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The Mecca Pact and the Redefinition of Security in West Asia after the Iran War

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The Iranian Studies Unit

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Table of Contents

US Military Bases and US-Provided Security 1

Regional Alliances as a Possible Sign of Hegemonic Erosion 5

References 8

The joint US-Israeli war against Iran has raised fundamental questions about the durability of the prevailing US-led security order in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf. This article examines whether the war has damaged the material and political foundations underpinning the US military presence in the Gulf. Has the conflict generated greater insecurity within a US-led security order? And crucially, has it begun to displace the basing infrastructure through which that order is sustained? This possibility remains an open empirical question. Accordingly, the article seeks to understand whether damage to US military bases, pressures for troop withdrawals, and the relocation of military capabilities toward alternative locations such as Jordan or Israel represent temporary wartime disruptions or indicate a more durable process of strategic eviction from the Gulf.

Furthermore, the crisis has underscored a longstanding debate over whether durable security in the Gulf should be anchored in regional cooperation rather than sustained primarily through the permanent presence of an external power.¹ Of course, Iran's missile and drone attacks on several regional states were themselves among the major sources of instability. This reality raises a more fundamental question: Has a security architecture based on the US military presence succeeded in providing security for its host countries?

US Military Bases and US-Provided Security

For decades, the Gulf's Arab states have tied their security to the United States. Qatar, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and other regional states have hosted US military personnel, bases, and equipment, while the US military presence has constituted one of the principal pillars of the Gulf's regional security architecture. Scholarship on Gulf security has long highlighted this tension. In his study of the Gulf's security architecture, Mehran Kamrava argues that the region's prevailing security order is inherently unstable, in part because of the extensive US military presence and the reliance of regional states on Washington as an external security provider. He argues that the US military footprint across the region has itself become a source of chronic tension and insecurity.²

However, the 2026 war put this dependence to a real test. Iran's missile and drone attacks on the Gulf States demonstrated that neither security arrangements with Israel nor the presence of major US military bases, on their own, have been sufficient to guarantee their security. As Marwan Muasher of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace observed, Neither the Abraham Accords nor the presence of large US bases are enough to protect Arab Gulf states.³

In other words, threat identification and response to threats are made in Washington, not in the host country's capital, and the US military presence is to protect vital US interests, bases and forces.

1 Frederic Wehrey and Richard Sokolsky, *Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015).

2 Mehran Kamrava, "Structure, Agency, and Persian Gulf Security: Continuity amid Change," *Comparative Strategy* 44, no. 1 (2025): 115–129.

3 Marwan Muasher, "The Iran War Is Uncovering the Weakness in U.S.-Gulf Ties," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 1/4/2026.

The very nature of US security commitments leaves Washington with considerable discretion over the form and extent of its response to threats against its partners.⁴ For this reason, a country may host US forces for decades and yet, when war breaks out, find itself becoming a theatre of strategic competition itself.

The US has a broader set of global and regional interests, ranging from maintaining Israel's security and countering Iran to preserving its military presence and strategic influence in the Middle East.⁵ Also, freedom of navigation and the free flow of energy from the Gulf are considered important US interests in the region.⁶ The Gulf States, too, have direct interests in protecting their oil and gas infrastructure, safeguarding trade and maritime navigation, and preventing their territories from becoming theatres of military conflict.⁷ The recent war demonstrated that these interests can come into conflict with one another.

Even before the war, the academic literature on the Gulf had emphasized that the existing security architecture is inherently fragile because of its heavy reliance on an external power. The security relations in the Gulf are fluid in nature and that the reliance of smaller Gulf States on the United States for protection constitutes an important element of this structure.⁸

Within this framework, the war once again highlighted a reality embedded in the structure of US security policy toward the Middle East: Israel occupies a distinct position within Washington's security architecture. This position is reflected in official US policy through its commitment to maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge over other neighbouring militaries, as well as through special arrangements for military assistance and arms sales to Israel.⁹ Therefore, the issue should not be reduced to the claim that the US abandoned its allies. A more precise formulation is that the war demonstrated that being an ally of the United States does not amount to enjoying an absolute and unlimited security guarantee. This distinction is highly significant.

