



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Deconstructing the Islamic Military Alliance

June 08, 2017

Written by: Fatima Raza, Research Assistant

Edited by: Najam Rafique

The Islamic Military Alliance or the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT) announced by the government of Saudi Arabia in December 2015 is a military coalition of about 41 nations led by the Kingdom itself.



The purpose as evident from the name is to join forces and combat the common menace of terrorism. This initiative has been under some serious speculation in the world in general, and Pakistan in particular. From the very beginning, the coalition's mandate has been shrouded in mystery. Pakistan's inclusion in the coalition in 2015 was primarily announced by Saudi Arabia that took the general public by surprise as it had not been announced officially by the Pakistani government till that point in time.¹ However, later on, the appointment of the former Pakistan Army Chief Raheel Sharif as the Commander of the coalition confirmed Pakistan's inclusion in this alliance.²

Even after this rather conspicuous development, a debate continued regarding the pros and cons of Pakistan's involvement in the alliance and whether the government had officially signed any Terms of Reference (TORs) pertaining to the mandate of this coalition. In the simplest of terms, the air of controversy and ambiguity surrounding this coalition can be attributed to the fact that no structural, as well as policy mandate has been formulated for it yet. Regional and domestic politics has been brimming with misgivings regarding Pakistan's inclusion in the alliance and its position vis-à-vis Iran in particular which is not a part of this joint initiative of all Muslim nations.

However, it would be interesting to analyze the efficacy of this alliance in true letter and spirit by looking at various aspects of its formation. Will this alliance even be an effective measure to end the scourge of

¹ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1010757/pakistans-inclusion-in-saudi-alliance-sparks-confusion/>

² <https://tribune.com.pk/story/1389984/gen-raheel-sharif-gets-noc-head-islamic-military-alliance-sources/>

terrorism or not? Several other questions are to be considered as well. All of these will be address them one by one:

- If the alliance is predominantly 'Islamic' in nature, then why are countries such as Iran, Iraq and Syria not its members?
- The membership of this alliance comprises of about the 60% of OIC (Organization of Islamic Cooperation) members, which even after several decades of its inception, remains quite ineffective in bringing about any semblance of peace and stability to the Muslim world. How will this alliance among the same set of states be any different or more effective than OIC?
- Alliances based on integrated visions are likely to succeed more in their ambitions. However, the IMAFT comprises of countries that have previously disagreed on matters of military operations and security. For instance, the Yemen conflict and disparate stances of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is a clear cut reflection of two integral members of this alliance who do not see eye to eye on a grave matter of regional security.
- Another pertinent reservation is how effective this alliance can prove to be in terms of resolving the poster issues of the Muslim world? Palestine's occupation, the Kashmir conflict, Yemen war and the Syria crisis keep oozing fresh blood to date without any feasible solution in sight anywhere in the near future. Can this alliance practically resolve either of these issues through its joint reservoir of massive resources and manpower?
- Combating terrorism requires a two-pronged approach of first neutralizing the physical threat and then weeding out the causative factors behind this menace. After the military operations have been conducted, will there be any political, social or economic agendas put forth by the alliance to curb the extremist mindset that materializes into unwarranted violence of terrorism?

In order to be efficacious, alliances must abandon all values and practices that are biased, individualistic or sectarian in nature. Such multilateral goals are only achieved when unilateral interests are put on the backburner. However, the recent US-Arab countries summit in Riyadh was suggestive of an entirely different purpose. President Trump and his counterparts singled out Iran as the sole perpetrator of terrorism in the region.³ Such measures cast a shadow over the true motives behind the formulation of

³ <http://www.globalresearch.ca/an-unholy-alliance-trump-israel-and-saudi-arabia-targeting-iran/5592491>

this coalition. Some are of the view that this coalition is of Sunni-Muslim states which have joined hands against the Shia regime in Iran, Iraq and Syria. The deep sense of rivalry between Iran and the leader of this coalition, KSA, also accentuates this point.

Here comes into play the above mentioned pre-requisite for building a successful alliance which is to have integrated goals. The call for isolating Iran by Trump and Saudi Arabia reflects an individualistic approach towards issues of regional politics. Not all members of the coalition which were present in the US-Arab summit are rivals to Iran. For instance, Oman and Iran enjoy close diplomatic and trade links with each other, while Oman is part of the alliance in question. Any decisions to practically isolate Iran by the IMAFT shall also impact Oman's ties with the Islamic republic. According to experts, bilateral trade between Oman and Iran is likely to touch US\$5 billion within five years, from the current \$1 billion.⁴ This brings to light the ostensibly light, but deep-running cracks in the fabric of this alliance.

The tale of simmering differences among the members of this alliance does not stop here. The recent cutting off of ties by four Gulf states with Qatar is yet another fissure that challenges the worth of this coalition in question. It is being stated by Saudi Arabia, U.A.E, Bahrain and Egypt that this diplomatic boycott with Qatar is due to its armed support of terrorist groups. While the other reason of citing fake news has also come to light. In early June 2017, KSA, U.A.E and Bahrain blocked Qatari media outlets due to remarks allegedly made by Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim Al Hamad Al Thani, who reportedly hailed Iran as an "Islamic power" and criticized US President Donald Trump's policy towards Tehran.⁵ It was later on retracted by the Qatari authorities announcing that Emir's account had been 'hacked'. But even so, the rift among all these countries has only deepened.

The Iranian factor at the heart of this divide is too conspicuous to ignore. These developments call to attention the deep fissures that exist among Arab regimes. It also poses a serious question about the viability of an anti-terror alliance of countries who do not even agree with one another on which outfits are to be dubbed as terrorist organizations or not. Hence, it brings to light the lack of congruity on how to deal with such outfits while there is also a dearth of policies to deal with eradication of the extremist mindset that leads to the widespread aggression of terrorism.

While there are no two opinions about the necessity of such an alliance in the Middle East in particular and in the Muslim world in general, its practical usefulness may still be an elusive matter. Ironically, it is

⁴ <http://timesofoman.com/article/97368/Business/Oman-Iran-trade-soars-after-lifting-of-trade-sanctions>

⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/06/05/middleeast/saudi-bahrain-egypt-uae-qatar-terror/index.html>

President Trump's statement at the Riyadh summit that should broadly be the future trajectory for nations of West Asia, "The nations of the Middle East cannot wait for American power to crush this enemy for them."⁶ If these words are taken seriously as opposed to the person who said them, there might be a way to mend broken ties and deal with the anathema that plagues us all.

As far as the inclusion or exclusion of any Muslim country is concerned, it becomes an ethical and ideological conundrum to form an 'Islamic' coalition while leaving out any number of Muslim nations. Iran, Iraq and Syria are too significant for regional peace and stability to be left out of the alliance in question. Saudi Arabia as the theological hub of the Muslim world can invoke confidence and integration among different Muslim countries, but not without Iran's equal participation. It is high time that these two states try to bridge the wide gulf that has managed to keep the Muslim world divided for so long. The alliance, to be effective, shall only be fruitful if it includes *all* the countries of the Muslim world.

⁶ <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Watch-Trump-tells-Middle-East-step-up-in-fight-over-Islamist-extremism-492431>