The Islamic Military Alliance against Terrorism: Efficacy and Challenges

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Abstract

The 41-nation Islamic Military Alliance led by Saudi Arabia was established in 2015 to fight against growing menace of extremism and terrorism across the Middle East and the associated regions. Though all states of alliance are part of Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), yet the coalition is Sunni dominated and excludes 23 other members of the OIC including Iran, Iraq and Syria, causing the organization’s effectiveness and credibility into question. The alliance is in its formative phase and it will take time to determine its scope, nature and capability. This paper will analyse the history and objectives for the formation of the alliance. It will also assess the role of the US and Pakistan, as well as evaluate the military strength, efficacy and challenges to the Islamic Military Alliance.

Keywords: IMA, Counter-terrorism, Islamic Alliance, Sectarian divide, ISIS, Muslim-NATO

Introduction

The 41-nation Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFt), commonly referred to as Islamic Military Alliance (IMA) has been formed as a counter-terrorism military alliance by the Muslim countries. This alliance has been led by Saudi efforts to dispel and disrupt the growing menace of terrorism in the Middle East in the shape of ISIL and other terrorist groups.

The establishment of the group was first confirmed in a joint communiqué issued by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on December 15, 2015. The statement considers the commitments of the Islamic injunctions against aggression, the principles and objectives of the OIC to cooperate against terrorism and provisions of the UN Charter and other international conventions against terrorism to form counter-terror group known as IMA. the statement reads that countries including the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Pakistan, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Turkey, Chad, Togo, Tunisia, Djibouti, Senegal, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Gabon, Guinea, Palestine, Comoros, Qatar, Cote d'Ivoire, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Maldives, Mali, Malaysia, Egypt, Morocco, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, and Yemen “have decided to form a military alliance to fight against terrorism led by Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.” The headquarters of the alliance will be established in Riyadh to coordinate and support military operations to fight terrorism. The statement also read that there were ten more countries that have supported the formation of alliance (Joint Statement, 2015). The alliance was expanded later to 41 countries. Eritrea, Afghanistan and Oman are amongst
those who joined the group later (Gaub, 2016a). Thirty four members of the IMA are also members of OIC whose creation was pushed by Saudi Arabia in 1969, but 23 OIC members are not in the list of IMA. There are three major players of the Middle East including Iran, Iraq and Syria but they are not made part of the IMA (Gaub, 2016b). Azerbaijan, Indonesia, Tajikistan are considering taking up for membership but have not formally joined the alliance (Saleem, 2017).

Pakistan’s involvement in the alliance is significant, as its former Chief of Army Staff, General (Retd.) Raheel Sharif was appointed as the IMA’s first Commander-in-Chief on January 6, 2017 (Pakistan, 2017). Washington’s role is also significant because of its involvement in the dynamics of security and foreign policy in the Middle East and its strategic ties with Riyadh.

The paper has been divided into five parts. The first section will build a conceptual framework; the second part will analyse the military strength and capabilities of the major alliance members; the third part will discuss the US’s role in the politics of Middle East and its ties with Saudi Arabia; the fourth part will evaluate Pakistan’s role in the alliance and the fifth section will analyze the efficacy and challenges of the alliance, followed by a conclusion.

**Methodology**

The paper is exploratory and descriptive study, using qualitative research methods. The idea of a Muslim coalition to fight terrorism is a new one and evolving as an issue agenda of security and strategic debate. The research explores the causes and evolution of IMA as a Muslim military alliance to fight terrorism in the Middle East and associated regions. The paper also describes efficacy and challenges of IMA. The research has used process tracing and content analysis as research methods to reach out conclusions. As the issue area is still emerging as topical agenda, there is room for scholarship to find out various dimensions of the subject, for instance, implications of IMA for the Middle East, the role of major powers in IMA’s efforts to fight terrorism in the Middle East etc.

**Conceptual framework**

The growing threat of terrorism has engulfed the Middle East with the emergence of new terrorist groups like ISIS, Boko Haram, etc. Saudi Arabia has taken the lead in forming a military alliance to defeat terrorism. In late 2015, the Saudi Foreign Ministry announced the formation of an Islamic Military Alliance. The stated reason for the establishment of the group was explained in a joint communiqué which said:

“terrorism and its atrocities - which spread Shari’a-forbidden corruption and destruction in the world - constitute a serious violation of human dignity and rights, especially the right to life and the right to security... hence it should be fought by all means and collaboration should be made
to eliminate it because this is cooperation in righteousness and piety”
(Joint Statement, 2015).

There is a question as to whether it is a genuine military alliance or as a mere political commitment, as some argue it to be a quasi Muslim-NATO. Florence Gaub said that the idea was not new. Many alliances have earlier been formed in the Middle East such as the Arab League, Baghdad Pact and Middle East Defence Organization (MEDO) yet all failed to deliver when put to the test (Gaub, 2016a).