This issue is more than just a function of contemporary political relations; US-Israeli security, military, and intelligence ties have been institutionalized over decades. Consequently, when a regional crisis escalates into direct confrontation with Iran, Israel's security becomes a central consideration for Washington. This means that not all US partners carry equal strategic weight in Washington's calculations. Nevertheless, even if the US defends its Arab allies, the more important question is whether the US security model can shield them from the costs of a war that the US itself has entered. The answer suggested by the recent war is, at least in part, no.

4 Jennifer K. Elsea, *Defense Primer: Legal Authorities for the Use of Military Forces*, CRS In Focus IF10539 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 23/12/2025).

5 Jim Zanotti, *Israel: Major Issues and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report R44245 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 5/12/2024).

6 Clayton Thomas, *Iran Conflict and the Strait of Hormuz: Oil and Gas Market Impacts*, CRS Report R45281 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 4/8/2025).

7 Christopher M. Blanchard, *Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations*, CRS Report RL33533 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2/10/2023).

8 Kamrava, "Structure, Agency, and Persian Gulf Security".

9 Jeremy M. Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel: Overview and Developments since October 7, 2023*, CRS Report RL33222 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 28/5/2025).

For the past few decades, Iran has largely held the view that regional security should rely on regional arrangements and actors, with a reduction in dependence on foreign powers. From Iran's perspective, if regional states genuinely seek sustainable security, the long-term solution may lie in establishing an inclusive regional security architecture, one in which no foreign power can unilaterally determine the security of the Persian Gulf, and no regional power can disregard the security interests of its neighbors; a concept proposed in 2019 as the "HOPE" initiative.

Following the announcement of the trilateral defence pact between Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Türkiye, a particular phrase has been repeatedly circulated on social media: An attack against one member will be regarded as an attack against all members. At first glance, this wording closely resembles the language commonly associated with collective defence arrangements and may create the impression that, if a missile were to strike Riyadh tomorrow, Ankara and Islamabad would immediately enter the war as well. Such an interpretation, however, does not accurately reflect how defence pacts operate in the real world. There is an important distinction in international relations between a defence commitment and automatic entry into war. Even under NATO, the world's best-known example of collective defence, an attack against one member does not mean that all other members are automatically or immediately required to enter the war. More precisely, Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty obliges member states to provide assistance to the attacked ally, but it leaves the nature and scope of that response to the prerogative of each member state.

Accordingly, if Saudi Arabia were to come under attack, it would be inaccurate to assume that Türkiye and Pakistan would automatically and immediately enter into a full-scale war. This does not, however, render the agreement merely formal or symbolic. The principal strategic value of such defence arrangements often lies in the period before a war begins. Their purpose is to compel a potential adversary to consider whether an attack against one member would remain a bilateral confrontation or could instead trigger a broader regional crisis by drawing the other members into the conflict. For example, following the conclusion of this pact, the positions of Türkiye and Pakistan prior to any potential attack on Saudi Arabia must also be incorporated into an aggressor's strategic calculations. The attacker must consider whether Ankara and Islamabad would genuinely become involved and, if so, to what extent. This very uncertainty can constitute part of the deterrent power of a defence pact. In other words, military agreements do not necessarily imply participation in war; in some cases, they introduce uncertainty over whether a conflict will occur and how far it might escalate.

In practice, therefore, a signature on paper does not necessarily produce a genuine alliance. However, if, for whatever reason, the interests of the members of a pact overlap during a conflict, the agreement can make coordination, political alignment, and eventual participation in the conflict considerably easier. The central question, therefore, is whether a potential aggressor believes that an attack could escalate into a multilayered conflict involving additional states. The participation of Ankara and Islamabad elevates the agreement beyond a traditional bilateral relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan and transforms it into a broader form of security and geopolitical cooperation. Nevertheless, this development should not be overstated, because the three countries do not have

completely aligned interests. Saudi Arabia does not necessarily want to become involved in every crisis that might arise for Türkiye or Pakistan. Pakistan continues to regard India as its principal security concern. Ankara, meanwhile, is a NATO member and pursues an independent foreign policy that does not always coincide with the priorities of Riyadh or Islamabad.

