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OPINION

Saudi-Houthi Confrontation: The First Test of the Mecca Pact

Murad S. Sadygzade*



Barely had Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan formalised their mutual defence arrangements when they encountered a crisis that could determine the future of their emerging alliance. The renewed confrontation between Riyadh and *Ansar Allah*[1] (read Houthis) is becoming the Mecca Pact's[2] first serious stress test, as its members must demonstrate their willingness to honour commitments whose costs now extend beyond diplomatic declarations. What was once a discussion about the alliance's potential has become a much more immediate question of what assistance its members are prepared to offer one another, and how much risk they are willing to accept in doing so.

Saudi Arabia's announcement that it had intercepted a drone south of Mecca has given the crisis an additional political and religious dimension. The Houthis deny intending to attack the holy city, and the reported interception must be distinguished from claims about the drone's intended target. Nevertheless, the mere prospect of a threat to Islam's holy sites sharply narrows the Saudi leadership's room for restraint. Turkey and Pakistan can hardly disregard this consideration either, since their aspirations for a prominent role in the Muslim world entail responsibilities that, in such circumstances, extend beyond conventional interstate cooperation.

Yet the significance of this test extends well beyond the willingness of the leaders in Ankara and

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Islamabad to send forces to assist their Saudi partner. Signed on 7 August, the agreement emerged at a time when established approaches to regional security were proving inadequate to the threats at hand, while dependence on American guarantees had exposed vulnerabilities that another round of arms purchases could not resolve. Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states increasingly recognise that close ties with Washington do not, in themselves, ensure either the prevention of conflict or timely intervention when it escalates.

For Riyadh, the central difficulty is that America's willingness to protect its partners is governed by its own interests, which do not always coincide with the needs of regional states. Washington may tolerate a level of tension that the Saudi leadership regards as a threat to infrastructure, investment and domestic stability, while American understandings with individual parties to a conflict may leave allied security concerns unresolved. The present situation, in which the United States maintains contact with the Houthis while avoiding direct military involvement in the renewed confrontation, brings this divergence into particularly sharp focus.

The Mecca Pact should, therefore, be understood as part of a broader reassessment of relations between regional powers and external security guarantors. As the international order changes, there is a growing recognition across the Greater Middle East that regional stability requires arrangements in which local states can set priorities and influence decisions that affect their vital interests. For now, many such decisions are made either outside the region or by actors within it who see little reason to account for the consequences of their actions on their neighbours.

This also explains the desire to diversify defence and political relationships through closer cooperation with China, European countries, Russia and other external powers. Such diversification broadens the Gulf states' options, but it does not automatically provide reliable protection, since having more partners does not reconcile their competing interests. Regional cooperation matters precisely because it can gradually place a greater share of responsibility on the states that bear the direct costs of Middle Eastern conflicts and therefore have a compelling interest in containing them.

Saudi financial resources, Turkey's defence industry and Pakistan's military capabilities give the new grouping considerable potential, yet a collection of national strengths remains at some distance from a

functioning system of collective defence. Bridging that distance requires joint planning, agreed-upon procedures for decision-making, and a clear understanding of which commitments each member assumes under particular circumstances. Announced plans for exercises and defence technology cooperation suggest serious intent, but the Yemen crisis is unfolding faster than the members can give their agreement the institutional substance it needs.

The alliance's eventual character will also depend heavily on the place assigned to Iran within the emerging order. Reports in August of a possible invitation to Tehran, which did not receive official confirmation from all parties, do not establish that a joint decision had been reached, although they leave open the possibility of preliminary diplomatic soundings. If such contacts did take place, they would reflect a pragmatic reading of regional realities, in which lasting security depends on finding acceptable terms of coexistence even among states with substantial unresolved differences.

