

Assessing the Middle East Strategic Alliance as a Counter to Iranian Influence

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Since the 2016 election of President Donald Trump, US-Iranian relations have steadily deteriorated, culminating in the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in May 2018.¹ At the same time, regional power dynamics in the Middle East, and subsequently US strategic goals, have shifted from a primary focus on terrorism to more traditional great-power competition.²

Because Iranian-trained, -funded, and -equipped militias have played such an integral role in the campaign against Islamic State (IS) forces in both northern Iraq and Syria, the territory once held by the extremist group is largely being ceded to those same Iranian proxies, giving ever more influence to an avowed American enemy. Geopolitically, the shift of these territories into the Iranian sphere of influence cuts a Shi'a stripe across the Sunni world, connecting Tehran to Damascus via Baghdad. Ali Younisi, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's adviser on ethnic and religious minorities affairs, even went so far as to say, "Baghdad is now capital of the Iranian empire."³

In this context, the Trump administration is actively pursuing the formation of the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a regional security structure including the United States, the six states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jordan, and Egypt.⁴ President Trump and others have informally referred to the proposed agreement as the "Arab NATO," but specifics about its organizational structure and its

scope and responsibilities remain ambiguous, as the alliance is still in its infancy.

Still, MESA's purpose is clear: to check Iranian influence in the region. Regardless of whether its official documents specifically mention the Islamic Republic, there is little doubt about the reason for its creation. As a secondary objective, MESA is also intended to reduce US involvement in the region and transfer regional responsibility to its partners.

This report assesses MESA's viability toward this end and concludes that MESA is not viable at this time. I reach this conclusion by examining the publicly available information about MESA and using research-backed conjecture and expert opinion to fill in the gaps. The report begins with an overview of MESA's likely organizational structure and scope, followed by an analysis of historically successful and unsuccessful military alliances in an attempt to illustrate lessons learned and best practices. I then examine three key MESA member states on five criteria: domestic stability, military capacity, alignment of national interest, economic factors, and role in the alliance. Next, I outline relevant topics that pose challenges and present opportunities for MESA and in doing so examine the pros and cons. In conclusion, I assess MESA's likelihood of success as outlined by the Trump administration, as far as is known at the time, followed by a brief discussion of the reasoning for the negative conclusion and possible courses of action moving forward.

The Middle East Strategic Alliance

MESA is an attempt to adapt US strategic policy to shifting power dynamics in the Middle East. In the same way that the many Western European nations and the United States presented the Soviet Union with a united front during the Cold War, MESA is intended to unify the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and the United States against the rising Iranian threat. Further, transferring responsibility from the United States to its regional partners as their capabilities evolve is consistent with broader US policy in recent decades.

The vision for MESA is a region in which the so-called Shi'a Crescent is never fully materialized and Iran's various proxies do not have the capability to sow discord and advance Iranian interests.⁵ MESA is designed to meet two US goals: preventing an openly hostile state from acquiring unchallenged control of a region vital to US interests and the global economy at large and reducing US involvement and fiscal commitment in the region.

Because little is known about the Trump administration's plan for MESA, this report pieces together known elements with likely structures to provide a broad perspective of MESA's ostensible organizational framework. Further, it identifies the scope of MESA's operations, its regional responsibilities, and other conceivable uses for the alliance. Finally, it addresses several key questions.

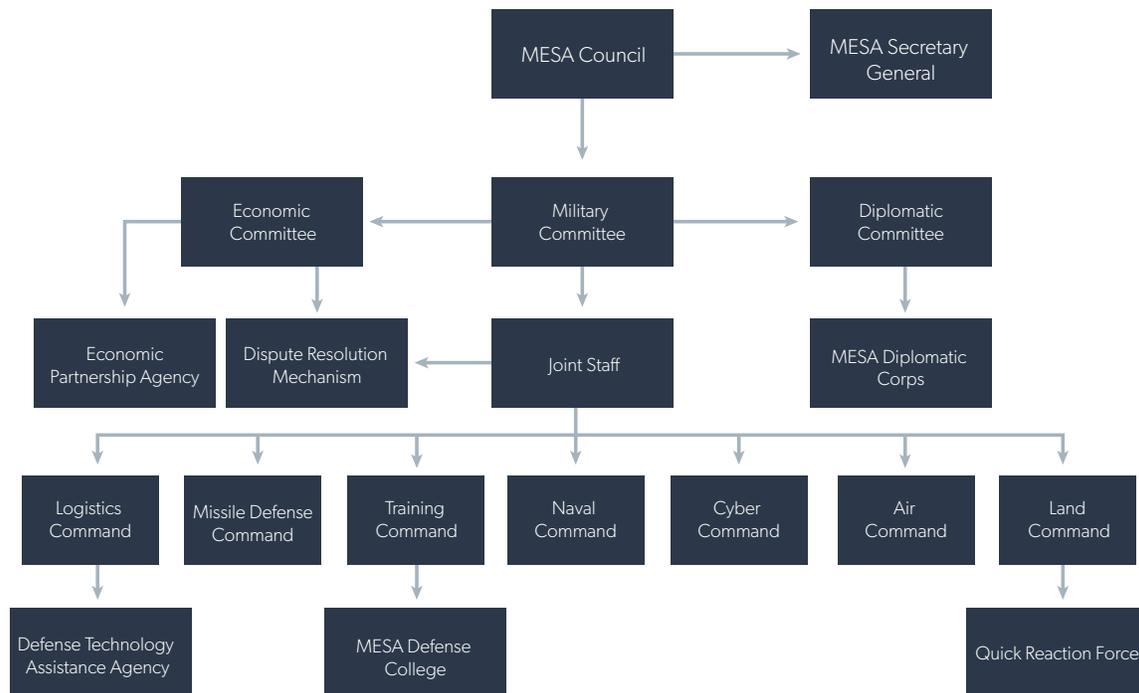
Likely Organizational Structure. On September 26, 2018, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Arabian Gulf Affairs Tim Lenderking gave an interview to the *National* in which he named nine countries to be included in the alliance: the United States, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).⁶ US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with GCC officials on October 1, 2018, to further discuss details of MESA, but organizational details remain sparse in its early development phases.⁷ Because the alliance is widely known to be modeled after NATO in at least a broad, conceptual manner, its organizational structure is likely to be similar as well.

To be perfectly clear, the proposed structure in this report is the product of my informed conjecture and does not represent official plans by the United States or others. To that end, Figure 1 illustrates a proposed organizational structure for MESA. Similar to NATO, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), MESA would be led by a council. The MESA Council would be responsible for leading the organization, deciding the direction of the alliance, and overseeing implementation of its directives. The council's authority would be largely vested in the MESA secretary general, the head administrative position in the organization. The secretary general and council would oversee the three committees that represent the three ways in which MESA intends to influence the region: economically, politically, and militarily. The committees would be staffed ceremonially by the respective member states' defense, economic, and foreign ministers, whereas representatives would be chosen to conduct the majority of the work.

The Diplomatic Committee, as well as the MESA employees who comprise the MESA diplomatic corps, would be responsible for external and internal diplomatic negotiations. If disagreements arise between member states or between MESA and external entities, these diplomatic professionals would be tasked with resolving conflict peacefully and responsibly.

The Economic Committee would be designed to facilitate economic cooperation among member states. Because MESA is primarily intended to counter the Iranian threat in the region, the economic partnership among member states is an attempt to economically isolate Iran in conjunction with ever-tightening US sanctions. Toward that end, the final MESA charter should include provisions for a free trade agreement (FTA). Both the Economic Partnership Agency and Dispute Resolution Mechanism would work to ensure an equitable and efficient implementation of this FTA.

Finally, the Military Committee, the largest subset of MESA, would handle all military matters. Because MESA is modeled after NATO, which in turn is modeled after the US military, a joint staff would direct all military operations. Underneath the joint staff would

Figure 1. Suggested Organizational Structure for MESA

Source: Author.

be seven commands to oversee each type of conflict MESA forces might encounter. Of note are three further subsets: the Quick Reaction Force, the Defense Technology Assistance Agency, and the MESA Defense College.

The Quick Reaction Force, under the Land Command, would be an agile and adaptable force to respond to small-scale, immediate threats to security or sovereignty. With the proper training, technology, and scope of operations, the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) could conceivably fulfill this role.

The Defense Technology Assistance Agency would serve as a forum through which the United States could supply high-quality military technology to member states at discounted prices and provide that technology's specialized repairs, maintenance, and updates.

The MESA Defense College would be one of the alliance's most crucial institutions. A central theme throughout the MESA structure and doctrine is the United States' receding role. The challenge of

creating a military alliance out of thin air necessitates US leadership in its beginning stages. Still, this must be balanced with the understanding that the Trump administration's vision for MESA is one of decreasing US leadership (and financial commitment) paired with increased partner responsibility. Because of the high quality of Saudi military technology and the kingdom's financial wealth, its ongoing challenges in Yemen clearly are the result of a lack of effective and tested training and military doctrine. The MESA Defense College, modeled heavily after the US Department of Defense's National Defense University, is intended to address such shortcomings.

The purpose of the Defense College, much like the Defense Technology Assistance Agency, is to provide uniformity in strategies and doctrines so that MESA field commanders, whether Emirati, Egyptian, or Kuwaiti, would have a common understanding of how to employ the troops under their command. The Defense College, staffed heavily by US military personnel at its inception, would

provide the long-term professional development for MESA military leaders, which would be deployed on the battlefield and exported to their respective member countries' military forces in training procedures and warfighting tactics.

From the onset, US leadership is necessary. This means that the secretary general, at least for the first few terms, should be an American. Further, US military personnel should fill many of the joint staff positions and leadership positions in the lower commands.

However, such a structure is *not sustainable*. The longer the United States keeps its military officers and officials in MESA leadership positions, the more likely its regional partners will view MESA as an American venture rather than a mutually beneficial endeavor. In this way, MESA will be different from NATO, the CSTO, or the SCO, in which a global hegemon is the de facto leader of the organization. As the alliance matures, a transfer of leadership from the United States to its regional partners must occur. If it does not, MESA runs the risk of being perceived as a foreign puppet, which, as with the Baghdad Pact, would likely inhibit long-term viability for the alliance.

Scope of Operations and Regional Responsibilities. In the same way that NATO has yet to be involved in large-scale organized conflict, the hope is that MESA too would deter such conflict in the region. Because of the nature of military engagement in the Middle East, MESA needs to be prepared for not only conventional warfare but also small-scale, intermittent security threats and guerilla-style insurgency.

Conceivably, the alliance would have four main purposes: (1) to secure freedom of navigation in crucial international waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal; (2) to deter large-scale conventional conflict with member states; (3) to respond to threats, military or otherwise, to the stability of member states' governments; and (4) to combat guerilla-style insurgencies harming regional stability. Therefore, MESA forces would likely be involved in the Yemen campaign in some capacity if it is still ongoing after MESA has been established and its forces properly trained in counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, and guerilla warfare.

To maintain a high degree of readiness for conventional warfare, MESA should conduct annual large-scale military exercises in the same way that the CSTO and NATO regularly engage with their member states. Because military exercises both enhance readiness and send messages to potential adversaries, MESA military exercises might include such scenarios as an Iranian attack on the Saudi mainland or an Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) takeover of a disputed island in the Persian Gulf. Along with these theoretical scenarios, IS or an associated offshoot could make a resurgence in Syria or Iraq, drawing MESA forces into combat.

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Perhaps the most-used function of the alliance would be its ability to safeguard the integrity of international waterways. Although the US Fifth Fleet is not going anywhere anytime soon, over time, this potential transfer of responsibility also meets the subsidiary goal of the Trump administration's foreign policy at large: to decrease US investment worldwide while demanding more from its international partners. This is likely the aspect of the alliance the United States is least likely to

delegate to its partners, but, nevertheless, the Fifth Fleet could—even if in name only—operate under MESA’s authority, similar to how US troops in the European theater are subservient to NATO command and control.

Finally, MESA’s role as a guarantor of member states’ respective governments is crucial to the alliance’s longevity. As was witnessed with the fall of the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), though external forces certainly contributed to its failure, the most damaging blows were when coups or revolutions led to new governments that subsequently withdrew from the organization. Similarly, the quickest way for MESA to crumble is for its member states to experience domestic instability sufficient to cause them to waver in their international commitments.

As discussed above, the PSF is a contender to fill this role. Its intervention in Bahrain in 2011 represents its only (arguably) successful military operation, and it is presently ill-equipped for the extended combat operations it would likely encounter in Yemen.

Key Questions. Two hallmark characteristics of NATO could pose problems for MESA. The first is the requirement that member states spend 2 percent of their gross domestic product (GDP) on defense. This has been an increasingly hot-button issue under the Trump administration, as the president and senior defense officials have pushed NATO members to meet their 2 percent commitments. At times, the United States has even suggested that its commitment to its NATO allies would be contingent on whether it believes they have met their NATO fiscal obligations.⁸

Transplanting this concept into MESA would be challenging, at least initially. Saudi Arabia and the United States could certainly meet this goal, but smaller, less-committed countries might be inclined to wait until the alliance has proved its worth before they fully invest. For this reason, MESA should not adopt NATO’s 2 percent GDP requirement at the outset. If MESA becomes a viable strategic entity, it could consider adopting the 2 percent requirement at that time.

The second NATO structure to be considered in the creation of MESA is NATO’s Article 5 mutual defense

clause. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty calls on all NATO member states to consider an attack on one NATO ally as an attack on the entire alliance. This constitutes a particular challenge to MESA because of the nature of warfare in the region. MESA members are most likely to encounter intermittent, unconventional, and guerilla conflicts. Unlike the threat posed by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, this threat is posed by a number of versatile and sometimes clandestine groups. Certainly, there is a distinct difference between a full-scale Soviet invasion of West Germany and IS skirmishes with the Egyptian army in the Sinai Peninsula. In the former case, the United States would be obliged to bring the full force of its military to bear in a confrontation with the USSR, whereas in the latter situation, by the time MESA troops arrived on scene, the battle would be finished, and the extremist militias would likely have disappeared into their hiding places.

