

WHO LEADS THE UMMAH? THE MECCA PACT SAYS EVERYONE—AND NO ONE

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The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey represents a significant development in the evolving security architecture of South and West Asia. Although often portrayed as a potential “Middle Eastern NATO,” this issue brief argues that the defense pact’s immediate significance lies primarily in political coordination, deterrence, intelligence sharing, and defense cooperation rather than the creation of an integrated military alliance. The pact faces structural constraints arising from divergent threat perceptions, competing regional ambitions, overlapping alliances, and differing strategic priorities among its members. Nevertheless, its formation carries wider implications for Iran, the United States, Israel, and India. Potential expansion of the pact could generate a regional balancing effect, encouraging India, Israel, and the UAE to deepen their existing strategic cooperation while increasing U.S. involvement. The brief argues that such developments could ultimately produce an interconnected security architecture linking South and West Asia and significantly reshape the region’s strategic order.

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Mecca Pact: What Is It Really?

The Mecca Joint Defence Agreement is a trilateral defense partnership between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey, signed on August 7, 2026. In what appears to be an addition of the Turkish state to the already existing Saudi-Pakistan defense pact, the Mecca Pact aims “to strengthen collective deterrence against any act of aggression, and stipulates that any armed attack against

any one of the three states shall be regarded as an attack against them all,” according to the Saudi Press Agency.¹ The press release also stated that the agreement “provides for the enhancement of all aspects of defense cooperation among the three states.”

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after its signing. It remains unclear whether the pact is a standalone agreement or simply a revised version of the Saudi-Pakistan defense pact of 2025, which has also not been published. So, it clearly signals that the agreement itself aims to serve the purpose of the narrative rather than any substance.

While the specifics of the pact have not been provided, quite a bit can be understood from a closer observation of the official press communications surrounding the Mecca deal. Turkey presents this primarily as a Turkey-Saudi narrative, with Pakistan not even included in the title and only being referenced after the reader has engaged with the content.² This aligns with Ankara's focus on highlighting its strategic bilateral ties with Riyadh rather than promoting a trilateral alliance. Saudi Arabia, in contrast, demands a complete

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trilateral framing from the title onward, supported by the “Summit” branding, emphasizing its position as the organizer and mediator of a three-way agreement rather than merely a bilateral partner.³ Pakistan, on the other hand, reflects Saudi's “Summit” and “Makkah” branding and adds additional honorifics, emphasizing apparent equality and respect, probably to assure local audiences that Pakistan is a complete and valued partner rather than a minor addition.⁴

Contrary to the announced principle that an “attack on one is an attack on all,” the pact has already been put to the test when Houthi rebels in Yemen attacked Saudi Arabia, yet there has been no response from the Pakistani or Turkish side. Right now, experts such as Galip Dalay are stating that the framework is more about deterrence than collective defense.⁵ In a world where the United States is becoming an unpredictable strategic defense partner, this pact serves as a complementary framework to extend all three nations' defense capabilities while the U.S. is preoccupied with Iran.

The Rationale behind the Pact?

With the United States heavily focused on the Iran conflict, this may be a favorable time for the three countries to expand defense relations and develop a more independent regional security framework.

Since Saudi Arabia and Pakistan already have a defense pact, adding a third partner could significantly strengthen the existing framework.⁶ Turkey, in particular, brings important strategic advantages. A Saudi-Pakistan alliance alone would not give either country the capability to reach major cities in Western Europe. With Turkey's geographical proximity to Europe and its longer-range missile capabilities, including Tayfun Block-4⁷ and its Yildirim program,⁸ the alliance gains a much greater geographical reach. While

the possibility of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, or Turkey attacking Western countries is extremely low, maximum missile range and conventional military power are capabilities that states aspire to develop as part of establishing a strong deterrent. Such capabilities could, in turn, give the three countries greater autonomy in their foreign-policy decisions. At present, countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan remain highly dependent on the United States as a security guarantor, which can constrain their foreign-policy choices. This can be seen in Saudi Arabia's reluctant position toward the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as Riyadh preferred to contain Iraq rather than see it completely destabilized.

Moreover, there is a growing perception that the United States is becoming an increasingly unpredictable strategic partner.⁹ The latest escalation between Iran and the United States has further highlighted this uncertainty and may have encouraged the three countries to develop additional security arrangements that are less dependent on Washington.

Finally, Iran's position as Saudi Arabia's main regional rival makes the inclusion of Pakistan and Turkey strategically significant. Turkey shares Iran's northern border, while Pakistan shares its eastern border. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, sits across the Gulf from Iran and has access to its southern maritime approaches. A closer defense relationship between the three countries could therefore create a framework for applying pressure on Iran from multiple directions. Combined with the existing presence of U.S. military bases in the Gulf, such an arrangement could serve as a strong deterrent intended to keep Iran in check.

