intervention in their internal affairs, IMAFT may collaborate with other non-member states that share the objectives of fighting terrorism and countering Iran's interferences.

IMAFT's objective of fighting terrorism transcends the regional confines of the Islamic World and seems to fit the scope of activities expected of a globalised intergovernmental organisation. Limiting the ability of terrorist groups to carry out attacks and curtailing the ability of countries to support organised terrorism require effective international cooperation between IMAFT and many non-member states. Although this implies extensive collaboration, the expected security payoffs should justify the cost that this effort entails. IMAFT's success in defeating terrorist groups should benefit a large number of societies around the world.

Accordingly, efforts exerted by the new alliance to defeat terrorist groups will need to integrate with efforts made by major powers outside IMAFT such as the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and the United Nations. The objective should be to synthesise the military power of IMAFT with a globally mandated backing in intelligence and funding. Responsibility rests upon the political leadership of IMAFT to reinforce the resolve of member states to fight terrorism, build solid collective capabilities to eradicate terror in-

78 Lake and Rogin 2015..

79 Sons and Wiese 2015.

80 Binhuwaidin 2015b.

frastructures, and integrate the resulting IMAFT's political and military capacities with international counterterrorism regimes.

Potential Issues with the Performance of IMAFT: As the review of alliance politics in the theoretical foundations section of this paper has clarified, ensuring states' commitment to alliance obligations, signalling the credibility of the alliance to adversaries, and maintaining alliance cohesion influence the ability of the alliance to perform mutual security pledges.

One day after the Saudis had announced the establishment of IMAFT, Pakistan and Indonesia stated that they did not decide to join the alliance. Turkey's Foreign Ministry Spokesman Tanju Biljic said at a news conference in Ankara, "I can say that this coalition will not be a military structure. It is not on the agenda."⁸¹ Nevertheless, the fact that Pakistan and Turkey eventually accepted membership in IMAFT suggests that Saudi Arabia successfully wielded its soft power influence over Muslim countries through its designation as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia created IMAFT amidst the war it was waging in Yemen, and member states knew that by accepting membership they ran the risk of getting involved in the ongoing war. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the majority of the member states seem to be adequately committed to IMAFT's security obligations.

Discussing whether Saudi Arabia can reliably lead IMAFT requires determining the Saudis' standing on political extremism. On one hand, criticisms maintain that Saudi Arabia promotes strict interpretation of Islamic teachings that arguably condone violence. A report issued by the Henry Jackson Society think tank stated that Saudi individuals and foundations are major providers of funding for British extremists, positing possible links to terror attacks that recently took place in the UK and other European countries.⁸² On the other hand, Riyadh has been active in controlling radicalisation since 2004. The Saudi programme to rehabilitate terrorists transforms a substantial number of radical individuals through religious re-education and psychological counselling.⁸³ Furthermore, by hosting the Arab-Islamic-American Summit on 21–22 May 2017, which involved the participation of 50 Arab and Muslim countries and featured the attendance of the U.S. President Donald Trump, Riyadh has appeared to lead the efforts to confront radical ideology and terrorism.⁸⁴ Obviously, improved Saudi Arabia's reputation in actively countering extremism and terrorism can validate its leadership of IMAFT.

The ability of IMAFT to deter and coerce opponents will depend on shaping their perceptions of its credibility. Therefore, in order to reduce foes' uncertainties over the resolve of the alliance's security association, IMAFT needs to communicate the credibility of its

81 Fouad 2015.

82 McGuinness 2017.

83 Borges 2010.

84 *Al Arabiya English* 2017.

military threats. Hence, the North Thunder military exercises hosted by Saudi Arabia from 14 February to 10 March 2016 signalled the military capabilities of Saudi Arabia and 19 other Muslim state allies. The war games reflected the Saudis' concerns over the increased influence of Iran and the decreased commitment of the U.S. towards the security of the Arab Gulf states.⁸⁵ Accordingly, the objective of the North Thunder exercises that involved around 150,000 soldiers, 2,540 warplanes and 20,000 tanks was to increase the preparedness of the allied forces and project the credibility of the newly established Islamic military alliance.⁸⁶

The degree of cohesion within IMAFT will influence its performance. Cohesion concerns the tension between the member states' national interests, on the one hand, and their adherence to the imperatives of collective security, on the other. Saudi Arabia's leadership of IMAFT needs to maintain focus on the security objectives of the alliance and reinforce Muslim allies' interest in those objectives. This is a challenging task given problematic differences over how Muslim states define terrorism and, accordingly, identify terrorist groups. For example, while Muslim countries consider Daesh and al-Qaeda as terrorist organisations, some Muslim states refuse to include other organisations such as Muslim Brotherhood and Palestinian Hamas in this category. Therefore, IMAFT's capacity to fight terrorism will be determined by the ability of its members to collectively define what terrorism is and who terrorists are.