Gaub has claimed that the formation of some type of Islamic military alliance is the third effort by Saudi Arabia since the Arab Spring. The first effort was made in 2013 when around 100,000 troops were planned to have been structured under the Gulf for a NATO-style integrated command structure under Saudi leadership. The second such attempt was made when Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states proposed a joint police force known as GCC-Pol and joint navy in 2014. However, progress was at slow pace on these projects. Saudi Arabia and Egypt also tried to set up a 40,000-strong body of troops with its own command structure based on NATO-type structure within the Arab League for counter-terrorism purposes in 2015. In August, 2015, KSA put negotiations on hold (Gaub, 2016a).

The question arises why Saudi Arabia has taken the lead for establishing a military alliance in the region. Two reasons seem to be applicable. One, the US’ rebalancing towards Asia under the Asia Pivot Strategy as enunciated by the former Obama administration and its resultant reduction of its role in the Middle East, thereby causing Saudi Arabia’s decreasing reliance on the US. Second is the US-Iran rapprochement after the Iran deal in July, 2015. Though, both these arguments also need to be evaluated after the May, 2017 Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh in which sitting US President Trump signalled the need for isolating Iran and simultaneously struck a $ 110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia’s threat perception is influenced by confrontations from many fronts, i.e. its threat assessments from Iran in the east, Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Houthi rebels in the south, and ISIL in the north (Gaub, 2016a).

ISIL has declared war against Saudi Arabia. The group also called the IMA an infidel alliance. The militant group has killed nearly 50 Saudis in the last two years. Moreover, around 3,000 Saudis have joined the terrorist cult in Iraq and Syria as well (Gaub, 2016a).

In South Yemen, Saudi Arabia is facing two frontal challenges as Yemen provides a launching pad for Al-Qaeda activities in Arabian Peninsula and Saudi Arabia; and secondly, the presence of Houthis (a Shia militia) also poses a security challenge for the kingdom. This has transformed into an unabated military confrontation between the two since 2015.
The alliance would impact Saudi’s foreign policy in three ways: first, restoring balance in the region, as a counterweight to Iran; second, repairing damage to the country’s Muslim reputation, both at home and regionally; and third, leading to synergistic efforts militarily (Gaub, 2016a).

Likewise, Saudi Arabia’s in making alliances has a background of its active and assertive role in recent years which include participation in the NATO-led campaign in Libya as well as intervention in Bahrain, and Yemen (Jenkins, 2016). In this context, Saudi Arabia’s threat assessment coupled with its growing assertive role drove Riyadh Arabia to make an Islamic Military Alliance. However, the military strength of the alliance needs to be evaluated.

**Capabilities, military strength and strategy**

Most of the countries of the IMA have modest military muscle, yet some states have a considerable military strength. A report said that most of the states of alliance are poor countries and have little military power; and while Saudi Arabia might contribute financial support in exchange of their support yet funding is not a guarantee of success (Jenkins, 2016).

Saudi Arabia, which is the biggest investor of defence has 233,000 army personnel and 305 combat aircrafts. Its navy stands with 25,000 men. However, its lack of experience is the main vulnerability of the Saudi forces (Gaub, 2016a).

Besides Saudi Arabia which initiated the idea of an IMA, there are other significant players which are part of the coalition. A chart of the military strength of major players of these coalition is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Defence Budget</th>
<th>Army Personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UAE</td>
<td>$ 22.8 billion (SIPRI, 2017)</td>
<td>100,000 (Wikipedia, Armed Forces of UAE, 2017)</td>
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The group’s formation is primarily aimed against the newly established terror group, ISIS/ISIL. However, at tactical level, the coalition lacks strategic direction, as no standing troops are planned and nor does it have a command structure and integrated units. The alliance would provide for cooperation through institutional platforms (Gaub, 2016a). The mere appointment of a commander in chief and announcement of where it is headquartered raises questions on its credibility.

If a comparative analysis taken between IMA and NATO or its opponent Warsaw Pact alliance, one would realize that the latter alliances were aimed for the defence of their respective members outside the countries. For instance, NATO was aimed at curtailing the influence of Soviet expansion and Warsaw Pact conversely aimed at limiting spread of capitalism. However, IMA is directed against terrorism and terrorists are most often the “enemy within” (Qadir, 2017).

An author has claimed that no military action is designed under the group so far and the alliance would rely upon non-kinetic means to combat terrorism; therefore, its naming as “Muslim-NATO” remains questionable (Qadir, 2017).