Why the Pact is Unlikely to Deliver?

While the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan is politically significant, turning it into an effective mil-

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itary alliance will be considerably more difficult. The agreement says that an attack on one member will be treated as an attack on all, creating a principle similar to NATO's collective-defence concept. However, several structural problems could prevent the pact from becoming a credible alternative to existing security arrangements.

First, the pact is partly caught up in competition for leadership of the Muslim world. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have different visions of regional leadership and have often pursued competing foreign policies. Riyadh sees itself as the principal political and religious center of the Arab and Muslim worlds, while Ankara has increasingly sought a larger independent regional role, at least in territory with Turkic populations. Bringing the two countries into a common military framework therefore does not eliminate their strategic competition. On the other hand, Pakistan, with the possession of nuclear weapons, surely has a mild superiority complex among the three. Also, the recent role it played in the mediation between Iran and the U.S. has boosted its international

stature. Thus, the pact could become another arena in which they compete for influence.

Second, Turkey's NATO membership creates an important problem of overlapping commitments. Turkey is simultaneously a member of NATO and the Mecca alliance. NATO's Article 5 requires allies to assist an attacked member, but it does not prescribe an identical military response; each country determines what action it considers necessary. Nevertheless, imagine a hypothetical conflict in which Saudi Arabia and the United States are on opposite sides. Turkey could find itself under pressure from two different strategic commitments. The problem is therefore not simply choosing between Article 5 and the Mecca pact, but determining which alliance takes priority when their strategic interests diverge. This ambiguity could weaken deterrence rather than strengthen it. Turkish officials have rejected claims that the Mecca Agreement constitutes a rival to NATO or conflicts with Article 5, instead presenting it as complementary to Turkey's existing alliance commitments.¹⁰ However, in the above-mentioned hypothetical situation,

the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement has failed before it started.

Third, the pact could pull its members into wars in which they have little or no strategic interest. Collective defense sounds attractive when the threat is clearly external and shared. But Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Pakistan do not have identical threat perceptions. A conflict that is existential for one country may be peripheral to another. If every bilateral dispute can potentially become a collective military crisis, members may eventually become reluctant to honor the pact. Moreover, unlike NATO, where the likelihood of armed conflict between member states is relatively low and collective defense is supported by decades of institutional coordination, the members of the Mecca Pact face much more immediate and frequent security threats. Pakistan faces the longstanding risk of conflict with India, while Saudi Arabia remains exposed to threats from Yemen, Iran, and other regional proxy groups. As a result, the pact could be activated by regional conflicts far more frequently than NATO, creating a risk of conflict escalation and entrapment, whereby members become involved in wars that may not directly serve their own strategic interests.

Fourth, the three countries already have different perceptions of what the agreement is supposed to achieve. Saudi Arabia appears primarily interested in strengthening regional deterrence and reducing vulnerability amid the current regional crisis. Turkey presents the agreement as a defensive framework that does not replace existing alliances and is potentially open to expansion. Pakistan, meanwhile, has its own priorities involving India, Iran, China, the United States and its economic dependence on Gulf partners. Pakistani officials have explicitly described the agreement as defensive and not directed against a particular country.

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This issue brief is not claiming that the deal has no meaning. The development surely has many lessons that the U.S. needs to learn if they wish to continue with the U.S.-led order in the region. Any form of defense cooperation does not appear out of nowhere or nothing. It signals that things are changing. But, it is not changing as much as is being claimed, and is nowhere near the imagined Middle Eastern NATO or the death of the U.S.-led order in the region. The Mecca Pact may, therefore, succeed as a mechanism for political coordination, intelligence sharing, arms cooperation, and deterrence, without becoming a Middle Eastern NATO. However, its greatest weakness is that its members share an identity and some security concerns, but do not necessarily share the same enemies, priorities, or willingness to fight the same wars.

Regional Implications of the Pact

The pact has led to a wide range of speculation about its possible implications in the regional and extra-regional order. This analysis would like to stress those key factors that might have a direct impact, at least in the narrative sense.

a. Iran factor

Iran will be the most affected country in the region as the pact signatories have a strategic presence around Iran. An attack on one member, in theory, could trigger a response against Tehran from Iran's northern, western and eastern borders simultaneously. Moreover, the fall of the Assad regime deprives Iran of the strategic influence it had in Syria, which had created a security dilemma for both Turkey and Saudi Arabia in the region.¹¹ On the eastern flank, while Iran's relationship with the Taliban-led Afghanistan has not been smooth but yet pragmatic,¹² recent skirmishes with Pakistan have opened a door for Iran to further strengthen this pragmatic relationship into an alliance.¹³ While the precise objectives of the pact are yet to be determined, it seems that it