Another consideration with Article 5 is how MESA would regard attacks perpetrated by proxy forces. It is very much in the interests of Iran and other destabilizing powers to use proxies to chip away at their enemies. This allows a state to train, equip, and direct a force to do things it does not want to do under its own flag, and when the international community voices concern, proxy warfare grants plausible deniability, allowing a state to feign innocence. Iran has used such forces to great effect, targeting Saudi Arabia via Yemeni Houthis and Israel via Hezbollah, among others. Thus, it is entirely reasonable to consider whether a proxy attack on a MESA member state would invoke an Article 5 clause, drawing retaliation against not only the proxy force itself but also the power behind the proxy force. Certainly, this issue should be addressed at length when building the MESA framework, but it seems that in the same way Saudi Arabia does not fire missiles at Tehran when Houthis attack Saudi sovereignty, so too would MESA likely retaliate solely against the entity committing the violence.

Using an Article 5 requirement in MESA’s founding document would necessitate carefully defining what constitutes an attack on a member state and the type of force the alliance would use to respond in such an event. It should be designed to deter large-scale conflict with conventional forces while attempting to

bind member states together in the event of legitimate threat to sovereignty from asymmetric forces.

By its very nature, an international cooperative organization is difficult to build. Regardless of the strength of the alliance, at some point the members will have competing interests. During the Cold War, the Soviet threat was so close to European states that the concern for their very existence was enough to bind them together despite any trivial disagreements that might have arisen. Is the Iranian threat significant enough to do the same for the members of MESA? And if so, will it continue to be in the future? Although the members of the GCC perceive Iran as a serious threat, few consider it an existential threat as the Soviet Union was to Western European states during the Cold War.

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It is difficult to quantify the threat that one state poses to another and even more difficult to set a threshold of threat necessary to bind a group of states together for a shared purpose. Additionally, such a measure continually fluctuates. Further, although Egypt, the member state with the strongest military except the United States, is threatened by Iran's regional ascent in the abstract, it is not as geographically close to Iran as the GCC states are. Expectations for the alliance should be set with the understanding that increasingly drastic measures taken by MESA would require a proportional increase in the Iranian threat.

Because of its geostrategic position, Jordan is of particular interest to the alliance. Although

predicting with absolute certainty the nature and duration of future armed conflict is impossible, Jordan is surrounded by known hot spots for potential future friction with MESA. To the north are Syria, a power vacuum ripe for destabilizing insurgency, and Lebanon, the home of Hezbollah. On the northeast, Jordan borders Iraq, a perennial zone of conflict. To the west, it shares borders with Israel and the West Bank, an active theater of operations for Hamas. This, combined with the long-standing positive relationship between the United States and Jordan, justifies Jordan's inclusion in MESA as the only non-GCC member—save Egypt—in the organization, but it may warrant even stronger emphasis in practical operations of the alliance.

Although one alliance goal is to deter large-scale, conventional warfare with Iran or others, this is decidedly the least likely form of warfare in which MESA would engage. This is not to say that MESA military assets should not be strategically located to defend more geographically insulated countries such as Egypt or Saudi Arabia, but this understanding does call for a greater devotion of troops, infrastructure, and strategic planning to either the defense of Jordan or its use as a forward operating base of sorts. Conceivably, if MESA wages counterterrorism or counterinsurgency operations against a potential resurgence of IS in Iraq or Syria, Jordan would be a prime candidate for basing of direct action, intelligence, and logistical support for MESA operations. Alternatively, if such an insurgency decides to actively target the alliance, the easiest mark for their often-outdated military weaponry would likely be Jordan. Regardless of whether MESA planners decide that either of these scenarios are realistic, they should pay special attention to the opportunities and vulnerabilities presented by including Jordan in MESA.

Finally, the role of Israel must be addressed. The US-Israeli relationship is extremely important to the United States, especially to the Trump administration. Therefore, Israeli opinion of MESA is presumably an important factor in whether the organization becomes a reality. In fact, one principal reason for the United States' inability to join CENTO was the US-Israel lobby's opposition to the idea.

However, circumstances have changed since the 1950s. Israeli-Arab relations have progressively warmed over the past decade. Certainly, there is alignment between the GCC and Israel on the Iranian threat, but Arab states have traditionally maintained secrecy about their dealings with Israel. In late October 2018, however, the Omani Sultan Qaboos received Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Muscat at the same time that Israeli Culture Minister Miri Regev met with Emirati officials in Abu Dhabi.⁹ Both trips were groundbreaking and could represent greater Arab-Israeli partnership in the future. This bodes well for MESA becoming a reality in the near future because the US-Israeli relationship would apparently not be a barrier to the alliance.

Successful Military Alliances

This report analyzes three successful military alliances to isolate positive characteristics, structures, and best practices likely to be employed in MESA. By understanding what has led to successful international cooperative organizations in the past, one can better understand MESA's viability today. The three alliances are NATO, CSTO, and SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS).

In a general sense, an international cooperative organization succeeds by achieving its goals. Because NATO, CSTO, and RATS have different goals, success looks quite different for NATO than it does for RATS or CSTO.

North Atlantic Treaty Organization. NATO was established in 1949 by the United States, Canada, and a number of Western European states.¹⁰ Initially, the alliance's purpose was multifaceted. Certainly, the obvious purpose was to deter Soviet aggression in Europe, but it also had auxiliary functions. The strong American presence on the continent was intended to prevent the revival of a nationalist and militaristic Europe that largely led to World War II and to encourage European political reintegration in the wake of the deadliest conflict in human history.¹¹

After the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO played modest roles in the Yugoslav conflict in 1995 and in Kosovo in 1999.¹² The September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, however, radically shifted NATO's mandate in a way that persists to this day. After the attacks, NATO invoked Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty for the first and only time to date, calling all alliance members to the common defense of an attacked ally. The alliance agreed on a package of eight measures to support the United States and launched its first-ever anti-terror operations: Eagle Assist and Active Endeavour.¹³ NATO would remain active throughout the remainder of the war on terror, with different alliance members taking on different leadership roles in the fight against the insurgency in Iraq and leading the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan.

Scope of Operations. From 1949 until 1990, NATO was not involved in a single military engagement. Still, because NATO's primary purpose in the immediate postwar period was to serve as a buffer to Soviet aggression, this was a successful outcome for NATO.

Following the fall of the Soviet Union, NATO was involved in peacekeeping and stabilization operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina and minor preventative operations in Turkey in support of the First Gulf War. After the September 11 attacks on the United States, NATO's focus shifted toward anti-terrorism operations. Starting with Operating Eagle Assist from 2001 to 2002, seven NATO radar aircraft patrolled and monitored US airspace. In 2003, the same radar aircraft participated in Operation Display Deterrence, intended to enhance Turkey's defense during the Second Iraq War. Operation Active Endeavour, also initiated in the immediate aftermath of the September 11 attacks, involved NATO forces conducting anti-terrorism operations in the Mediterranean and along crucial shipping routes.¹⁴

During the war on terror, NATO protected public events; rendered aid in Darfur, Pakistan, and the United States; and conducted anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and off the Horn of Africa. However, NATO's most significant operations continue to

be in the Iraqi and Afghan theaters. NATO Training Mission in Iraq (NTM-I), established in 2004, and the ISAF, formed in 2003, were both designed primarily to build the capacity of the Iraqi and Afghan security forces respectively, though ISAF troops did engage in limited combat operations. NTM-I ended in 2011, and ISAF concluded in 2014.

Operation Resolute Support, currently ongoing in Afghanistan, commenced in 2015 shortly after ISAF concluded. Much like ISAF, Resolute Support is a training and advisory mission. The NATO Mission in Iraq, formally begun in 2018, is a capacity-building mission in coordination with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS.¹⁵ Finally, NATO maintains ongoing missions in support of the African Union to secure the Mediterranean and for air policing.

NATO's military operations have largely been characterized by a defensive nature in mostly advisory or support roles. This has not always been the case; non-US coalition fatalities from 2001 to 2017 in Afghanistan totaled 1,130.¹⁶ Still, over half of those fatalities came from two nations, with the majority of alliance members having fewer than 50 fatalities.

Further, alliance members played different roles in different conflicts. Traditionally, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States have taken the lead in operations with both manpower and funding, while most other nations played supporting roles. This is due to several factors, such as domestic political dynamics and economic conditions. Still, NATO has relied heavily on US troops and coffers.

Key Points. Because MESA is said to be modeled heavily after NATO and because NATO is the world's premier international military alliance, it might be worthwhile to closely examine several key takeaways from its nearly 70-year history.

NATO's unprecedented success is largely due to its ability to operate in spheres other than military might. The organization's commitment to its role as a political mediator and stabilizer is evident even in its charter, specifically Article 2. Arguably, given the aversion to armed conflict with the Soviet Union over a 50-year period, the strengthening of alliance members' political institutions in alignment with broader

NATO and Western governance philosophy contributed just as much to the end of the Cold War as did the organization's military might.¹⁷

The North Atlantic Council, the governing body established by Article 9, serves this purpose. With permanent representatives to member states, the council is intended to coordinate political positions in the alliance.

Often, NATO has used membership as an incentive for the democratization of potential member states' political and economic institutions.¹⁸ Moreover, though not within the NATO framework, economic measures were actively pursued to strengthen European allies in conjunction with the organization's political and military efforts. The Marshall Plan was the most comprehensive of these efforts, and though it ended officially in 1951, its effects lasted well into the Cold War and arguably to this day.

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Drawing from lessons learned in the NATO experience, MESA should take away two key points: More than military might is required for an international alliance to be successful, and political uniformity among member states and the political integration of new members play a role in the alliance's military and strategic cohesion. The former point is largely addressed by MESA's proposed FTA, the creation of MESA institutions for standardized instruction, and a structure modeled largely after NATO. But political uniformity and integration are particularly relevant for MESA given the wide range of

governments and political philosophies espoused in the alliance. Even though Turkey and Eastern European states with a more heavy-handed and authoritarian history are not carbon copies of the open democratic systems of Germany and the United Kingdom, NATO partners can usually agree—at least nominally—on liberal Western values. This is not the case with MESA members.

The United States governs differently than does Egypt or Saudi Arabia. Many Gulf states are not shy about the extent of their nondemocratic institutions and illiberal cultural values. Abuses tolerated by some of its Middle East partners are considered unacceptable and unconstitutional in the United States, increasing the likelihood of internal discord within the alliance over differing policies and practices among member states.

NATO members were able to bind together so closely because of their shared values and a shared threat to those same values. This is not to say that MESA is an impossible concept without a convergence in values and governance among member states. But if history is a reliable indicator, MESA states may either slowly conform to the US form of governance—an extraordinarily positive development—or gradually drift apart from one another to a point where the alliance is of no practical use.

Further, NATO's experience in adapting to meet the challenges of a post-Soviet world is useful for MESA as well. In particular, the alliance's mobilization and subsequent participation—even if in name only—in the war on terror is a stark lesson in the challenges of international alliance building. Few are unaware of the Trump administration's calls for American partners to contribute more on international agreements, but such calls date back at least two administrations. In 2007, US Secretary of Defense Bob Gates spoke to leaders of 38 European militaries:

If an alliance of the world's greatest democracies cannot summon the will to get the job done in a mission that we agree is morally just and vital to our security, then our citizens may begin to question both the worth of the mission and the utility of the 60-year-old trans-Atlantic security project itself.¹⁹

As the conflict escalated, greater contributions were naturally required of member states, both monetarily and in human capital. Yet clearly, all was not rosy in NATO dealings during the war on terror, specifically in the Afghanistan campaign.

In a RAND Corporation book, Andrew Hoehn and Sarah Harting describe the situation:

The underlying issue of troops and equipment has renewed a long-standing NATO discussion about money, specifically over who in NATO is spending what for defense. . . . [Such internal discord] may be viewed as an indicator of a lack of support for the mission in Afghanistan and may endanger the cohesion of the alliance more broadly.²⁰

As NATO evolved to remain relevant after the reason for its very existence had dissolved, it encountered the challenge of corraling its members' resources and unified will to accomplish the mission.

Achieving a shared understanding of how a specific goal is in the interests of a given member state and the broader alliance is one thing, but actually committing state funds—and more importantly the lives of the state's youth—is a totally different challenge. In the case of NATO, we can see that the alliance survived the war on terror largely because the United States chose to bear the burden in cost and manpower that its partners chose not to bear. Because the Iranian threat is not as existential as the Soviet threat was to European states, MESA will need to be especially mindful of the demands it makes of its member states.

Success of NATO. For NATO, its purpose was always well-known: to serve as a counterbalance to the Soviet Union and, if necessary, to defeat it in armed conflict. After the Soviet Union's fall, NATO's mission has largely remained focused on Russia, moving into a phase of geopolitical strategic competition rather than the armed standoff of the Cold War. When global threats changed, NATO adapted to meet those challenges in the war on terror, and it remains an important international institution to this day.

Therefore, NATO is a successful alliance because conflict with the USSR was avoided throughout the

Cold War, the USSR disbanded, NATO remains, and NATO has adapted to meet the new challenges it faces in the post-Soviet era. Characterizing NATO as the most successful military alliance in the history of warfare is not an exaggeration.