The significance of the agreement, therefore, will depend on how the parties define an attack, what level of commitment they are prepared to undertake, and what decision-making mechanisms would govern their response under actual crisis conditions. This development should be viewed in the broader context of the Iran war and the growing uncertainty among regional states regarding the reliability of US security guarantees. If states in the region increasingly perceive that the US may no longer be able or willing to guarantee their security under all circumstances, it is natural for them to move toward greater defence self-reliance, regional security coalitions, and diversification of security partnerships. Pakistan's participation is particularly significant because it introduces a nuclear-armed state from outside the West Asia into a formal defence arrangement with a major Arab power. This could potentially alter regional deterrence calculations. At the same time, any conclusion that Pakistan would necessarily use nuclear weapons in the event of an attack on Saudi Arabia would go well beyond the actual provisions of the pact.

Nevertheless, Pakistan's status as a nuclear-armed state may enhance the alliance's political and strategic deterrent value. Its presence can introduce an additional layer of uncertainty into the calculations of any potential aggressor, even if there is no automatic or explicit nuclear commitment under the agreement.

West Asia appears to be moving toward three-layered and overlapping security architecture.

The first layer: Traditional alliances:

The United States + Israel + their Arab partners.

The second layer: Emerging regional coalitions:

Türkiye + Pakistan + Saudi Arabia.

The third layer: Flexible security networks:

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC),

Iran + Oman cooperation, maritime security arrangements, bilateral security cooperation between Iran and some of its neighbours, and other similar mechanisms.

In this sense, the new Mecca Pact can be viewed as one of the important indicators of a gradual transition from an externally outsourced security model toward the regionalization of security, that is, toward a security order in which regional states themselves assume a greater role in shaping and providing security. In hegemonic stability theory, a hegemon uses its dominant power to provide and maintain the public goods of international order and security, while bearing a disproportionate share of the burdens associated with sustaining that order.¹⁰ In West Asia, particularly in the Gulf,

¹⁰ Bradley Florian Podliska, *Acting Alone: U.S. Unilateral Uses of Force, Military Revolutions, and Hegemonic Stability Theory* (PhD diss., Texas A&M University, 2007); Wehrey and Sokolsky, *Imagining a New Security Order in the Persian Gulf*.

the US gradually emerged as the region's most important external security actor. Through military deployments, alliances, and security arrangements, Washington became increasingly central to the regional security order.¹¹ An important point in hegemonic stability theory is that a perceived decline in the hegemon's capability or willingness to provide security can alter the behaviour and calculations of its allies without it having to become objectively weaker. Gilpin argues that changes in the distribution of power can disrupt the existing international order, while the perceptions of other states regarding a state's capabilities and willingness to exercise power also shape the functioning of the system.¹²

Regional Alliances as a Possible Sign of Hegemonic Erosion

The new defence agreement between Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan can be understood as a sign of a gradual shift in the provision of security, from reliance on an external hegemon toward intra-regional and multilateral security arrangements. Rather than signalling the end of US hegemony, regional alliances, during the initial stages, may reduce the costs of maintaining US hegemony. For example, if Saudi Arabia establishes its own defence arrangements with Türkiye and Pakistan, the US may be able to shift part of the regional security burden onto its regional partners. This can be analysed through the concept of "burden sharing".¹³

Therefore, two competing interpretations can be identified: 1- Regional alliances = a sign of declining US hegemony, 2- Regional alliances = a redistribution of the security burden within a US-led order.

In the context of the contemporary Middle East, it appears that both processes are occurring simultaneously. A more important point: the Iran war may accelerate this process. The Iran war has created a credibility test for the hegemon. Because US allies do not look only at how much military power the United States possesses. They also ask a more consequential question: How much of that power will the United States actually be willing to deploy to defend us when a crisis occurs?¹⁴ For allies, therefore, the credibility of a security commitment depends not merely on the hegemon's material capabilities, but also on its perceived willingness to use those capabilities on behalf of its partners when the costs of doing so become substantial. On 7 September, a spokesperson for the Qatar Foreign Ministry announced that "having a strategic alliance with the US is very important, but not enough".¹⁵ This is precisely what the international relations literature refers to as the credibility of security commitments.¹⁶ If the response is ambiguous, allies may begin to insure themselves against uncertainty by diversifying their external security partnerships. In other words: "Alliance diversification".¹⁷

11 F. Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

12 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

13 Brian D. Blankenship, *The Burden-Sharing Dilemma: Coercive Diplomacy in US Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2023).