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was designed to encircle Iran and place it under sustained pressure, particularly amid ongoing confrontations with the United States and Israel. However, if there is a bigger mandate of the pact, like balancing or hedging U.S. and Israel dominance in West Asia, then Iran can also be considered a suitable partner.

b. United States

The U.S. is not a regional actor but it has the biggest stake in the West Asia region. The pact signals a declining role for the U.S. as the principal security provider in the region. The relations of the U.S. with Turkey are already strained over several issues, including the Kurdish/YPG question, Ankara's acquisition of the S-400 air defense system from Russia, Erdoğan's increasingly independent foreign policy, and Turkish criticism over Israel and Gaza.¹⁴ A formal alliance between Turkey and Saudi Arabia is likely to reinforce Erdoğan's independent posture,

potentially opening the door to closer ties with Russia, sharper criticism of Israel, and intensification of the Kurdish issue. Similarly, the pact also allows Saudi Arabia to pursue a more autonomous foreign policy that may not necessarily align with the United States' interests. As a result, Washington's coercive capability in the Middle East is diminished by increasingly independent Saudi Arabia and Turkey. In the case of Pakistan, the U.S. influence remains substantial. Despite its formal alliance with Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Pakistan lacks the economic capabilities to pursue an independent foreign policy. This is evidenced in the U.S.-Pakistan bilateral trade deal arrangement that is being discussed currently, reinforcing Pakistan's dependence on the United States.

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c. Israel

The narrative of decreasing U.S. influence in the region will intensify Israel's security dilemma. While Iran remains Israel's primary adversary, its relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey are not particularly friendly. One of the key strategic advantages Israel had was the assumed but not yet declared possession of nuclear weapons.¹⁵ However, with the inclusion of Pakistan in this alliance, it has given both Saudi Arabia and Turkey a countermeasure against Israel's assumed nuclear deterrence. This will likely push Israel toward closer defense relations with India (a direct competitor of Pakistan) and the UAE (a direct competitor of Saudi Arabia), giving rise to a revised I2U2 framework incorporating defense cooperation.¹⁶ Given the ongoing defense pact discussions between India and the UAE, Israel's inclusion is plausible; indeed, one could argue that the India-UAE talks themselves are a response to the Saudi-Pakistan defense agreement. The addition of Turkey to the Saudi-Pakistan defense pact may prompt India and the UAE to strengthen their own defense arrangement and Israel represents a natural addition. Moreover, it is worth noting that Israel's repeated departures from Washington's policy to curb the war with Iran may further motivate Israel to deepen pragmatic partnerships with India and the UAE to reduce its dependence on the U.S.¹⁷

d. India

For India, the pact constrains its influence in the Middle East. Although New Delhi has sought a stronger relationship with Saudi Arabia, its consistent prioritization of the UAE appears to have eroded Saudi confidence in India as a reliable partner. Pakistan's acquisition of two significant Middle Eastern alliances is particularly notable, given that both India and Pakistan have historically competed in the Gulf across diaspora presence, economic trade, and military influence.¹⁸ That said, the prospect of Saudi Arabia

or Turkey materially supporting Pakistan in a potential conflict, such as a scenario resembling Operation Sindoor, remains unrealistic, as direct confrontation with India would carry prohibitive costs relative to any strategic benefit. Pakistan's alliance with the two states therefore represents a diplomatic victory in securing a regional defense partnership ahead of India in the region, though the arrangement functions primarily as a deterrent rather than a guarantee of active support; while India's actions might strain relations with Saudi Arabia and Turkey in the event of another Operation Sindoor-type episode, the likelihood of direct retaliation remains low.

The alliance nonetheless provides Pakistan with a diplomatic shield and access to Saudi financial resources and Turkish military technology, further strengthening a military posture already bolstered by Chinese support. Moreover, Bangladesh's recently expressed interest in joining the Mecca Pact could increase strategic pressure on India, particularly if the grouping expands further into South Asia.¹⁹ In response, New Delhi may have greater incentive to deepen its existing strategic partnerships with Israel and the UAE. Rather than producing a formal alliance immediately, this could contribute to the emergence of an interconnected security network linking South Asia with the Middle East, building upon existing India-Israel-UAE cooperation and the broader I2U2 framework. Such a development would represent a significant evolution in the strategic architecture connecting the two regions.

Therefore, while the Mecca Pact is currently structured as a trilateral defense agreement, the addition of further members could transform it into a broader regional alliance, expanding military and strategic cooperation across South and West Asia. Its potential expansion could trigger a regional balancing effect, with existing U.S.-backed groupings, thereby creating an intercon-

nected network of security partnerships linking South and West Asia. The involvement of the United States would be particularly significant, as it could connect these emerging regional arrangements to the existing American security architecture in the Middle East and South Asia. Such a development could fundamentally reshape the region's strategic landscape, transforming what has traditionally been treated as separate South Asian and West Asian security environments into an increasingly interconnected regional system.

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