Collective Security Treaty Organization. The CSTO was conceived as Russia's counterbalance to NATO in the wake of the Soviet Union's dissolution. Even though former Soviet bloc countries derived greater degrees of freedom and national sovereignty because of the USSR's fall, it also presented challenges. Economically, these states had to transition from a socialist command economy to a free, mixed-market economic ecosystem, and politically, the oppressive but stable communist governments were replaced with highly volatile and often ineffective multiparty political systems.²¹ Further, most of these states were largely excluded from Western and typical Eurocentric institutions such as the European Union and NATO. During this turbulent period of change and exclusion, members—led by Russia—coalesced together and formed the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in 1991. The CIS would lay the groundwork for what eventually became the CSTO.

In May 1992, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan signed the Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (CST).²² Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Georgia signed the CST in 1993, and the treaty came into force in 1994 for a term of five years. In 1999, the leaders of Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan voted to extend the CST for another five years, while Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Uzbekistan chose to leave the organization.

At the 2002 session of the CST, parties to the agreement decided to transform the CST into a full-fledged international cooperative organization, formally creating the CSTO. The UN General Assembly then granted the CSTO formal observer status in 2004, followed soon after by Uzbekistan's reentry into the organization until it once again withdrew in 2012.²³ Finally, in 2009, a special session of the Collective Security Council in Moscow passed a resolution to create the Collective Rapid Reaction Force, a

joint task force of combined military units from member states designed to counter limited attacks and threats against member states, such as terrorism and organized crime.²⁴

Scope of Operations. The CSTO has yet to engage in any meaningful military operations in the way that NATO has over the past few decades. The organization had an opportunity to do so in 2010, when ethnic clashes broke out between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz.²⁵ Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva requested CSTO troops to quell the unrest, but the organization declined to get involved. Further, when President Otunbayeva later suggested deploying CSTO troops in southern Kyrgyzstan as a stabilizing force after the conflict had subsided, his requests were largely ignored.²⁶

Rather, CSTO member state militaries primarily engage with one another in large-scale military exercises. Some notable examples include the organization's first-ever "peacekeeping" exercises in 2012, Enduring Brotherhood 2014 in Kyrgyzstan, Unbreakable Brotherhood 2017 in Kazakhstan, Combat Brotherhood 2018 in Tajikistan, Rubezh 2018 in Tajikistan, and Combat Brotherhood 2018 in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.²⁷

Critics characterize these exercises as a smoke-screen for Russian aggression, but smaller CSTO member states nonetheless happily agree to the maneuvers, as they provide the closest thing to real-world combat experience for their militaries without casualties. Moreover, Russia sells arms at a discount to CSTO member states, creating a state of reliance on the Russian Federation for services and technical expertise. Any dichotomy between Russian interests (geopolitical counterbalance to NATO and cover for military exercises) and other CSTO member state interests (domestic stability and anti-terrorism and anti-transnational crime capabilities) is largely reconciled by these concessions.

Success of the CSTO. The CSTO is considered successful for different reasons and to a lesser degree than NATO. The CSTO lacks the international prestige of NATO, not the least because its member states

other than Russia are at best moderately strong militarily. Still, the organization has been successful because it has largely served the interests of its member states. For Russia, the organization has allowed it to practice large-scale military maneuvers under the guise of alliance readiness and to fortify its geopolitical buffer. For the smaller member states, the CSTO has given them access to Russian-made military technology at discounted prices, and the organization's emphasis on anti-terrorism and anti-transnational crime is in line with the interests of Central Asian regimes prone to instability.

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Although not as powerful as NATO and lacking the international prestige and recognition of its transatlantic counterpart, the CSTO has nevertheless served its members' interests.

Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure. RATS is a permanent body of the SCO, an international political, economic, technological, and military cooperation organization. The SCO Charter was signed in 2002 by SCO members' heads of state and entered into force in September 2003. The SCO, and by extension RATS, is comprised of eight member states: China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan,

and Uzbekistan. The organization has four observer states (Afghanistan, Belarus, Iran, and Mongolia) and six dialogue partners (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cambodia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Turkey).²⁸ The organization as a whole is mostly economic and political and was not necessarily formed as a geopolitical strategic bloc in the way that NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the CSTO were.

China's role in the SCO is similar to Russia's in the CSTO or the United States' in NATO, though to a lesser degree. Consistent with the SCO's largely economic nature, the Chinese economic powerhouse is the de facto leader of the SCO. Yet China's rising military capacity is also manifested in the organization, specifically through RATS, which was created in 2004.

Unlike CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force, RATS serves as an anti-terrorism and security force in earnest, not as a smoke screen for larger military exercises. RATS is dedicated to fighting against the "three evils" of terrorism, separatism, and extremism.²⁹ Although the SCO secretariat is housed in Beijing, RATS headquarters is in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. This reflects that the Central Asian members of RATS are most vulnerable to the aforementioned "three evils."

Scope of Operations. The SCO has yet to participate in any military engagement other than military exercises. Because of the nature of RATS, though it certainly plays a role in coordinating and executing military exercises, such exercises are conducted under the SCO umbrella. From 2002 through 2016, the SCO conducted 22 joint exercises, which mostly fall into three categories: the Peace Mission series, smaller anti-terror exercises of varying names, and other exercises lacking a common theme.³⁰

The SCO has conducted Peace Mission exercises annually or biannually since 2005. These exercises are the largest the organization has undertaken and mostly serve as a platform for the larger players in the alliance—namely, China and Russia—to flex their military muscle and send messages to the United States and Western strategic competitors. Anti-terror exercises, on the other hand, have more of a practical

application for the Central Asian member states that are most threatened by transnational terrorism. Such exercises include East Antiterror 2006, Volgograd Antiterror 2008, Norak Antiterror 2009, Saratov Antiterror 2010, Kazygurt Antiterror 2013, and CentrAsia Antiterror 2015.³¹ The final category of exercises includes exercises with a less focused purpose, such as Tianshan 1 and Coordination 2006,³² which have decreased in frequency as the Peace Mission series and anti-terror exercises came to address the member states' military concerns.

Success of RATS. RATS is considered successful largely because of its limited scope and purpose. As its name indicates, RATS's primary concern is terrorism and its ensuing destabilizing effects. Similar to the CSTO, the SCO allows China to orchestrate and participate in large-scale military exercises with little international pushback. For states seriously concerned about their border integrity, RATS has provided a forum for sharing and standardizing the best collective defense and organizational practices.

To be clear, RATS is not a military alliance in the traditional sense, nor does it have a quick reaction force or other military assets to serve the ambitions of its member states. Rather, it is the international cooperative organization equivalent of an online chat room, where participants with a shared interest engage with one another for the purpose of shared learning and greater understanding of the subject matter—the fight against terrorism and transnational crime. RATS undoubtedly serves the interests of its members differently than NATO does. Nevertheless, it does so and is therefore considered a successful military alliance, within the broader framework of the SCO, for the purposes of this report.

Past Failures

This section examines the failures of two relevant military organizations—the CENTO and the PSF—in an attempt to avoid their mistakes and take advantage of lessons learned for the development of MESA.

Central Treaty Organization. The CENTO, also known as the Baghdad Pact, was an international military, political, and economic cooperation organization established in 1955 by Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom.³³ Modeled after NATO, CENTO was created to prevent Soviet expansion into the Middle East as the West's strategy of containment.³⁴ It failed, and it eventually faded into obscurity and was officially dissolved in March 1979.³⁵

Problems arose almost immediately for CENTO. In July 1958, a military coup overthrew the Iraqi monarchy.³⁶ The new military government withdrew from the Baghdad Pact, opened relations with the USSR, and adopted an official stance of neutrality in the Cold War.³⁷ Not only did this warrant a name change for the Bagdad Pact, but it undermined the organization's credibility after only three years. The 1960s brought the extended Arab-Israeli conflict, a destabilizing factor and the organization's first real test.

The Indo-Pakistani War of 1965, though only 17 days long, could have been a devastating conflict. It included the largest tank battle since World War II, and both sides suffered thousands of casualties.³⁸ During the conflict, Pakistan repeatedly requested CENTO assistance, but the organization refused. CENTO failed to not only come to the aid of one of its member states but also contain Soviet expansion in the region. In effect, the USSR bypassed CENTO states, establishing close military and political ties with Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. By 1970, the Soviets had 20,000 troops in Egypt and naval bases in Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.³⁹

The 1970s saw the demise of CENTO. In 1974, Turkey invaded Cyprus, despite strong warnings from CENTO and the West, leading the United Kingdom to withdraw troops from Turkey and the US Congress to curtail all Turkish military aid.⁴⁰ Moreover, with the détente of the 1970s easing US-Soviet tensions and the USSR increasingly focused on competing with China, CENTO member states felt less threatened by Soviet aggression and therefore had weaker shared interests. After the Iranian Revolution of 1979 in which the shah was

overthrown, the new Iranian government withdrew from CENTO, Pakistan followed suit, and CENTO officially dissolved in March 1979.⁴¹

No single reason caused CENTO's failure, but rather a number of internal and external reasons led the organization to be short-lived and ineffective in its mission. Internally, the organization had weak leadership. In 1956, the United Kingdom intervened when Israeli forces invaded the Sinai Peninsula in response to Gamal Abdel Nasser seizing control of the Suez Canal. This failed intervention badly damaged British prestige and weakened its ability to lead CENTO.⁴² The United States could not assume such a role because of the influence of the Israel lobby and the challenge of congressional approval, according to US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles.⁴³ Instead, it provided bilateral assistance to its allies in the region.

No single reason caused CENTO's failure, but rather a number of internal and external reasons led the organization to be short-lived and ineffective in its mission.

Further, CENTO never provided members with a mechanism for guaranteeing collective defense, as demonstrated by the Indo-Pakistani conflicts.⁴⁴ It also failed to create any permanent military command structure or armed forces. This eventually led CENTO to shift its focus from military matters to more economic and political affairs.

Externally, CENTO was the victim of several unfortunate circumstances. The member states' governments were not always stable, with two of the five members experiencing coups or revolutions. The constant Arab-Israeli tension created confusing and complex regional power dynamics between the West-backed organization and the US-backed Israel. Because of these factors, CENTO members were not confident that the organization could (or would) serve their interests if called, leading to the creation of the Organization for Regional Cooperation and Development by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey in 1964, a blatant slap in the face to CENTO. Compounding these troubles was that many Arabs felt CENTO was too pro-Western and not representative of member states' populaces.

Peninsula Shield Force. The PSF is the military component of the GCC. Established in 1984, the PSF was a two-brigade, 10,000-man (since increased to 40,000⁴⁵) coalition of forces designed to protect the security and serve the interests of GCC members.⁴⁶

The PSF's failure lies not in battlefield defeats or its dissolution, but rather in its disproportionate lack of influence and missed opportunities. The GCC is one of the most powerful international organizations, and it wields tremendous influence both in the region and abroad. The same cannot be said for its military arm.

The GCC, via the PSF, attempted to spearhead an Arab effort to guarantee the defense of Kuwait in 1991, but it failed to do so, missing the opportunity to not only gain international credibility by confronting Saddam Hussein's aggression against a GCC member but also forge ties with NATO, a relationship that would have further legitimized the PSF in the sphere of international security.⁴⁷ Twelve years later when the United States returned and deposed Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the PSF once again played no role in the operations.

Presently, the PSF makes no effort to combat Iranian proxies acting as destabilizing forces in the region. The only significant action taken by the PSF was its deployment to Bahrain during the Arab Spring in 2011 to stabilize domestic tensions, though even

then the PSF assisted only in precautionary measures and did not engage in any direct action against protesters and mobs.⁴⁸ As a result, it lacks clout commensurate with its parent organization and is a nonfactor in regional power dynamics.

Although the Middle East is riddled with complex political and military challenges, the PSF's failure to achieve relevance is due mostly to one factor: lack of political motivation and will. The Arab nations of the Gulf have historically been preoccupied with political and economic matters through the GCC and the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). As a result, minimal funding has been allocated for collective defense. These states have largely relied on the West, specifically the United States, for their defense and security. The PSF exists as a deterrent to external threats and guarantor of domestic stability in name only. In 1991, when it really mattered, the United States responded, not the PSF. At present, the Saudi and Emirati militaries are acting in their individual capacities to organize a coalition to engage Iranian proxies in Yemen.

Another contributing factor to the PSF's failure, though less damaging, has been internal conflict among member states, specifically unease with Qatari ties to Iran. The most recent manifestation was the 2017 Qatar diplomatic crisis. But this tension has roots dating back to 2014 when Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Doha.⁴⁹ Such internal conflict inhibits the PSF's ability to respond to threats with a unified front.

Key Member States

This section discusses the relevant capabilities and deficiencies of three key MESA member states: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States. These states are analyzed on five criteria: domestic stability, military capacity, alignment of national interest, economic factors, and role in the alliance. Because these three countries would play leadership roles and likely contribute the lion's share of funding and manpower for MESA, their political, economic, and military states are of particular importance.

Egypt. Egypt is a key MESA member because of its raw manpower strength. Moving forward, Egypt would likely contribute the largest fighting force to MESA troop numbers, notwithstanding potential misgivings of the Egyptian government.

Domestic Stability. If one examines the political circumstances in Egypt over the past decade, "stable" might not be the first word to come to mind. President Hosni Mubarak held power from 1981 until the 2011 Arab Spring, known in Egypt as the January 25 Revolution. The Arab Spring led to a suspension of the constitution, dissolution of parliament, and military rule until mid-2012 when Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohamed Morsi was elected by popular vote. The situation quickly deteriorated following Morsi's attempt to pass a new Islamist constitution for the country, culminating in a July 2013 coup d'état led by Gen. Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The following year, Gen. el-Sisi was elected president and remains Egypt's leader to date.