14 Muasher, "The Iran War Is Uncovering the Weakness in U.S.-Gulf Ties."

15 Reuters, "UAE says its energy exports will not be 'held hostage' by Iran war," 7/9/2026.

16 Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

17 Victor D. Cha, "Powerplay: Origins of the U.S. Alliance System in Asia," *International Security* 34, no. 3 (Winter 2009/10): 158–196.

The new Mecca Pact indicates a shift in the calculations of regional states and a move toward greater self-reliance and regional cooperation in a way that converges with a position that Iran has officially emphasized for years. In a recent response to the pact, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Esmail Baghaei described the development as a "sign of a change in the perception of regional countries", arguing that states in the region had come to recognize that security is not a "commodity that can be purchased from false security brokers". Baghaei viewed the pact as reflecting a regional shift toward greater reliance on self-help in security affairs rather than dependence on external powers.¹⁸ This interpretation is consistent with earlier academic literature on Iran's security policy. In his study of Iranian perspectives on security in the Gulf, Taremi argues that Iran favours a regional security arrangement involving the littoral states of the Persian Gulf and excluding extra-regional powers.¹⁹

In her research for Chatham House examining Iran's relations with the Gulf states, Sanam Vakil likewise points to Iran's proposal for establishing a security networking structure an arrangement in which both the larger and smaller Gulf states would participate within a regional security framework. The same study suggests that Middle Eastern states cannot rely indefinitely on the United States as their sole security provider and are likely to move toward diversifying their external relationships while increasing the role of regional security arrangements.²⁰ This orientation is also reflected in statements by officials from the signatory states. Pakistan's Foreign Minister, Ishaq Dar, has emphasized that the Mecca Defence Pact is defensive in nature and that its door remains open to the participation of other countries in the region. Such a position suggests that the agreement should not necessarily be understood as a narrowly defined trilateral alliance, but rather as a potential nucleus for a broader framework of regional cooperation and security.²¹

Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan has also emphasized that the Mecca Defence Pact is defensive in nature and is not designed against Iran or any particular country. He has also stated that Egypt could join the framework after certain technical issues are resolved. This suggests that the mechanism established by the agreement was conceived from the outset with the potential to expand to other countries in the region.²² Former Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also responded to the signing of the Mecca Pact by emphasizing the need for comprehensive defence agreements among Muslim countries. Referring to his earlier article, "Greater Israel and Our Strong Region," he argued that the racist and aggressive policy of Greater Israel makes the need for such defence arrangements increasingly evident.²³

Therefore, it can be argued that what we are witnessing today in the form of expanding security cooperation among regional states is not, from Tehran's perspective, merely a new development. Rather, it may represent the gradual realization of the logic of "regionalization of security" that Iran

18 "Iran Sees Mecca Defense Pact as Sign of Regional Shift," Tasnim News Agency, 10/8/2026.

19 Kamran Taremi, "Iranian Perspectives on Security in the Persian Gulf," *Iranian Studies* 36, no. 3 (2003): 381–391.

20 Sanam Vakil, *Iran and the GCC: Hedging, Pragmatism and Opportunism* (London: Chatham House, 2018), 14–15.

21 Reuters, "Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Pakistan Sign Joint Defence Deal amid Regional Turmoil," 7/8/2026.

22 Reuters, "Türkiye, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Defence Pact Technically Same as NATO's Article 5, Turkish Minister Says," 8/8/2026.

23 Islamic Republic of Iran News Agency (ISNA), "Zarif Stresses Need for Comprehensive Defense Pacts among Islamic Countries," 9/8/2026.

has emphasized for years. The important difference is that this time, the driving force behind this shift is not merely an Iranian diplomatic initiative. The experience of war, growing doubts about the reliability of external security guarantees, and heightened perceptions of vulnerability among regional states have also encouraged them to move toward greater cooperation and self-reliance. Recent independent analyses have likewise identified a similar trend: in the aftermath of the war, declining confidence in US security guarantees and the growing vulnerability of the Gulf states have contributed to the emergence of new ideas for regional security cooperation.



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