The reasoning is straightforward; since an architecture that excludes one of the region's most influential actors from the outset risks perpetuating the confrontation it is intended to overcome. Any eventual inclusion of Iran would nevertheless require an understanding of the limits of acceptable conduct, including its relationships with armed non-state movements. Without reciprocal commitments, enlargement could simply bring existing conflicts inside the alliance, whereas its members need arrangements capable of containing threats before they develop into direct military confrontation.

The events surrounding *Ansar Allah* illustrate how difficult this task would be, for the movement's close ties to Tehran do not mean that every Houthi decision follows Iranian instructions. The movement has interests of its own, a domestic political constituency and its own judgment of which concessions are acceptable and which would weaken its position. Even a successful dialogue with Iran would therefore leave the pact's members needing separate understandings with the Houthis, whose autonomy could impose significant limits on any compromise negotiated between states.

Whereas the Iranian question at least allows for discussion of future engagement, the question of Israel remains unresolved and is likely to become increasingly contentious as the alliance develops. Turkey is moving further up the escalation ladder in its tensions with Israel, as disagreements sharpened by the Gaza war become ever more

entangled with competing interests in Syria. The August strikes on a Syrian airbase and the accusations that followed demonstrated that these disputes already affect both countries' military and political positions, creating the conditions for further dangerous incidents.

Saudi Arabia, too, has growing grounds to view the Israeli leadership's regional policy as a source of insecurity, as events in Gaza and Lebanon, followed by military action against Iran, progressively widen the zone of instability. Of particular concern to Riyadh is that the consequences do not remain confined to the immediate adversaries. When Israeli strikes on Iranian facilities are followed by Iranian retaliation against Gulf infrastructure, the kingdom bears the costs of decisions over which it has little influence, even as it is forced to defend itself against their repercussions.

A convergence of views between Ankara and Riyadh does not, however, mean that the Mecca Pact's members have agreed on a common policy towards Israel or share the same assessment of how far confrontation should go. Turkish leaders may consider certain measures necessary that their Saudi counterparts deem excessively risky, while Pakistan will assess them in light of its own foreign policy priorities. The present crisis thus also tests whether the allies can agree on the limits of mutual support before comparable disagreements arise in circumstances offering even less room for compromise.

Negotiations over assistance will inevitably raise the question of reciprocity, since Turkey's willingness to support Saudi Arabia today will shape its expectations of its partners should it face a crisis of its own. Pakistan likewise cannot indefinitely separate the obligations it assumes from the support it receives in return, which means that present decisions will establish precedents for future requests. A precedent grounded in a clear allocation of responsibility would strengthen the pact, but internal tensions will accumulate if each member seeks the advantages of an alliance while avoiding its associated costs.

Confrontation with the Houthis poses a particularly awkward challenge for a young alliance because military superiority offers no assurance of a swift or decisive outcome. Ansar Allah needs to retain only the ability to inflict damage periodically, whereas Saudi Arabia must continuously protect its population, energy facilities and transport routes. Under these asymmetric conditions, even limited attacks can sustain a persistent sense of insecurity, while an expensive,

prolonged campaign may bring a political settlement no closer if the movement remains able to rebuild its strength and continue resisting.

These circumstances have direct economic implications for the kingdom, whose diversification efforts and investment ambitions depend on a predictable environment for long-term projects. Even where physical damage can be repaired relatively quickly, the prospect of further strikes affects insurance costs, investors' required returns and the timing of investment decisions. Riyadh therefore needs an outcome that reduces the likelihood of recurring crises. Otherwise, reconstruction and defence spending will rise alongside the costs of uncertainty, and military gains will fail to deliver the expected economic benefits.

Houthi advances along Yemen's coast and threats to shipping further complicate the picture, as the security of Saudi territory becomes increasingly bound up with conditions in the Red Sea. Yet protecting ports, escorting commercial vessels and conducting military operations inside Yemen are distinct undertakings, each carrying a different degree of responsibility for the allies. Unless these distinctions are agreed in advance, limited assistance could gradually become involvement in a conflict on a scale that none of the signatories originally intended to assume.