President el-Sisi has managed to retain power and prevent further turnover in the Egyptian government. But the prevailing perception is that Egypt has made little improvement, if any, on issues such as human rights, democratic representation, government accountability, and repression—issues that were the catalyst for the 2011 revolution. Hossam Baghdad, a prominent Egyptian investigative journalist and human rights advocate, told the *Guardian* in 2016 that the level of political repression "is without a doubt the worst we've ever seen."⁵⁰ This followed the 2016 arrests of over three dozen Facebook page administrators for "inciting against state institutions and spreading the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood"; an Egyptian police raid of Masr al-Arabia, a privately owned news corporation; and bans of a wide swath of specially designated terrorist symbols.⁵¹ Since President el-Sisi assumed power, Egypt has jailed more journalists than any other nation, save China.⁵²

Further, accusations of torture by the Egyptian Interior Ministry and its National Security Agency have skyrocketed. The Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms (ECRF), a Cairo-based human

rights watchdog, reported 830 torture complaints and 14 deaths from torture while in government custody in 2016.⁵³ Another ECRF report alleges over 1,700 forced disappearances since 2015, with 254 in the first six months of 2017.⁵⁴ Although heinous and reprehensible at times, the Egyptian people actively tolerated (and even encouraged) the actions of the Egyptian state under President el-Sisi for a time. In the words of Baghdad:

This is a regime that people supported even at the expense of their own rights in order to defeat terrorism, and yet terrorism attacks today are at an all-time high and we have seen the almost complete destruction of the tourism sector. People are starting to realize that they gave up their liberties but did not get either the safety or economic stability they were promised in return.⁵⁵

Egypt has been the victim of an ongoing terrorist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood—at least according to President el-Sisi's government. By associating its political opposition with the real terrorist threat in the Sinai, the regime has justified much of its drastic domestic action. Regardless of the justification, President el-Sisi's regime is employing the same tactics and pursuing similar policies that arguably led to the 2011 revolution in the first place, and his popular support is decreasing.

Beyond its political situation, Egypt faces societal challenges. Most notably, population growth could drive domestic instability. According to the UN, Egypt's population will be 150 million by 2050 and 200 million by 2100.⁵⁶ Government planning services, specifically social and educational programs, have thus far failed to meet the demands of the current population. Consequently, the next generation of Egyptian workers is increasingly unprepared to enter and contribute to the Egyptian workforce, which will harm the Egyptian economy.⁵⁷ In particular, the agricultural sector in the Nile Delta is vulnerable to these workforce trends and changing global weather patterns. With projected increased flooding in the region, less land will be available to farm even as the country's demand for food rises.⁵⁸

Although Egypt is clearly vulnerable to domestic instability, whether President el-Sisi is vulnerable to regime change is not immediately clear. President el-Sisi has steadily consolidated diverse arms of the Egyptian government under his direct control, placing allies in key positions in the civil service and military.⁵⁹ In 2017, Egypt scored -1.42 on Global Economy's political stability index, following modest but steady increases since 2013.⁶⁰ This indicates that though Egypt today possesses the ingredients for turmoil and political instability, President el-Sisi is slowly insulating his administration against regime change.

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Because regime change was a primary contributor to CENTO's failure, it is reasonable for MESA planners to be particularly concerned with regime change in their member states. It should also be noted that Egypt enjoys the strong backing of the United States, both diplomatically and economically, which could offset some uncertainty in its political future. In conclusion, Egypt's domestic stability and by extension its ability to maintain its long-term commitments such as membership in MESA are moderate to low and are a point of concern for MESA.

Military Capacity. Other than the United States, Egypt fields the strongest military among MESA members.

It has 1,329,250 total military personnel, 1,132 aircraft, 4,946 combat tanks, 15,695 armored fighting vehicles, and 319 total naval assets, including two aircraft carriers, operating on an annual defense budget of \$4.4 billion.⁶¹ Further, its funding is supplemented by significant aid from the United States, trailing only Israel in total military aid from the American government since the 1970s.⁶² Traditionally, Egypt has been a military powerhouse in the Middle East through sheer numerical advantage, not only in military personnel. Egypt's population is over two and a half times greater than the next largest in the Arab world, larger than the combined populations of Iraq, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Syria.⁶³

However, on today's modern battlefields, technological and asymmetric advantage is often a more accurate predictor of victory than numerical advantage, and toward that end, Egypt is modernizing its military. The Egyptian Air Force has 250 F-16 fighters, 50 AH-64D attack helicopters, 30 C-130 transports, and an agreement to purchase 50 MiG-29 jets from Russia by the end of 2020.⁶⁴ Egypt is also planning to assemble 400 T-90 battle tanks⁶⁵ in 2019 under license from Russia and receive 762 total mine-resistant ambush protected vehicles from the United States.⁶⁶ In 2015, the Egyptian Navy acquired four Ambassador MK III fast missile craft⁶⁷ from the United States, a P-32 *Molniya*-class missile craft,⁶⁸ a FREMM multipurpose frigate, and two *Mistral*-class amphibious assault ships, which will be used to launch Russian Ka-52 Alligator helicopters. Finally, in 2017, the navy inducted two of the four Type 209 diesel-electric attack submarines it ordered from Germany.⁶⁹

Despite its impressive size and rapid pace of modernization, Egypt has not been immune to the challenges facing Arab militaries since the end of World War II. Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, the Egyptian military regularly performed poorly on the battlefield, resulting in either outright defeat or limited success not representative of the sheer numerical advantages it had on the battlefield. Although a litany of explanations can be offered, it seems that Egyptian tactical leaders consistently displayed rigidity, lack of

adaptability and creativity, poor intelligence gathering and sharing, and little to no combined arms or maneuver warfare.⁷⁰

Recognizing this problem after the Six-Day War, Nasser and later Anwar Sadat continued policies of depoliticization aimed at increasing the lethality of the Egyptian armed forces. Such policies markedly improved Egyptian strategic leadership, which helped Egyptians in the October War in 1973, but similar problems persisted and would likely need to be addressed by MESA partners. For MESA planners, this further highlights the need for a well-integrated and well-understood unified military doctrine.

Egypt also has some experience in the type of warfare in which MESA would conceivably be involved. In 2013, Egypt launched its largest campaign in the Sinai since the October War against IS affiliate Wilayat Sinai. Thus far, results have been mixed. Egypt has increasingly pursued a scorched-earth strategy, increasing troop levels, military hardware, and the use of ethically questionable tactics.⁷¹ Although such tactics have alienated some of the Bedouin population native to the Sinai, it has also made Wilayat Sinai unable to hold population centers in the country, a positive development for the Egyptian armed forces.⁷² Nevertheless, the terror group has resorted to guerilla and insurgent-style operations to make up the difference, and the mountains, canyons, and deserts of the Sinai have enabled Wilayat Sinai to appear, attack, and disappear at will.

Because of its imposing size and its military's significant involvement in the country's governance, Egypt has a well-established military presence in the region already. Further modernization will only increase Egypt's lethality and ability to adapt to the modern battlefield, a positive sign for MESA planners. Moreover, it has valuable experience in the type of warfare MESA will likely face. The ongoing terrorist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula has provided the Egyptian military with a case study in asymmetric warfare, one that would be useful in MESA operations and in educating the next generation of MESA leaders.

Alignment of National Interest. The question of whether Egypt's national interest is sufficiently

aligned with MESA's interest is not easy to answer definitively. Egypt's recent foreign policy has largely been defined by an opportunist mindset. Although Egypt had been squarely in the US corner since the Camp David Accords, relations have been more tenuous of late, specifically since President Barack Obama's election. The Obama administration was less than impressed with Egypt's human rights record and failed to definitively back Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the revolution that led to his deposition.

The revolutionary regime of the Islamic Republic is exactly the type of governance that directly threatens the stability of the Egyptian state.

The rise of the Muslim Brotherhood government, though democratically elected, raised red flags for the United States and other Western allies wary of Islamist governments in the region. Still, after el-Sisi's coup d'état, the Obama administration froze nearly \$1.3 billion in military equipment bound for Egypt.⁷³ Although President Obama eventually ended the freeze, human rights concerns persisted through the end of the Obama administration, resulting in Egypt turning to France and Russia—not to mention North Korea—to compensate for lost arms imports.⁷⁴ There has even been a reasonable concern that Russia would in effect “flip” Egypt into the Russian sphere of influence. This is a point of consideration because Russia is increasingly close to the Iranian regime, and if nothing else,

it demonstrates that Egypt is not averse to dealing with the avowed foes of its close allies.

Egypt has historically had a hot-and-cold relationship with Iran, peaking during the October War and the Mohamed Morsi administration in Egypt and bottoming out following the Camp David Accords and during the Iran-Iraq War.⁷⁵ At present, el-Sisi's relationship with Iran is tempered—not overly friendly but certainly nowhere near openly hostile. Presumably, Egypt prefers not to directly engage with Iran. For example, when asked about the purpose of MESA at large, Egyptian officials fell in line with their Jordanian and Qatari counterparts in expressing reluctance about the alliance's need to directly confront Iran.⁷⁶ Egypt may be content to metaphorically ride in the back seat while the United States and Saudi Arabia drive, avoiding unilateral direct confrontation with the Islamic Republic but not putting up too much of an intra-alliance fight over the alliance's direction.

At the same time, however, Egypt is a part of the Saudi-led blockade of Qatar in response to Qatari ties with Iran, leading one to believe that the el-Sisi regime perceives such a relationship as a threat. Some might posit that Egyptian alignment with Saudi interests is a result of Saudi investment in the Egyptian government—at least \$12 billion since 2013.⁷⁷ But this neglects that by their very natures the Iranian and Egyptian regimes are diametrically opposed. Egypt is more or less a praetorian military dictatorship that fears Islamist governance so much that it has been proposed that the United States must designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization for Egypt to participate in MESA.⁷⁸ The revolutionary regime of the Islamic Republic is exactly the type of governance that directly threatens the stability of the Egyptian state.

Even though Egypt is the most vulnerable of the three key MESA member states to diverging interests with the larger alliance, President el-Sisi has affirmed his commitment to playing a leadership role in a MESA-like structure.⁷⁹ Still, Egypt is not in as close physical proximity to Iran as many other MESA members and instead is most threatened by Iran's support for destabilizing proxy activity near its borders.

Further, as discussed earlier, a likely primary area of operations for MESA would be Yemen, a region with a negative history for the Egyptians after the North Yemen Civil War in the 1960s, a conflict often referred to by Egyptian historians as “their Vietnam.”⁸⁰ If MESA materializes, MESA planners should expect Egypt to be less willing to directly engage adversaries outside its borders and anticipate some pushback from the el-Sisi regime on alliance-wide, hard-line political and military stances.

Economic Factors. The Egyptian economy, though relatively diverse, was not immune to the sociopolitical turmoil of the early 2010s. Over the past five years, however, reforms are gradually producing positive results. In 2014, President el-Sisi’s government reduced energy subsidies, passed the value-added tax law, and liberalized the Egyptian pound in an attempt to rebalance its macroeconomy. Two years later, the Civil Service Reform Law was passed, along with the removal of investment barriers in an attempt to improve governance and attract local and foreign investors.⁸¹

The Egyptian economy grew from 5.3 percent in 2017 for a GDP of \$1.204 trillion, up from a 4.2 percent growth rate. Services accounted for 54 percent, with 34.3 percent from industry and 11.7 percent from agriculture.⁸²

For MESA’s FTA, the question is what opportunities exist for other member states to contribute to the Egyptian economy. Aside from more foreign direct investment from the wealthy Gulf states, the United States has many businesses that would likely be eager to use advantageous MESA provisions to decrease their bottom line. Trade is also potential. By end use, exports and imports accounted for 34.8 percent of GDP.⁸³ Reduced trade barriers would likely benefit the Egyptian economy, especially given the United States’ and Saudi Arabia’s vast resources. Finally, tourism has been a significant boon to the Egyptian economy, not only because of its contributions to the Egyptian export market but also because of the boost to tourism-related services, the largest percentage of GDP by sector.

Role in the Alliance. Egypt was chosen as one of the three most crucial MESA member states because of its close relationship with the United States and its tremendous military capacity. If the United States envisions an international cooperative organization in which its partners assume more and more responsibility as the alliance matures, Egypt is likely the member to replace diminishing US manpower. Because of the size of the Egyptian standing army and its experience in the Sinai Peninsula, Egyptian troops would conceivably comprise the largest proportion of MESA forces. Efforts would need to be taken to ensure that this does not paint a negative view of MESA in Egypt, especially considering Egypt’s vulnerability to domestic instability.

Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia’s value to MESA is somewhat intuitive given its natural rivalry with Iran and long-term US strategic goals. Put another way, Saudi Arabia is MESA’s natural leader, especially if the United States—as it has explicitly said it would—actually retracts from the region.

Domestic Stability. The kingdom’s tremendous wealth has allowed it to pursue ever more generous social programs that have resulted in, on balance, a well-pacified populace. For instance, starting in 2017, the kingdom has executed a welfare program that results in half the Saudi population receiving payments from the government.⁸⁴ Moreover, for those in Saudi society who may have felt marginalized despite the financial offerings, recent social reforms have provided a measure of hope for a more modern, tolerant society moving forward. Although the Saudi government is undertaking such policies because the regime fears the power of certain demographics in Saudi society, it remains unlikely that King Salman’s government is vulnerable to any sort of popular uprising at this point, despite his regime’s lackluster human rights record.⁸⁵

These positive facts notwithstanding, the Global Economy political stability index gives Saudi Arabia a score of -0.62 .⁸⁶ This is because the question of Saudi stability is a layered one. Even though King Salman might not be threatened by public uprising, he and his line of succession very well might be threatened

by dissenting elements within the royal family. In two anonymous letters in 2015, a senior Saudi prince called for King Salman's removal from power, citing concerns about the king's handling of the conflict in Yemen and the country's finances.⁸⁷ This ire has largely been refocused on Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the 33-year-old heir apparent and son of Salman, who many suspect of having actually managed the kingdom for the past few years.