An additional element in the politics of alliance cohesion involves preventing member states from dragging IMAFT into conflicts in which the alliance does not have immediate interests. Foreign disputes of any member state can develop into conflicts that may require the entire alliance to assume a political stance or even perform a military action. For example, Egypt, Sudan, the UAE, Pakistan, Malaysia, Djibouti and Benin have unsettled territorial disputes with other member and non-member states that can, if not properly managed, threaten the accord within IMAFT. Therefore, Riyadh needs to safeguard the alliance from the potential risk these disputes pose to the cohesion of the alliance.

Besides, enhancing the prospects of cohesion of IMAFT requires successfully institutionalising its evolving structures. Institutions involve arrangements purposefully structured to encourage preferred behaviour and discourage undesirable behaviour. Therefore, the process of institutionalising a military alliance involves developing structural arrangements that encourage member states to bolster collective security and discourage them from obstructing this objective. The present disagreement over determining the core tasks of NATO and sharing the burdens between the transatlantic allies⁸⁷ should substantiate the importance of institutionalising military alliances. Therefore, proper institutionalisation of IMAFT involves securing in place norms and procedures necessary for

85 McDowell and Jones 2016.

86 Al-Sughair 2016.

87 Mattelaer 2016.

successfully managing intra-alliance bargaining, including issues of burden-sharing and maintaining peaceful relations among the member states.

Conclusions

This paper has attempted to analyse the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism in view of the conceptual, theoretical and political postulations presented by the literature on military alliances. Despite few idiosyncrasies, IMAFT sufficiently fits the concept of military alliance, has clear collective security underpinnings, and reflects many of the immediate and potential inter-alliance and intra-alliance aspects typically associated with military alliance politics.

Because it includes a sizeable number of countries in the continents of Asia and Africa, IMAFT is geographically expansive and seems to represent a militarily capable interstate security association. Its structure evokes the possibility of involving a multi-tier arrangement, presenting three simultaneous variants of international state alignment: an alliance, a coalition and an entente. Given the pronounced national power variations among the large number of member states, a set of core states is likely to more significantly contribute to the collective security tasks of IMAFT than other states.

By deciding to join IMAFT, Muslim governments appear to share the common interest of confronting the growing threats of terrorism. Saudi Arabia's leadership in the new alliance realistically introduces this state's objective of counterbalancing Iran's regional influence. From the perspective of Arab Gulf countries, Iran's aspirations for regional dominance and its policy of meddling in the domestic affairs of many Arab and Muslim countries constitute serious security threats. The perception that Washington is in the process of repositioning its strategic interests from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific region further reinforces Arab Gulf states' sense of the need to address the ensuing regional security threats. Therefore, the emergence of IMAFT is significant for regional and global political considerations, and the new alliance seems destined for power-based bargaining roles in Middle Eastern politics.

The advent of IMAFT, however, remains a recent event, and much of its structure and function is in the formative stage. The emerging military alliance needs to acquire consolidated organisational and behavioural arrangements that can only develop through a protracted process of institutionalisation. The institutional building of IMAFT needs to develop along the lines of establishing a formal agreement among the member states that sets norms and procedures necessary for nurturing effective application of power bargaining and a reliable collective security mechanism.

Honouring the member states' commitment to collective security obligations, signalling the credibility of the alliance to opponents, and sustaining the cohesion of the alliance are among the leading issues expected to determine the actual behaviour of IMAFT. Much

of the ability of the new alliance to develop into a solid interstate security association depends on the success of Saudi Arabia in managing these important aspects of the alliance politics. In the absence of such success, IMAFT may run the risk of fading away into insignificance and appearing as an ineffective symbolic entity in the realm of regional security.

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