The alliance has commitment for sharing intelligence, training and military support for counter-terrorism initiatives, primarily among Muslim majority countries (Saleem, 2017). The alliance strategy to fight terrorism is founded on targeting the funding of terrorists and choking cross-border movement of extremists. However, the author writes with credible information that the alliance will not have a specific military force of its own or a voluntarily contributed force like that of the UN (Saleem, 2017).

A Wall Street Journal piece has revealed that the IMA would be formally organized when defence ministers of the group would meet in coming months. It also highlighted that the new coalition might establish a mobile military force to assist member states in counter-terrorism capabilities in the Middle East and Africa against ISIS. It will also fight against other jihadist groups which have sprouted in war-torn Libya and Yemen, and such as Boko Haram in west Africa (Saeed Shah and Margherita Stancati, 2017).

In February 2016, to show its power, Saudi Arabia had also launched the large military exercise, named ‘North Thunder’, along with troops from 20 nations (Smith, 2016). Countries which took part included United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Bahrain, Senegal, Sudan, Kuwait, Maldives, Morocco, Pakistan, Chad, Tunisia, Comoros, Djibouti, Oman, Qatar, Malaysia, Egypt, Mauritania and Mauritius. Saudi Press Agency claimed it to be the “largest and most important military manoeuvre in the history of the region” (Smith, 2016). It also stated that “the North Thunder drills represent a clear message that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and its brothers and friends of the participating countries stand united to confront all challenges and maintain peace and stability in the region” (Smith, 2016).
Given this, the alliance has announced its Commander-in-Chief as General (Ret’d) Raheel Sharif of Pakistan, and headquarters at Riyadh. However, the command structure, troop numbers, deployment and strategy for operations all need to be yet revealed.

**The US role**

The US’s role cannot be ignored in the Middle East and especially in case of fighting against terrorism when it comes to its allies in the region. The US and Saudi Arabia are considered as long-standing strategic partners. The former defended the latter in Iraq-Kuwait war. Saudi Arabia had also invited the US forces into the country thereafter (Jenkins, 2016).

Saudi Arabia has financially assisted the US programmes to train and arm Syrian rebels. The US encourages and welcomes Saudi’s involvement in fighting against Islamic extremists represented by Al-Qaeda and ISIL (Jenkins, 2016). For instance, the former US Defense Secretary, Ashton Carter, stated that that the Riyadh announcement is, in general at least, “very much aligned with something that we’ve been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat ISIL by Sunni Arab countries” (Jenkins, 2016).

However, the fundamental question within US policy circles is whether Saudi Arabia and its partners will actually field a joint military force in Syria i.e. “put boots on the ground” (Jenkins, 2016)? It remains to be seen.

**IMA and Pakistan**

The Islamic Military Alliance has nudged Pakistan into a risky game due to the sectarian dimension of the alliance and its relations with Iran. Faiza Saleem from University of Singapore cautioned that Pakistan needs to be circumspect about its foreign policy choices in the Middle East (Saleem, 2017).

Pakistan had hard choices to make in the wake of alliance formation led by Saudi Arabia with whom it shares deep strategic, religious and brotherly relations. The reason for calling it a hard decision for joining the alliance is based on the fact that Pakistan’s relations with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states including UAE were at a low ebb when Pakistan decided to remain neutral in the Yemen crisis in April 2015 (Saleem, 2017). Therefore, Pakistan joined the alliance led by Saudi Arabia with whom it could not afford to worsen its relations.

However, Pakistan’s role is not clear. Nevertheless, Gen. (Ret’d) Raheel’s appointment as Commander-in-Chief of the IMA is of great importance. He has remained a commander in Pakistan’s conflict ridden areas of North and South Waziristan. He also spearheaded Operation Zarb-e-Azb, resulting in a decrease of terrorist incidents in the country. For instance, there were 441 violent jihadist attacks in Pakistan in 2016 as compared with 2,586 attacks in 2009 (Jones, 2017).
One of the major implications of Pakistan’s joining IMA would be furthering the sectarian divide within its own territory. Pakistan played its part in Afghan-Soviet war and still is bearing the brunt in socio-politico- and economic spheres. However, Pakistan has remained neutral in the Middle Eastern power-politics between Saudi Arabia and Iran which has divided the Middle East on sectarian lines; and the Saudi-led IMA may embolden Pakistani based Deobani groups to target the Shia community, thus prompting a new sectarian wave in the country (Saleem, 2017).

A story in Wall Street Journal claimed that Pakistan has committed a separate force of 5,000 men to Saudi Arabia to help guard its vulnerable south region, close to the border with Yemen. However, deployment is yet to be announced. The former Pakistani Defence Minister and present Foreign Minister of Pakistan Khwaja Asif also clarified that,

“This alliance is against terrorism, especially to help those countries which are threatened, but don’t have the necessary wherewithal to combat terrorists…We will not act against Iran” (Saeed Shah and Margherita Stancati, 2017).