Even though King Salman might not be threatened by public uprising, he and his line of succession very well might be threatened by dissenting elements within the royal family.

Initial prospects for MbS were positive, especially from Saudi Arabia's Western partners, as the crown prince outlined several social, political, and economic reforms he intended to enact. Among other things, his goals were to modernize Saudi society, diversify the Saudi economy, and fight corruption in the kingdom's government.⁸⁸ Although pleasing to Saudi allies who had begged for such reforms for years, MbS's actions upset many royal elites. Not only did the crown prince's policies upset the status quo (under which Saudi elites had prospered for many years), but his campaign against "corruption" quickly evolved into a convenient excuse to suppress his political competition.⁸⁹ Despite this and ongoing human rights concerns, Western partners stood

by MbS and the Saudi regime because the crown prince represented the best hope for a modern Saudi Arabia they had seen—that is, until the murder of dissident and *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018.

On October 2, 2018, Jamal Khashoggi entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul to complete the necessary paperwork to allow him to marry his Turkish fiancée. While inside, he was murdered, and his body was dismembered. The ensuing details are disputed by Saudi Arabia, but there seems to be an international consensus that MbS was at least aware of the operation and, according to the CIA, directly ordered the assassination.⁹⁰ The Saudi government has detained 21 individuals, dismissed two senior officials, and charged 11 Saudi nationals over the incident, five of whom will be put to death if found guilty.⁹¹

Although the Trump administration chose to stand with the Saudi government, few others did. Moreover, the United States was not unified in its support of MbS; even top Republican leaders denounced how the Trump administration handled the situation.⁹² This is significant because international support for a given regime is often a deciding factor in determining its longevity. For example, the Assad regime in Syria would probably not be alive—let alone in its current favorable strategic position—were it not for the support of the Iranian and Russian governments. In the same way, if the Saudis find themselves devoid of international backers while dealing with a domestic uprising, there is little to prevent a popular overthrow. Although they have not yet reached this point of international marginalization, the point should be noted nonetheless.

Saudi Arabia is a Sunni majority nation, which its governing policies reflect. Activists have long accused the Saudi government of viewing its Shi'a population as a potential tool of influence for Shi'a superpower Iran rather than as equal Saudi citizens. Although the government denies any wrongdoing, these tensions boiled over during the 2011 Arab Spring and in the 2017 Qatif conflict.

Qatif, a province in eastern Saudi Arabia that is home to the majority of the state's Shi'as, also

happens to have most of the kingdom's oil resources. Since mid-2017, the government has been intermittently sparring with Shi'a militants, such as a January 2019 raid in Jish that resulted in six dead suspects.⁹³ Because of both Qatif's strategic position and the Iranian paranoia that pervades the highest levels of Saudi leadership, Shi'a unrest does not presently pose a serious threat to the kingdom's rule. It should undoubtedly be monitored and accounted for moving forward, but it does not seem to be an existential threat at present.

For the purposes of MESA, Saudi Arabia is not presently in serious danger of the sort of instability that would cause a new government to withdraw from MESA. However, Saudi leadership—King Salman, MbS, and their line of succession—is clearly susceptible to an internal deposition. Saudi elite already are discontented, and with their international backers withering away, it is not difficult to imagine a situation in which the king and his son are removed from power.

Still, this does not necessarily mean the new government would disavow MESA or the United States. In fact, whichever Saudi royal ascended to the throne in MbS's place would likely share his predecessor's and the United States' concerns about Iran's malign influence in the region. So, though Saudi Arabia presently runs at least a substantive risk of regime change, MESA planners should not be overly concerned because any usurper of the Saudi throne would likely agree with MESA and its goals.

Military Capacity. The Saudi military experience is a case study in the importance of human capital in military operations and the value of sound, modern doctrine. Saudi Arabia has 256,000 total military personnel, 844 aircraft, 1,142 combat tanks, 5,472 armored fighting vehicles, and 55 total naval assets.⁹⁴ But the number of military assets does not indicate the quality of equipment the Saudis employ. The Saudi military budget is \$76.7 billion, trailing only the United States and China worldwide and dwarfing Iran's \$8 billion budget.⁹⁵

Much of the weapons imported into the kingdom come from US companies, including the \$350 billion

arms deal reached with the Trump administration in 2017.⁹⁶ These US imports are often state-of-the-art, highly effective weapons systems that should greatly enhance the lethality of the Saudi military. Along with US weaponry come US training and guidance, which, because of extended combat operations from the war on terror, are an invaluable, intangible asset on the battlefield. Combined, these facts should point to an effective, capable, and lethal fighting force.

Regrettably, this is not the reality on the ground. While the enormous Saudi defense budget and its high-quality weaponry are objective realities, another objective reality is the kingdom's abject failure in Yemen, both tactically and strategically. Geopolitically, this is a crucial campaign for the Saudis. The two nations share a long, permeable border, and even more importantly, Yemen sits at a crucial geographic choke point of entry into the Red Sea known as Bab el-Mandeb. Yet not only have Iranian-backed Houthi rebels gained more territory, including over 100 square miles of Saudi sovereignty,⁹⁷ the conflict has been a public relations nightmare for the kingdom, with tens of thousands of civilian casualties and countless more affected by famines and other crises as a result of the fighting.⁹⁸ From this territory, rebels have launched over 100 missiles deep into Saudi Arabia, including an attack on a Riyadh airport in late 2017.⁹⁹

The Saudis have found such little success in Yemen for several reasons. First, the Saudi military's design is not suitable for the campaign it is trying to wage. Saudi Arabia has an enormous standing army and regularly purchases the world's most advanced military technologies. As a result, though it may effectively deter a large-scale invasion from a conventional force, it cannot maneuver and adapt to the unconventional, guerilla-style warfare being waged by the Houthi militias.

Second, the coalition has been reluctant to deploy any sort of significant ground force during the campaign. It has mostly relied on strategic air strikes thus far, which have a controversial historical track record of success. At the same time, any ground forces are unlikely to achieve greater success because

the Saudi land forces lack training and experience in unconventional warfare.

Compounding all these issues is the status quo nature of the Saudi military. Unlike the United States and many Western militaries, the Saudi military is not merit based, and it lacks a hierarchical structure. Often, high-level Saudi military officers attained their status by birth, money, or connections rather than battlefield experience and success. This limits Saudi leadership's problem-solving, flexibility, and ability to address these problems.

At the very least, for MESA planners, the challenges (and contributions) presented by the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces are known. The fact that Saudi forces already employ state-of-the-art equipment is positive, and it is clear that military doctrine, quality training and leadership, and the correct war-fighting mindset are necessary implants. If there is a single lesson learned from the armed conflicts of the post-World War II era, it is that greater fighting numbers and superior equipment do not guarantee victory—that is, if it is even possible to define the word any longer. Regardless, this issue highlights the need for a MESA Defense College outlined in previous sections, a centralized training program for alliance leaders to learn best practices on how to manage the available resources to meet the present threat rather than accumulating impressive but ultimately useless military assets.

Alignment of National Interest. Taking a step back, Iran's and Saudi Arabia's strategic competition is multifaceted. From an international relations perspective, the tension might be explained by the fact that both are relatively powerful players in a shared region. The US-Saudi relationship and the equally negative relations Iran has with the United States certainly do not help.

But on a deeper level, much of the Saudi-Iranian conflict originates from an ideological source. Shi'a-Sunni violence is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to the Saudi-Iranian conflict. But in this instance, a great Sunni power and a great Shi'a power are vying for control of a region with various pockets of oppressed Sunnis and Shi'as. People often more closely identify with those of a shared

religious background than with their own countrymen, with one result being that Iran views it as its responsibility to “liberate” oppressed Shi'as in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. So, it is somewhat intuitive to expect that Saudi Arabia and Iran would have less than favorable relations and that Iran would play such a central role in the kingdom's strategic positioning.

Shi'a-Sunni violence is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to the Saudi-Iranian conflict.

It is difficult to think of a way in which MESA does not align with Saudi Arabia's national interest. First, Saudi Arabia is Iran's primary competitor and victim, the second being a title perhaps shared with Israel. True, “death to America” chants are frequent in the Islamic Republic, and Iran continues to fund, train, and equip groups responsible for killing Americans. But the United States lacks the physical proximity to Iran that Saudi Arabia possesses, and while US interests may be at stake over a conflict with Iran, Saudi Arabia's very existence is in question in a conflict with Iran.

Militarily, if MESA materializes and is successful, Saudi Arabia would no longer need to contend with conflicts at its borders. The Shi'a Crescent would be no more, and the kingdom would once again enjoy free rein to do what it does best: make money. Furthermore, though the United States has informally extended its wing of protection over the kingdom, it is certainly not a bad thing for Saudi Arabia to formalize a mutual defense contract with both the United States and its regional partners. Because Saudi Arabia is already doing the heavy lifting in Yemen, continued operations under a MESA framework would not be an increased burden or

commitment for Saudi Arabia, as it would for Egypt or other potential member states.

Some elements of the Saudi leadership may question whether they would lose some autonomy and sovereignty by participating in MESA. Although other alliance members may have the same fear, it is not one that Saudi Arabia will need to confront. The entire premise of MESA rests on the eventual transfer of leadership from the United States to Saudi Arabia, to the point where some potential alliance members have expressed fear about Saudi dominance of a joint security organization.¹⁰⁰ If MESA materializes, Saudi Arabia can be highly confident that the broader alliance will mirror its own national interests. Of all the MESA member states, Saudi Arabia is least likely to quarrel with MESA institutions and would not impede the alliance's creation or its operations moving forward.

Economic Factors. The Saudi economy relies heavily on crude oil exports. Of its \$1.775 trillion GDP in 2017, exports constituted 34.8 percent. The petroleum sector is responsible for 90 percent of those exports and 87 percent of total budgetary revenues.¹⁰¹ But the global economic reality, which at least MbS has realized, is such that it is unwise to base a powerhouse economy such as Saudi Arabia's so singly on one sector, especially a sector that is becoming increasingly taboo globally. This is largely the justification for Vision 2030, the economic component of the crown prince's reform package, which seeks to diversify the Saudi economy to hedge against a catastrophic result if oil becomes less viable due to technological breakthrough or global consensus.¹⁰²

Aside from Saudi Arabia's potential to serve as a financier and investor for other MESA members, a possible opportunity with a MESA FTA is assistance from other MESA members, principally the United States, in the kingdom's attempts to diversify its economy. Countless US companies that specialize in alternative forms of energy and others outside the energy sector could bring business to Saudi Arabia under loosened business regulations per the FTA. However, foreign direct investment into the kingdom has plummeted recently because of the negative public image

from the Khashoggi incident and the war in Yemen.¹⁰³ Formalizing a more favorable business environment under the MESA framework, including the special incentives for key sectors outlined under Vision 2030, could reverse this trend.

Role in the Alliance. In a word, Saudi Arabia's ideal role in a functioning MESA is that of protégé. Inseparable from the concept of MESA is the receding US role as the alliance matures. The prime candidate to fill that void is Saudi Arabia. Although Egypt has the raw manpower, Saudi Arabia has the soft power necessary to fund MESA as the United States withdraws. Combined with its high-level technology, the physical location of MESA's organizational bodies, and its position as the primary stakeholder of MESA's outcome, Saudi Arabia emerges as the United States' protégé, destined to take the reins of leadership from the United States when the time comes.

MESA represents a long-term commitment for the United States. Although its goal is to eventually play a more minor role, instilling military discipline, doctrine, and leadership into another country's armed forces is not necessarily a quick process. This means that Saudi Arabia could be in its protégé role for an extended period before it assumes a true leadership position, and MESA planners should be clear about this and organize the alliance accordingly.

United States. The United States has made clear its intention to withdraw from the region, but that timeline is both ambiguous and subject to change. For that reason, the United States will need to be the leader, funder, and trainer of MESA for the foreseeable future, and therefore MESA cannot exist without the United States.

Domestic Stability. The idea of the American government being overthrown, either by popular uprising or coup d'état, is nearly unthinkable. The United States has a proud tradition of peaceful transfers of power, even in the most tumultuous of elections, which underlie a shared understanding in the United States on the importance of stability. Its Global Economy

political stability score for 2017 is at 0.3. The lower score is likely the result of increased partisan political infighting since President Trump's 2016 election.¹⁰⁴ But in the same way that the Saudi government is secure from one type of overthrow but vulnerable to another, MESA planners still have reason to be wary of the US ability to maintain its commitment to the alliance.

To be clear, the Trump administration probably would not have any issue fulfilling its commitments to MESA, assuming it convinces the rest of the US government to go along with the idea. However, MESA planners should be acutely aware on an issue that stems from the very nature of the US system of government. MESA may have the full backing of the Trump administration today, but what happens in 2020 or 2024? If the next administration has a different view of the US role in the region or believes MESA is not in the US interest, the new administration could withdraw from the alliance, renege on its commitments, or both. Because of the hyper-partisan nature of US politics, the next US leader may believe MESA is too closely tied to President Trump and his legacy (which the new leader will likely despise) to constitute continued US involvement.

MESA may have the full backing of the Trump administration today, but what happens in 2020 or 2024?

For instance, consider the decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, known informally as the Iran deal. Although Republicans had long articulated their dislike for the JCPOA, the Trump administration also clearly believed the JCPOA was a staple of President Obama's legacy, which expedited its premature demise.

Yet, MESA planners cannot do much to address this directly. The solution is for the Trump administration to find a way to reestablish the bipartisan agreement that largely defined US foreign and defense policy since the Cold War. If this is not done, MESA will likely not survive beyond the Trump administration.

