

The Purpose of Saudi Arabia's Islamic Military Coalition

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Feb 4, 2016

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Brief Analysis

In a statement delivered at the King Salman Air Base in Riyadh in mid-December, Saudi Arabian Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the formation of an Islamic coalition to fight terrorism. The coalition was supposed to be comprised of 35 countries out of a total of 57 member-states of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Yet bin Salman failed to provide any further information regarding what this alliance is or what it is expected to accomplish in the near future. Instead, the coalition set the tone for the subsequent escalation of hostilities between Saudi Arabia and Iran, hinting at broader attacks in the future on what Saudi Arabia deems terrorist groups – Iran’s proxies.

A mere glance at the alliance and its formation reveals that the coalition is built on a sectarian foundation because of its exclusion of OIC members Iran and Iraq. The creation of the alliance served as one of the more recent gambits in the Sunni-Shiite conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran and its affiliates: the Houthis, the Popular Mobilization Forces, and Hezbollah. The Sunni coalition suggests an expansion of sectarian fighting, already visible in Nigeria when groups of Shiites were attacked in the north of the country, which resulted in several deaths and injuries. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called on his Nigerian counterpart to form a fact-finding committee to investigate the incident. Other examples can be found in the protracted conflicts taking place in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

On both sides, the term “terrorism” is ill defined, allowing enemies to be prosecuted as terrorists. For example, the Saudi Ministry of Defense recently placed twelve Hezbollah leaders on its terrorist watch list last November in a step towards escalating tensions with Iran. The Saudi ministry explained that, “Hezbollah has long spread chaos and instability,” conducted terrorist attacks, and practiced criminal activities around the world. However, this movement against Hezbollah before establishing the Islamic coalition implied that Saudi Arabia was interested in engaging militarily with Hezbollah directly.

Hezbollah reacted to the coalition by issuing a statement that, “The Islamic military coalition, which contains 35 countries led by Saudi Arabia, is suspicious and provokes skepticism surrounding Riyadh’s credibility in leading the alliance.” Similarly, Iraqi Chairman of the Security and Defense Committee Hakim al-Zameli said to Alsumaria news that, “The alliance recently formed by Saudi Arabia is sectarian,” and claimed that it “does not represent Islam.” Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi also commented, “It is only a coalition on paper and in the media. Our communications with several countries have revealed that they are not willing to contribute military forces to this

alliance.” Meanwhile, the Saudi execution of 47 people convicted as terrorists in January, including Shiite Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, further suggested that Saudi Arabia remains interested in escalating the tensions between it and the Iranian bloc.

And although the alliance may have been partially intended to help the situation in Syria, the coalition has rendered Syria’s existing conflict darker and more complicated. Iranian Foreign Minister Hussein Jaber Ansari’s claim that, “Tehran and Riyadh are exerting diplomatic efforts to create favorable conditions to start a direct dialogue to help settle their differences,” clashes with the Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Hussein Amir Abdul Allahaan’s formal statement that, “Some groups linked to ISIS have participated in the negotiations recently hosted by Saudi Arabia for Syrian opposition groups and factions in the capital of Riyadh.” Iran’s semi-official Fars News Agency also broadcasted media reports claiming that links have emerged between Riyadh and extremist groups, and Tehran has directed criticism at Riyadh for excluding Iraq and Syria from the coalition. This trend indicates that the language of accusation and escalation is being utilized by all parties to harm each other, and that both parties are moving farther away from negotiations and a peaceful solution.

On the other hand, Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri, the advisor to Saudi Arabia’s defense minister and spokesman for Operation Decisive Storm Forces, said that, “Anyone who sponsors terrorism cannot be a partner in the fight,” in reference to Tehran. Those statements were preceded by another recent comment he made from Cairo: “We are now discussing operations to fight terrorism, and if Iran intends to join this coalition, it should cease harming Syria and Yemen and refrain from actions which support terrorism in Lebanon and Iraq.”

But it appears that Cairo fears that the Islamic coalition will form an alternative to the Joint Arab Force project, and for this reason Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi emphasized in a recent meeting with Prince bin Salman in Cairo that, “The Islamic alliance to combat terrorism is not to become an alternative to the Joint Arab Force.” These fears were justified by Saudi Arabia’s cancellation of a meeting scheduled for Arab Ministers of Defense and Foreign Affairs last August to discuss mechanisms for implementing the Joint Arab Force. And in an apparently conciliatory gesture, Saudi Arabia introduced a generous new package of financial and oil aid to Egypt after announcing the coalition. In this way, Saudi Arabia was able to take advantage of the country’s worsening economic situation and ensure Egypt’s compliance.

In reality, the coalition’s lack of momentum, operational mechanism, or clear framework in the month since its announcement demonstrates that it does not present a serious alternative to the Joint Arab Force. Most supposed member states declared that they did not intend to furnish soldiers for combat but were willing to offer intelligence cooperation. In contrast to the coalition, the Joint Arab Force may produce up to 40,000 troops capable of intervening quickly and directly against any threat to the region, including the threat of terrorism.

This coalition is but a new adventure for Prince Mohammed bin Salman, drawing attention away from the failures of the previous coalition for his war on Yemen. However, it should be seen as an important step towards a building sectarian conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, and both sides’ interests in dragging the rest of the region into war.

Ramy Aziz is an Egyptian journalist based in Europe. This article was originally published on the [Fikra Forum website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8600#.VrR45PkrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8600#.VrR45PkrLIU) ❖

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