Pakistan’s role is also significant due to the fact that it is the only Muslim state to possess the nuclear weapons, although, the role of nuclear weapons in combating terrorism is currently minimal. However, it does provide a psychological boost and elevates the country’s position in the Muslim world.

**Results: Efficacy and challenges**

Many scholars and practitioners have raised questions over the efficacy, credibility and effectiveness of the Islamic Military Alliance. One scholar has called it ‘controversial’ as it is a Sunni-majority dominated group with the exception of Oman which is an Ibadi-dominant country and friend of Iran (Saleem, 2017). The efficacy of the group has particularly been questioned due to exclusion of Shiite majority Iran. It seems to be “a predominantly Sunni alliance aimed at projecting Saudi Arabia as the leader of the Muslim world” (Saleem, 2017). Hakeem Azameli, a member of the Security and Defence Commission in the Iraqi parliament, has termed the group as “a sectarian coalition” (Serguei Doubine, etc.al 2015).

Saudi Arabia alleges that Iran supports terrorism across the Middle East and has therefore, not been made part of the alliance. Brig. Gen. Ahmed Al-Assiri, advisor to the Defence Ministry of Saudi Arabia stated that,

“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” (ArabNews, 2015).
The exclusion of other major players of the Middle East also might compromise the effectiveness of the group, as one scholar criticized the group by stating that “an alliance which claims to counter terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan, excludes Iraq and Syria – two countries that have been epicenters of violence in the region” (Saleem, 2017).

A Rand Corporation’s report claimed that discussions were going on for the deployment of Special Forces from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to assist U.S. efforts in Syria (Jenkins, 2016). Some see the Saudi effort as a mere propaganda tool for deflecting international attention for Saudi Arabia’s support for extremism. For instance, a New York Times editorial claimed that,

“It is hard to see Saudi Arabia, a Sunni-led state, as a serious partner against the Islamic State unless it stops financing the Wahhabi religious schools and clerics that are spreading the kind of extremist doctrine that is at the heart of the Islamic State’s ideology” (NYT, 2015).

An author has said that the coalition appears to have been hastily constructed. The absence of a phalanx of Muslim defence ministers or foreign ministers at the time of announcement is evidence that supports this perception. The credibility of the initiative was further undermined when Pakistan and Lebanon learned about their presumed membership only after the announcement. Moreover, other states that were touted as likely to join the group included Indonesia which had not yet decided to join (Jenkins, 2016).

Saudi Arabia’s track record of kingdom-ship, lack of democracy and violations of human rights also fuel scepticism over Saudi leadership of the coalition. Max Fisher, for instance, claimed that Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern regimes have cooperated for years to serve their dictatorships (Jenkins, 2016).

In May 2017, the Riyadh summit or Arab Islamic American Summit was convened by Saudi Arabia mainly to involve the Muslim states and the US. The summit was aimed at mutual commitment for global security and further strengthening business, cultural and political ties (Riyadhsummit2017). The summit had three significant aspects. One, it was part of Saudi Arabia’s strategy to reinforce its role as leader in the Gulf, Middle East, and the rest of the Islamic world. Second, the US commitment to ‘isolate Iran’ (Jamal, 2017) does not bode well for the regional security architecture nor for the progress of the IMA. Third, Trump’s first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia is also significant as the two countries struck a $110 billion defence deal (Thomas, 2017).

Given this context, the credibility and effectiveness of the alliance is questionable, especially when seen as a Sunni-dominated alliance against Shiite Iran. The current stand-off between Qatar and Saudi Arabia is also challenging not only for the GCC, but also for the greater regional alliance against terrorism.
Conclusion

The threat of growing terrorist networks in the shape of ISIS and Boko Haram is a common challenge to all Middle Eastern and extra regional players including Saudi Arabia and Iran, who look at each other with mistrust and suspicion. The IMA, spearheaded by Saudi Arabia is a Sunni-dominated alliance which excludes Iran, Iraq and Syria, thus raising questions over effectiveness and credibility of the group. A common defence is needed which should also include Shiite dominated states including Iran and Iraq. The exclusion of Syria from the alliance does not bode well for the effectiveness of the group where the evil of ISIL is generating and growing. An inclusive approach is therefore, needed to fight terrorism. Moreover, a clear policy guideline, command and control structure and strategy remain to be revealed. The US should assist the IMA in intelligence, reconnaissance and technology sharing. Pakistan’s role in terms of its history of fighting terrorism through its military operations is a role model for the IMA. To sum up, it is imperative that collective efforts should be made to fight the common challenge of terrorism, based on inclusiveness and non-discrimination.

References


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