Military Capacity. The United States is the world's premier military power. It has a technological, human capital, doctrinal, and numerical advantage over almost every other nation. Its budget dwarfs China's, the global runner-up, at \$716 billion for 2019.¹⁰⁵ The US military fields 2,083,100 total military personnel, 13,362 total aircraft, 5,884 combat tanks, 38,822 armored fighting vehicles, and 415 naval assets, including 20 aircraft carriers.¹⁰⁶

Just as valuable as its tremendous resource pool, however, is its experience from extended combat operations during the war on terror. As seen from the Saudi experience in Yemen, tested military leaders and units with real combat experience are just as vital to battlefield success as high-speed equipment and technological advantage. The type of combat MESA is likely to encounter is the same type of combat that the United States has prosecuted for the past 18 years. Its contribution to MESA, both materially and doctrinally, would be astronomical and instrumental in getting the alliance off its feet.

Alignment of National Interest. Much like Saudi Arabia, the United States' national interest is aligned closely with MESA's. This is not particularly surprising, as the two states are the primary advocates for the alliance. US policymakers believe that Iranian influence is culpable for much of the discord and insurrection in the region, so MESA's principal goal of reducing Iranian influence is attractive to the United States. Further, empowering local US partners to effectively deal with Iran and its various proxies would greatly reduce US financial investment and troop commitment in its 18th year of the war on terror. However, it is entirely possible for MESA to be in the US interest at the alliance's inception and not remain so as it develops.

For example, if the United States commits itself to MESA and MESA combat operations result in significant civilian casualties, the resulting negative association will certainly inhibit US ability to conduct international dealings elsewhere. Or if five or 10 years down the road, MESA further entrenches the United States in the quagmire of Middle East conflict rather than allowing it to methodically excuse itself from financial and military commitment in the region as intended, MESA will in fact not have been in the US interest. However, if the alliance materializes and proceeds as planned, MESA is unlikely to diverge from US interests, principally because the United States will be in the leadership role.

Economic Factors. Through MESA, the United States has the opportunity to become the exclusive arms dealer for Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the rest of the GCC. Although it already has significant arms agreements with many of these countries, if the United States can become the sole, or almost sole, supplier of weapons and military equipment to its regional partners, this could create positive externalities in addition to the economic benefit to the US economy and defense sector. US strategic competitors, most notably Russia, often make inroads with other countries through their arms deals and thereby slowly attain and exert influence over important US allies. Convincing MESA member states, whether through discounted prices or formalized doctrine in the MESA Charter, to purchase US arms can negate this effect and further secure Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others in the US corner and further away from adversarial interests.

Moreover, from a purely economic standpoint, arms deals are generally quite lucrative. The United States receives money from not only the initial purchase of equipment but also ongoing repairs, maintenance, and updates that can only be purchased from the initial seller because much of the weaponry is highly advanced and state of the art. This would mean continued cash flows to the United States moving forward. Even if the United States provides its equipment to MESA members at discounted prices, the volume of product and the longevity of the

equipment's value will likely be a net positive for the US economy.

According to Bahrain Foreign Minister Khalid bin Ahmed al Khalifa, MESA would “boost trade and foreign direct investment between its members.”¹⁰⁷ Presumably, much of this would come from the United States, and assuming it invests intelligently, the United States could realize a reasonable return. Further, MESA would open up its member countries' markets to US goods, and since no other MESA member is as significant a manufacturer as the United States, one could expect a trade surplus from the US perspective.

Finally, from a strategic standpoint, such subsidized channels for investment and trade would help dispel the growing Chinese economic involvement in the region, a crucial tool for Beijing to exert influence.¹⁰⁸ So even though the United States could make money through MESA, the biggest economic impact would be for the United States to take the place of strategic competitors—China and Russia—and thereby ensure the region lies squarely in the US sphere of influence.

Role in the Alliance. The US role in MESA is transient but principally a leadership role. MESA is not a different medium through which the United States will commit further troops in the region. Rather, the United States views MESA as a tool through which it can simultaneously begin withdrawing from the region while empowering its partners to sufficiently confront the challenges presented by Iran and others.

Toward that end, the US involvement in the alliance is planned to be at its highest point at MESA's inception, with a gradual drawdown as regional partners' capabilities evolve. The United States could follow the Russia-CSTO model of providing its military technology to alliance members, as well as serving as a doctrine and strategy dealer of sorts. The MESA Defense College would initially be staffed by US military personnel and government personnel, and it would espouse US military doctrine. To the extent that US military personnel are physically involved in MESA operations, it would likely be limited to air combat operations and special operations

advising and training missions characteristic of US military policy of late.

As the alliance matures and evolves, US policymakers envision a receding role to the point where the United States functions mainly as an observer state, maintaining positive relations with the organization while preserving its fiscal and physical independence. This is the ideal situation. Yet the United States may play a leadership role longer than expected and possibly indefinitely, depending on the external circumstances at the time.

The United States views MESA as a tool through which it can simultaneously begin withdrawing from the region while empowering its partners to sufficiently confront the challenges presented by Iran and others.

Other MESA Member States. Other than Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, MESA would be rounded out by Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. Similar to the NATO model during the Cold War, including these smaller states in MESA is an attempt to construct a united coalition in the face of Iranian influence. Whereas these states' influence would have been marginal if acting alone, by banding together they can project a much louder voice in regional affairs. And with Egypt, Saudi

Arabia, and the United States, the alliance has real potential to be a potent force in the region.

As MESA matures, if it proves to be a viable forum for international cooperative action, other states might be interested in becoming official observer states. Foremost among these are Iraq, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. Although the former two are presently subject to the influence of the alliance's principal adversary, a successful MESA could illuminate for them with which side they would most benefit by allying themselves.

Assessment of MESA's Viability

Before examining the potential benefits of a successful MESA, it might be worthwhile to revisit the reasoning used to justify MESA, as well as broader US interests in the region. Put another way, would it be so bad if the United States and Saudi Arabia ceded their regional influence to the Iranian regime? Obviously, US policymakers have thought so for decades, but thoroughly understanding the reasons requires a comprehensive view of US geopolitical strategy.

Perhaps the most immediate and attention-grabbing interest the United States has in the Middle East stems from a deep-seated fear of a foreign terrorist incident similar to the September 11 attacks. Even though the United States initially entered Iraq to depose dictator Saddam Hussein, US forces remained for a significant period after a new government was established to prevent the state from falling into disarray. It did so because it felt that, if Iraq slipped into political turmoil and an insurgency arose, destabilizing actors would target the US homeland or US forces—not just the local government. This was clearly the US understanding behind its involvement in Afghanistan and remains so to this day. Ongoing US-Taliban peace talks include, among other things, assurances from the Taliban that attacks on the United States will not be plotted from within its borders.¹⁰⁹

This threat has evolved and become more lethal. Terrorist safe havens in politically unstable countries used to require a good deal of planning, resourcing,

and logistical support. Training in weapons and tactics had to be conducted, strategic planning had to be coordinated, and in the case of the September 11 attacks, significant amounts of resources were required to carry out the deed.

By contrast, in the age of IS, foreign terrorist attacks have largely been supplanted by domestic attacks, often perpetrated by citizens propagandized half a world away. To its credit, the United States has largely succeeded in preventing foreign terrorist attacks since 9/11. Nevertheless, it remains in the US interest to maintain a foothold in the region and allow its military—the world’s foremost counterinsurgency experts—to operate and advise partners.

To understand the entirety of US interests in the Middle East, a broader geographic perspective must be taken. The US Seventh Fleet, headquartered in Yokosuka, Japan, is well-known for its freedom-of-navigation operations in the South China Sea, intended to contest Chinese claims to international waters and several man-made islands. But the Seventh Fleet is also active near the Strait of Malacca because nearly one-third of global oil shipped transits the strait annually.¹¹⁰ In 2017, the world quickly became aware of US naval activity in the strait after USS *John S. McCain* collided with a merchant ship sailing near the strait, leaving 10 US sailors dead. But only a few months before the tragedy, the aircraft carrier USS *Nimitz* and the entire *Nimitz* carrier strike group navigated the strait on its way to exercises in India.¹¹¹ Clearly, the United States has a vested interest in making its presence—and military might—known in such a crucial global choke point.

The Middle East is home to three more strategic choke points in the global oil trade: the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz, the only oil shipping lane more heavily transited than the Strait of Malacca. The United States is exceedingly concerned with ever-growing territorial claims in the South China Sea because the United States has an interest in the stability of and favorable governance in the Middle East. Much of US international power comes from its economic might. While the United States has the most powerful military in

the world, enacting economic sanctions is far more acceptable internationally and domestically than mounting full-scale invasions.

Combined with the role global commerce (specifically the global oil trade) plays in supporting the value of the US dollar, this clearly illuminates why a Middle East dominated by Iran and Iranian-sympathetic states poses just as much of a challenge to the United States as does an IS insurgency. If Iran is given unilateral control over the Strait of Hormuz, let alone Bab el-Mandeb and the Suez Canal, the United States’ regional and global clout will be significantly weakened. Everything that can be said for the United States applies to Saudi Arabia by a factor of two. This is what is at stake when considering the possible benefits of a functioning MESA.

Opportunities and Benefits. Given the region’s value, the most obvious upside to MESA is the alliance’s operation if it is successful. The potential payoff to the United States, Saudi Arabia, and other MESA members would be significant. Most obviously, the suppression of the Iranian regime and its destabilizing efforts would contribute to securing these interests. But additionally, for nearly two decades, US lawmakers from both parties have bemoaned the ever-deepening hole into which the United States seems to be dumping money and manpower, with far too little to show for it. MESA represents a solution to this problem.

One pillar of the alliance is the transfer of responsibility and fiscal commitment to US partners as their capabilities evolve. If successful, the outcome would be a Middle East where Iran is held in check, US allies do not regularly face existential threats, and US and global economic interests are secure—all while enabling the United States to finally reduce its involvement in the region, save precious funding and lives, and work to dispel its international reputation as a meddling world policeman. In short, if MESA were to materialize and be successful, it would be a century-shaping event.

As mentioned, a likely institution within the framework of MESA is the US wholesale of arms

and advanced military technology to member states. Aside from the economic benefit this provides to US manufacturers and its economy at large, this could be a powerful, influential tool for the United States and the West. Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of US Central Command, testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee saying that US strategic competitors “are increasingly competing to be the partner of choice—militarily, politically, and economically—with U.S. allies.”¹¹²

In short, if MESA were to materialize and be successful, it would be a century-shaping event.

In 2017, Egypt announced it was negotiating an agreement with Russia to allow Russian military jets to use Egyptian air bases and airspace.¹¹³ In early 2018, it was revealed that Egypt has been purchasing weapons from North Korea and allowing North Korea to use its Cairo embassy as a home base for its arms sales across the region. Specifically, a North Korean cargo ship intercepted off the coast of Egypt in 2016 was found to contain more than 30,000 rocket-propelled grenades at a value of \$26 million.¹¹⁴

There is a similar story, though to a lesser extent, in Saudi Arabia, where many fear that US retribution for human rights violations or gross mismanagement of the conflict in Yemen will result in the kingdom accelerating its pivot (and its purse) to the East, specifically China and Russia.¹¹⁵ Other Gulf states, most notably Oman and Qatar, are ambivalent at best about the broader GCC policy of hostility toward Iran. US arms deals could reverse this shift and prevent key allies from falling into the Chinese, Iranian, or Russian spheres of influence. The US Defense Security Cooperation Agency and the US Defense Technology Security Agency already

serve these functions, and under MESA, their roles would likely significantly expand. If the United States is successful in doing so, it can boost its own economy and defense sectors and diminish its adversaries’ ability to project their influence in the region.

One final note is the need to develop and implement a corresponding defense industrial policy for the alliance. Keith Hartley writes for the *Journal of Peace Research*:

Military alliances provide economic benefits in the form of collective defence as a public good, but they offer further unexploited benefits from an efficient defence industrial policy. . . . Such opportunities are often realized in free-trade areas and in the Single European Market for goods and services.¹¹⁶

Clearly, Hartley was examining defense industrial policy in the context of NATO and the EU, but regardless, the literature on the topic strongly advises that military alliance members take advantage of other states’ defense resources through free trade. Compared to a collective industrial policy of, say, collaboration, where inefficiencies abound, Hartley argues for a cross-border integrated system free of barriers to entry.¹¹⁷ Since the United States possesses a comparative advantage over nearly all other MESA members in arms and defense systems, the result would likely be a veritable US monopoly. Combined with the proposed MESA FTA, this aspect of MESA looks to be promising for all parties involved.

MESA also could serve as a tool for the United States to rein in Saudi recklessness and incentivize further reforms. Unlike its relationships with other Western countries, the US relationship with Saudi Arabia is not based on shared values, history, or cultures. Rather, the US-Saudi relationship is one of necessity, based on the principle of the lesser evil and driven by the Iranian regime’s staunch anti-American ideology and action. Unsurprisingly, the US-Saudi relationship has at times been strained. The US ability to conduct diplomacy elsewhere has been hindered by the fact that it remains closely aligned with the Saudis while claiming to conduct policy based on its liberal Western values. Moreover, US military support

for the Saudi campaign in Yemen has reflected poorly on the United States' ability to effectively train and equip its partners.

Domestically, US support for the Saudis has worsened an already precipitous political divide. US human rights advocacy groups and lawmakers particularly concerned with the end use of US weaponry have long been wary of the US-Saudi relationship. But recent events, particularly Jamal Khashoggi's murder, have driven many in the United States to question whether the relationship benefits the United States at all.

True, it is sound foreign policymaking to understand that the world is imperfect and that decisions often need to be made that are not ideal and perhaps difficult to stomach. But at some point a nation has to consider how its values and interests intersect with the purely economic or strategic benefits of maintaining a given relationship. The United States may be nearing this point with Saudi Arabia, and were any other US presidential administration in power today, the US-Saudi relationship would likely be diminished or even dissolved.

Although the United States certainly stands to benefit from a functioning MESA, Saudi Arabia has been the alliance's strongest proponent and would be its greatest beneficiary. Instead of sanctions, canceling arms deals, or other punitive measures as a means of the United States expressing its displeasure with the Saudi government, MESA could be used as a bargaining chip in US-Saudi relations. With the decision to withdraw US troops from Afghanistan and Syria, President Trump has made clear that he has no qualms about making highly controversial, convention-denying decisions about US foreign and military policy. This should pose a credible threat to the Saudis, telling them that the materialization of MESA is contingent on their good behavior and demonstrating that the Trump administration is not afraid to jeopardize their long-standing relationship if it feels it is in the US interest. If using MESA as a carrot fails to produce in Saudi Arabia the behavior the United States desires, maybe the United States should rethink its Saudi relationship after all.

In summation, the biggest pro for the alliance is the alliance itself, assuming it acts as it is intended to. MESA's success would mean a Middle East where US economic and strategic interests are protected, US allies do not regularly face existential threats, freedom of navigation is maintained in crucial international waterways that carry a significant portion of the world's energy resources, and stability is the norm, not the exception. Auxiliary pros include a boon to the US economy and defense sector, an added tool of influence projection for the West, and a metaphorical bit in the mouth of Saudi Arabia to check the impulses and influence the policy of the kingdom's young ruler.

Why MESA Could Be Viable. Of the proposed nine MESA members, four are strongly committed to the alliance becoming a reality. Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the United States have all expressed their belief in the need of a MESA-like alliance and their belief that MESA must directly address the Iranian threat.¹¹⁸ The collective will of these four states is one of the most promising signs for MESA proponents moving forward.

In a US Army War College publication, Jean Loup-Samann points out the extent of threats and challenges shared by the Gulf states. Namely, he identifies general instability that tends to spread to neighboring regions, increasing maritime threat from IRGC aggression, and the ballistic missile threat from Tehran.¹¹⁹ The four countries listed above strongly agree with this sentiment.

Broadly speaking, Saudi Arabia is the Gulf's de facto leader. When it took issue with Qatari ties to Iran, it led a blockade of Qatar with its local partners. When it became concerned about the extent of Iranian influence and involvement in the Yemeni conflict, it amassed a coalition of Arab and African states and led them into battle. Whether these ventures have been successful is less of an issue at this point. The key takeaway here is that, at least recently, Saudi Arabia has successfully led its Arab neighbors in significant regional engagements. This is clearly a positive sign for those who hope that Saudi Arabia could do the same with MESA.

Although Egypt, Kuwait, and Oman maintain a less aggressive posture toward Iran, MESA planners could frame the alliance in such a way as to minimize the explicit targeting of Iran. If MESA is presented as less of an Arab NATO—the implication being that Iran is the new Soviet Union—and more of a security and economic partnership forum akin to the SCO, these states might take a back seat to the United States’ and Saudi Arabia’s leadership.

Leaders have likely already recognized this to some degree. For example, Bahrain’s foreign minister recently commented on the need for the alliance, but in the same statement said, “MESA is against no one.”¹²⁰ Further, a senior US State Department spokesman said, “I do see [Iran] as a very strong element of [MESA]. . . . That doesn’t have to be the defining purpose.”¹²¹ While MESA’s anti-Iranian bent will never be a secret, framing the alliance in such a way might grant these less confrontational states the plausible deniability needed to justify their membership.

Overall, MESA’s ability to materialize rests on MESA planners’ ability to convince potential member states to buy into this strategic vision. In a realist international relations perspective, these states would recognize that choosing to participate in the development of the specific power dynamics outlined necessarily closes other doors. Namely, it closes doors to increased cooperation with Iran and, to some extent, with China and Russia. If these potential member states can be convinced that this perspective reflects reality, rather than a scenario in which states are free to benefit from a favorable relationship with all foreign nations, then MESA planners should be confident that partnership with the United States and the alliance would provide these Arab states with more benefits than they could gain with strategic competitors of the United States.

Finally, the role of President Trump’s character and governing style in MESA’s development should not be underestimated. No one would disagree that MESA faces numerous obstacles to its realization, let alone its long-term success. But whether addressing the issue of a border wall on the US southern border, simultaneously tackling perceived trade injustices around the world, or moving the US embassy

in Israel to Jerusalem, Trump has consistently demonstrated that his administration is not afraid to make highly controversial or exceedingly ambitious decisions—or both. Without a doubt, MESA is an exceedingly ambitious undertaking, and while more risk-averse and reserved presidents might shy away from the idea, if any US president would sign off on MESA, Trump would.

Overall, MESA’s ability to materialize rests on MESA planners’ ability to convince potential member states to buy into this strategic vision.

For those who are hopeful that MESA will become a reality, recent Saudi successes in marshaling diplomatic and military resources in the region and President Trump’s leadership on the subject are heartening. Much still relies on MESA planners’ ability to view regional power dynamics through a specific lens, but if done so, allying with the United States through MESA is clearly the correct choice.

Disadvantages and Potential Failings. A working MESA poses few disadvantages for the United States and its interests principally because the United States would be an influential player in MESA capable of directing the alliance to meet its interests. That said, it is impossible to predict how the world will look in 10, 15, or 20 years, and therefore it is impossible to say that entering into an expansive international framework such as MESA is without any risk.

One possible negative development would be that MESA materializes and nothing changes. If MESA operations in Yemen are just as unsuccessful and

reckless as the current Saudi-led coalition's, if Iran continues to gain territory and influence by proxy, or if Saudi behavior continues to fall below Western standards while infighting dominates MESA and the GCC, the United States would have invested significant diplomatic capital and its own international credibility and received far too little in return. Arab militaries have had limited battlefield success in the past few decades despite increased American equipment and training. If MESA fails to resolve this issue, it is unlikely to produce a different outcome. Although it is difficult to accurately approximate the likelihood of this scenario, the possibility is significant enough that MESA planners should be aware of this particular situation.

Another disadvantage of entering into such an alliance would be the necessary intertwinement of the United States, politically and militarily, with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states with questionable human rights and civil liberties records. The United States seeks to align its foreign policy with its values whenever possible. The potential members of MESA clearly do not share similar values. So even if MESA produces limited battlefield success and actively addresses the Iranian threat, the United States would likely lose some degree of legitimacy in its dealings with other despotic regimes. Bad actors will rightly point out American hypocrisy in enacting economic sanctions when atrocities are committed by strategic competitors and turning a blind eye when similar deeds are done by American partners. Unless these Arab states are willing and ready to make significant governance changes—an unlikely development—the United States will necessarily take a hit by participating in MESA.

Finally, the United States should be mindful of the sociological implications of MESA. If MESA materializes, few would deny the historical echo between the ensuing regional power dynamic and the bipolar world of the Cold War. Using history as a road map, the respective “combatants”—Iran on one hand and the United States, Saudi Arabia, and MESA on the other—would likely rush to stake claims to their respective regional empires, compelling local states to choose one side or the other in a zero-sum, “us versus them” manner. In doing so, MESA's creation

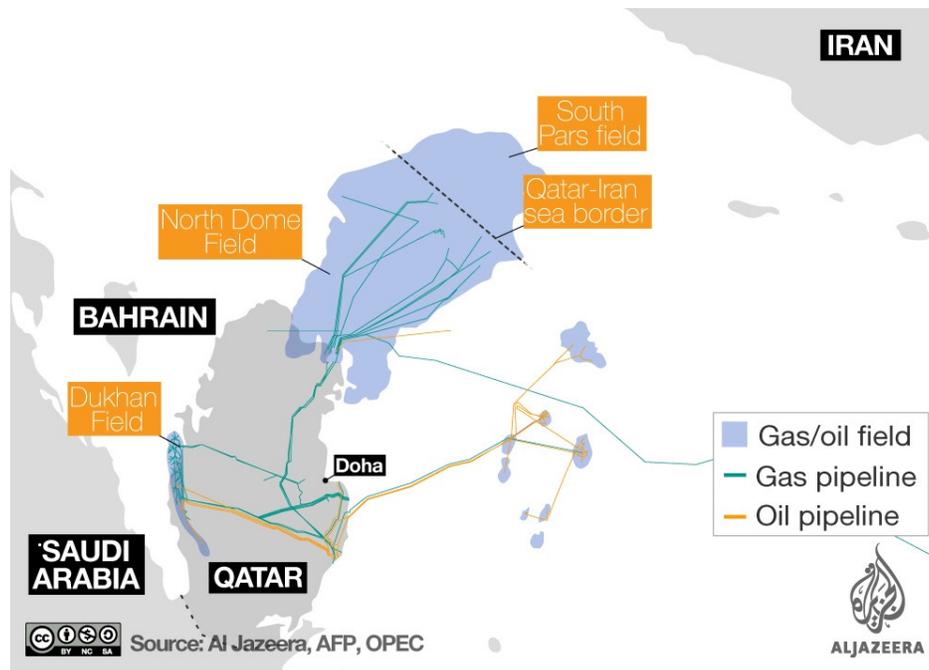
could effectively drive the Middle East into a Sunni versus Shi'a competition if not conflict. Although the Shi'a constitute only 10–15 percent of the Muslim population worldwide, in the Middle East the figure is closer to a 50–50 split.

Along with isolating a great number of Shi'a Middle Easterners, such a development would also likely marginalize Iraq, a state crucial to the region's political and economic stability. Iraq already delicately balances its relationships with Iran and the West, but losing Iraq completely to the Iranian geopolitical orbit could have potentially catastrophic regional implications. The United States' goal is to assemble a coalition of those willing to confront the Iranian threat, but certainly isolating nearly half the Middle Eastern Muslim population and losing any remaining influence in Iraq are not in the US interest.

So, there are still some reasons to worry about the prospects of a working MESA. This is not an exhaustive list since future developments in international relations are impossible to predict. Nevertheless, this demonstrates that even a functional MESA is not a clear win for the United States.

Why MESA May Not Be Viable. Although a successful MESA would have definite benefits, there are also significant challenges to be addressed before seriously considering the alliance. Of the alliance's nine proposed member states, six are GCC members, heavily implicating the cohesion of the GCC in MESA's success. This is particularly concerning because of the ongoing infighting between much of the GCC and Qatar.

Qatar has often been accused of financing terrorism and aligning itself, financially and otherwise, with Iran. The most recent manifestation of this conflict is the 2017 diplomatic crisis when Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others cut ties with Qatar and imposed a series of restrictions, including barring Qatari airlines from landing in the kingdom and denying Qatari ships entry to various ports. Saudi Arabia presented Qatar with a list of demands to meet before the restrictions will be lifted, which include Qatar severing diplomatic ties with Iran and turning over “terrorist figures.”¹²² Presently, the blockade is ongoing,

Figure 2. The South Pars/North Dome Gas Field

Source: Al Jazeera News, “Qatar’s Major Gas and Oil Fields,” June 15, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2017/06/qatar-north-dome-iran-south-pars-glance-Ing-gas-field-170614131849685.html>.

and as a result, Qatar has strengthened its relationship with Tehran in an attempt to offset the economic burdens of the blockade.

In failing to present a unified front, this conflict also gives Iran a dangerous weapon of influence in the GCC and any future iteration of MESA. Moreover, prospects for reconciliation look increasingly slimmer by the day. In early December 2018, Qatari Minister of Energy Saad Sherida al-Kaabi announced that Qatar would, effective January 1, 2019, withdraw from OPEC, the Saudi-dominated international economic cooperative organization.¹²³ Although OPEC and the GCC are different bodies, the move was clearly a political one aimed at Saudi Arabia. Even more troubling for MESA is Qatar’s rationale for leaving OPEC—specifically, to focus its economic energy on natural gas production rather than oil production.¹²⁴ This is problematic because the basis of Qatar’s ever-friendlier relationship with Iran is their shared usage of the world’s largest natural gas field, the South Pars/North Dome field in the Persian Gulf (Figure 2).

Qatar is the world’s leading supplier of liquefied natural gas, exporting roughly 77 million metric tons and hoping to produce 110 million after its withdrawal from OPEC.¹²⁵ Iran has a far superior land and naval force to Qatar, and if it decided to do so, it could easily encroach on the current Qatar-Iran sea border. Because natural gas is the lifeblood of the Qatari economy and key to its prosperity, Qatar feels that maintaining at least neutral relations with its nautical neighbor is in its best interest, and if its fellow GCC and OPEC member states insist on inflicting punitive economic damage, the Qatari government could logically move further into the Iranian sphere of influence.

This situation, if left unchecked, could derail MESA negotiations before they progress any further. There is little hope for an alliance strong enough to confront the dynamic Iranian threat and secure the globe’s most important international waterways if it cannot conduct standard operating procedures without imposing a blockade on one of its members. Whether

the accusations levied against Qatar are legitimate is less of an issue than the consequences of the action taken. Regardless, the result is a fractured GCC (and potential MESA) and a stronger relationship between Qatar and Iran.

Although a given action may be obviously advantageous to a country, in foreign policy a state must also consider how its action will affect its strategic competitors and their responses. With MESA, retaliation by Iran, Russia, and Syria must be taken into account before the alliance is formalized. Because Iran is the alliance's principal adversary of the alliance, Iran will likely respond negatively toward potential alliance members. Increased malicious activity from Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah, and others should be expected, though a direct military engagement with the IRGC remains unlikely. Iran would presumably seek to intimidate smaller potential alliance members and leverage its existing influence with states such as Oman and Qatar to thwart MESA negotiations.

Russia and Syria, though not directly implicated in the justification for forming MESA, certainly do not benefit from the alliance, if only because their mutual strategic competitor—the United States—would wield greater political and military influence in the region. Any Russian or Syrian retaliation is likely to manifest itself in the purview of the ongoing Syrian civil war. Both Damascus and Moscow have regularly been accused of human rights violations and war crimes in recent years, and if either decides to express its displeasure with MESA or the idea of MESA, the ongoing conflict could become even more grisly, with Russian and Syrian troops pursuing increasingly aggressive action that could place any remaining US and particularly US-allied forces at greater risk.

However, any more significant blowback outside the civil war seems unlikely as MESA member states are beginning to accept the reality on the ground in Syria after the Trump administration's decision to withdraw US troops. Most recently, the UAE reopened its Damascus embassy, a move that many believe will be the first step in normalizing relations between Syria and the Arab world.¹²⁶ So of the three, Iran poses the greatest threat for retaliation in response to MESA.

The historical failures of Arab militaries might affect MESA's lethality and interoperability. In *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, Kenneth Pollack argues for three factors leading to these systemic issues: politicization of militaries, underdevelopment, and cultural factors.¹²⁷ Pollack notes that the firsthand after-action reports of the wars in which Arab militaries were involved in the past 70 years are remarkably similar. In particular, Arab military action has been characterized by a consistent pattern of battlefield inflexibility, lack of creativity, lack of initiative, and an overall inability to adapt to the dynamic and complex modern battlefield.

Every MESA member other than the United States is an Arab state, so clearly this is a consideration for MESA. For politicization and underdevelopment, remedies might be possible through the framework of MESA. In the same way that NATO encouraged greater political alignment among its member states, MESA members might be compelled to implement standardized policy that, at least to some degree, guarantees the military's independence. Further, the long-term vision for MESA prescribes economic growth for its member states, meaning that increased development is likely to improve Arab militaries' weapons handling and technical proficiency.

Still, even in the unlikely scenario that both issues are addressed, the cultural factor remains the foremost obstacle to effective Arab military action. Cultural change is not as easy as enacting political reforms, and political reforms in the Middle East are not easy in the first place. Rather, culture takes generations to shape, molded by deep-seated beliefs derived from shared real-life experiences. Even if a government passes a law intended to address a cultural issue, a successful law can take decades to achieve its goal, while many outright fail to achieve their primary objectives.

MESA does not have decades to patiently wait for Arab states to painstakingly tweak their cultures to address historical combat issues such as tactical incapacitation, highly centralized decision-making, and failure to accurately report battlefield conditions for

fear of dishonor or retribution. To be frank, it is not immediately clear how to address such issues. But it seems equally obvious that MESA is not equipped or designed to do so, which will likely preclude any meaningful operational capability for the alliance, at least in the near term.

Although not necessarily an impediment to the alliance's success, one potential challenge for MESA's creation is the US system of government. Because the United States is set to play such an important leadership, funding, and development role from the onset, the alliance could not materialize without its full support. But for the United States to give this to MESA, it will need more than President Trump's support. MESA will need the support of military leaders, top diplomats, and, most importantly, the US Congress.

Cultural change is not as easy as enacting political reforms, and political reforms in the Middle East are not easy in the first place.

Both because the power of the executive has been greatly expanded in the late 20th century and because of the disjointed, asymmetric nature of warfare today, the US commander in chief does not need (and rarely seeks) congressional approval for military action. Entering a binding, multinational military alliance is different. The president could enter into some sort of MESA-like structure using his narrow executive powers in the short term, but for the alliance to be a long-term, politically independent staple of American foreign policy in the same vein as NATO, the Trump administration must secure whole-of-government approval.

At present, this is unlikely. The United States is in one of its most hyper-partisan political environments in recent memory. While Republicans and Democrats used to generally unite on foreign and military policy, today no issue is off limits for political grandstanding. Regardless of the practicality or ingenuity of an idea, if a figure as controversial and divisive as President Trump suggests something, the idea will likely fail to receive the support it might have received if presented by a more neutral party. With the departure of Defense Secretary James Mattis, the administration lost one such individual with the requisite credibility and perceived level of detachment to drive MESA home.

The most likely scenario is that the Trump-backed MESA plan, if put to a vote in the Senate, would receive zero Democrat votes and votes from one-half to two-thirds of the Republicans. At present, the Trump administration likely lacks the broad political support to justify US involvement—let alone leadership—in MESA. And it unequivocally lacks the political support to ensconce the United States in a long-term commitment to the proposed alliance that could span presidential administrations with diverse ideological foundations, as NATO has done.

The final obstacle to MESA becoming a reality is Saudi Arabia's behavior. As discussed briefly, the United States has voiced concerns about Saudi Arabia's human rights record for years. The kingdom still performs beheadings for capital punishment, including 48 in the first four months of 2018, half of which were for nonviolent drug offenses.¹²⁸ It also has a track record of repression and stymying various forms of dissent, and though it just recently began to allow women to drive cars, many institutional mechanisms of gender-based discrimination remain.¹²⁹ Still, throughout the nearly 20-year war on terror, the United States has grown ever closer to Saudi Arabia as, some would say, a geopolitical necessity.

Yet recent Saudi behavior has become so extreme that even those outside regular anti-Saudi circles in the United States are questioning the US-Saudi relationship. Further complicating things is that much of this turmoil has arisen shortly after the ascension of MbS, a young, charismatic figure to whom many in

the West have grown attached as a result of his vision for a more modern Saudi Arabia.

The most striking example of this is the murder of Khashoggi. Regardless of the veracity of alleged ties to Qatar and Turkey, the fact remains that Khashoggi was a prominent critic of the Saudi Arabian government and of MbS in particular. For those in the United States who had long been critical of the kingdom, this action provided further justification for their indignation. For those who stood in the Saudi corner through the litany of questionable military actions, legal decisions, and domestic policies in the name of shared strategic interests, this action was the first step in tipping the scales against Saudi Arabia.

Ultimately, the US response included sanctions on 17 individuals directly involved in the murder and an almost unanimous resolution from the US Senate blaming MbS for the assassination.¹³⁰ Although the Trump administration ultimately chose to stand by the US-Saudi partnership, it did so at great political cost and virtually unilaterally. In contrast, Denmark, Finland, and Germany halted all current and future arms and military equipment sales to the kingdom, effectively terminating much of those countries' respective relationships with Saudi Arabia.¹³¹ Despite retaining the nominal support of the United States, the Khashoggi murder has further damaged the international standing of a country with an already negative perception on human rights and repression.

As if Khashoggi's murder were not heinous enough, it came during an ongoing humanitarian crisis caused by the Yemeni Civil War, a conflict in which Saudi Arabia is one of the main belligerents. According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, over 60,000 people have been killed since 2016 as a result of combat operations alone.¹³² Considering a more accurate number that would account for deaths caused by famine, disease, and lack of water is as difficult as it is frightening.

The internationally recognized government of Yemen was pushed from Sanaa early in the conflict by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels who have subsequently sought to establish a government of their own. Although an entity under Tehran's control so

close to Saudi sovereignty is threatening enough to the kingdom, the Houthis have used their new territory to plan attacks on and launch missiles at the Saudis. For their part, the Saudis have led a coalition of nine African and Middle Eastern nations in the conflict with significant support from the United States in military equipment and arms.

Because of carelessness by the Saudi Armed Forces and the particularly brutal nature of the conflict, this has resulted in US weaponry being used to kill civilians time and again. Both sides have been implicated in various war crimes, including rape, torture, the intentional murder of noncombatants, and the seizure of humanitarian aid for sale on the black market.¹³³

Since the conflict began in 2015, international concern over the crisis has been slowly mounting, culminating in a December 2018 vote in the US Senate to withdraw US military support for the Saudi-led coalition.¹³⁴ For a week in the same month, representatives from the Yemeni government and Houthi rebels met in Sweden for a series of peace talks that resulted in little more than a prisoner exchange.¹³⁵ Although war rarely is black and white, it is apparent that the conflict in Yemen is between two sides with a shared disregard for innocent bystanders and indifference to those affected by humanitarian crises.

The long-standing Saudi reputation, the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, and the Saudi role in the Yemeni conflict have made the kingdom an increasingly less attractive international partner, particularly for nations such as the United States that strive to align policy with their values. Since the Cold War began, the United States has claimed to be the leader of the free world, a title that carries with it a great deal of responsibility and holds its owner to a higher standard of ethical behavior. Although a nation's values certainly must be balanced with its strategic interests given that our world is inherently imperfect, Saudi Arabia's recent actions have dictated that, if the United States expands its relationship with the kingdom through MESA, the United States' reputation will be damaged at least some by association. The extent to which this damage will inhibit the United States' ability to conduct diplomacy elsewhere is yet to be

determined, but certainly those states that pursue similar distasteful policies or methods as Saudi Arabia will expect a longer leash from the United States.

MESA would represent a dynamic shift in US policy from principled and virtuous leadership to pragmatic and opportunistic foreign policymaking, and without the most powerful nation continuing to fulfill its role as an ethical and moral leader, the world will likely become a more dangerous place as a whole. Regardless of the long-term outcome, the short-term reputation of the United States would be tainted by moving forward with MESA and deepening its relationship with Saudi Arabia.

Conclusion

Given the present challenges and opportunities, this report's assessment is that MESA is not viable at this time. The idea is, frankly, exciting. The prospect of an international cooperative organization that advances US interests while reducing its involvement in the Middle East is incredibly attractive to US policymakers—for good reason. The Middle East has been a thorn in the side of the United States for nearly three decades, and a structure like MESA, which purports to solve this issue, should be seriously considered.

Nevertheless, MESA is simply untenable at this time for two reasons. First, the growing rift among potential MESA member states is likely unresolvable in the near term and possibly indefinitely. Qatar is inching closer to Tehran by the day, and as a member of the GCC and potentially MESA, that is unacceptable. Qatar does so because of shared interests with Iran, and MESA is unlikely to change this calculus.

Further, Saudi Arabia's reckless and apathetic behavior relegates the idea of MESA to a more idealistic and whimsical realm of diplomacy than the serious foreign policymaking process its creation would require. Specifically, its abject failure in the Yemen conflict and the recent extrajudicial killing of a known dissident provide serious impediments to MESA becoming a reality at this time. Together,

these two factors—the ongoing Qatari rift and Saudi Arabia's unfavorable behavior—constitute, in my opinion, impassable barriers to a workable, viable, and sustainable MESA.

The second way in which MESA is untenable is more nuanced and political. As with CENTO in the 1950s, even if regional circumstances changed so that MESA members would be more cohesive and less controversial, the Trump administration is unlikely to muster the whole-of-government support necessary to see that the alliance would survive past the Trump administration.

Together, these two factors—the ongoing Qatari rift and Saudi Arabia's unfavorable behavior—constitute, in my opinion, impassable barriers to a workable, viable, and sustainable MESA.

The political climate in Washington is vitriolic and divisive to such a degree that political opponents could use any legitimate grievance with a given policy—and MESA has many—to justify disregarding that policy even if their true motive for opposition is that the policy is closely associated with their political opponent and their legacy. Whereas during the Cold War there was generally broad agreement between the two parties on foreign and defense policy, there no longer exists a looming existential threat such as the USSR to bind the parties together.

Additionally, Saudi Arabia's recent behavior has turned some in the US government who otherwise would not have opposed MESA on political grounds against the kingdom. This means the Trump administration would now have to contend with both legitimate and politically motivated opposition. In short, Democrats were unlikely to support MESA regardless, but because of the Khashoggi murder and Yemen humanitarian crisis, a significant number of Republicans would likely not support MESA now. So, both practically and procedurally, MESA is not viable at this time.

To be clear, the idea of MESA is a promising one that, given the right external circumstances, could transform the Middle East and secure US interests for a generation. The idea should unequivocally not be abandoned. This assessment that MESA is not viable is not based on the premise that the MESA concept is necessarily flawed but rather that external circumstances make its implementation unrealistic at this time.

If things change over the coming decade—specifically, the political climate in the United States improves, Qatar realigns with broader Gulf aversion to Iran, and Saudi leadership becomes more conscientious—and if the Iranian threat remains, the MESA plan should be resurrected at a time left to the discretion of perceptive and discerning US leaders. Until such time, however, US efforts to establish MESA will presumably result in a significant expenditure of US leadership and diplomatic capital for an ill-functioning, friable alliance that will be scrapped shortly after the next presidential administration assumes power. If the Trump administration is serious about MESA and its potential impact on the US strategic calculus in the Middle East, it will bide its time and do everything in its power to reshape the issue as a nonpartisan issue

of national security to be addressed by a subsequent presidential administration.

If MESA planners hope for the alliance to one day become a reality, the ongoing Qatari diplomatic crisis must first be resolved. Iran's and Qatar's relationship is based on shared interests that are not likely to substantially change any time soon. That does not mean, however, that Qatar necessarily must have a negative relationship with the United States or Saudi Arabia. All diplomatic capital that would be used to bring MESA to fruition should instead be used to reconcile Qatar to the rest of the GCC. Only then could the alliance proceed as described.

It is also possible to proceed with some of the mechanisms that would be part of MESA without formalizing any framework. In particular, Gulf nations have grown increasingly worried about Tehran's aggressive maritime action and the ballistic threat presented by Iran's missile capabilities. Establishing a unified missile command or defense college to teach sound doctrine could lay the groundwork for MESA if circumstances change in the future.

Finally and most importantly, MESA planners should exercise discretion in the present. If they push MESA too hard when the time is not right, they risk exhausting the idea. This may already be occurring. One anonymous Gulf official said, "There was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm at the very beginning. . . . But, as time went on, I think the enthusiasm and momentum has just slowed down." Another Gulf official was quoted saying, "Right now, we're waiting for more momentum on MESA."¹³⁶

A much wiser course of action would be for MESA planners to pursue limited goals, similar to those outlined above, and allow either a subsequent administration or a less controversial figure or institution to push MESA. Doing so will give MESA the best chance of becoming a reality at some point in the future.

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