There are serious reasons to question Pakistan's willingness to accept such an outcome, since its relationship with Saudi Arabia, however important, does not remove Islamabad's need to safeguard its own borders and maintain working relations with Iran. Participation in a prolonged war would require additional resources while narrowing its scope for mediation, a role that itself strengthens Pakistan's international standing. It is telling that reaffirmations of commitment to the pact have been accompanied by Foreign Ministry statements that a military response had not been discussed, suggesting a determination to avoid a premature expansion of obligations.

Turkey's comparable caution arises from a different combination of interests, as Ankara seeks to strengthen its influence in the Gulf while balancing those ambitions against commitments elsewhere. Moreover, direct participation in a war against a movement that presents its actions as support for the Palestinians would require a persuasive political explanation, particularly given Turkey's forceful criticism of Israel. Protecting the Saudi population could provide that justification, but as operations expanded, it would become harder

to explain why honouring defensive commitments required ever deeper involvement in Yemen's conflict.

Both countries must also reckon with the risk of damaging relations with Iran and the other forces commonly grouped under the term "axis of resistance". As long as assistance remains confined to protecting Saudi territory, its defensive purpose can be credibly maintained, but strikes inside Yemen could change perceptions and prompt retaliation. An agreement that might otherwise provide the basis for a broader regional understanding could then acquire a lasting orientation against Iran, undermining the political credibility of any discussion of Tehran's eventual participation.

Withholding meaningful support from Saudi Arabia would, however, expose the pact to a different kind of danger, since an alliance whose members evade assistance at its first serious test will inevitably face a crisis of trust. If Riyadh concludes that its partners have preserved their own freedom of action at the expense of Saudi security, the consequences will go beyond dissatisfaction over a single episode. The kingdom would have reason to question the value of arrangements through which it accepted reciprocal obligations and publicly committed itself to their fulfilment.

The absence of Turkish or Pakistani strikes against the Houthis does not by itself mean that the agreement is failing, since collective defence allows for different forms of participation and the pact's full text has not been made public. Much depends on what Saudi Arabia has requested and what assistance the parties have agreed to provide. Without accounting for these factors, expectations may become so inflated that anything short of full entry into the war is perceived as weakness, even though that very course could carry the gravest consequences for the alliance.

The members therefore need a response that offers Saudi Arabia tangible protection while keeping political objectives proportionate to available capabilities. Stronger air defences, intelligence sharing and the protection of critical infrastructure could demonstrate the seriousness of their commitments, provided these measures genuinely reduce the kingdom's vulnerability. At the same time, the allies must agree on the conditions under which assistance would be expanded or reduced, so that each new incident does not trigger decisions whose consequences reach beyond their original understandings.

Military support will have lasting value only if accompanied by diplomatic efforts capable of

preventing the conflict from spreading further. Contacts with Tehran must be complemented by engagement with the Houthis themselves, drawing on Oman's capacity for mediation and UN mechanisms, while the interests of other Yemeni actors must also remain part of the discussion. An arrangement that brings temporary calm to the Saudi border while deepening divisions within Yemen is unlikely to endure, since unresolved internal conflicts would continue to encourage attempts to overturn the resulting balance by force.

The pact's members must also decide what outcome they would regard as sufficient, since securing an end to attacks and achieving the complete military defeat of Ansar Allah demand fundamentally different levels of involvement. If Saudi security remains the objective, the Houthis must retain a path to ending their attacks on terms they do not perceive as threatening their own survival. Any concessions would nevertheless need to be matched by verifiable reciprocal steps, or another ceasefire would merely postpone renewed confrontation and deepen mutual distrust.

Prospective members will judge the Mecca Pact's appeal by its ability to secure such an outcome, since joining an alliance depends both on the reliability of its guarantees and on the risk of being drawn into someone else's war. Navigating this first crisis successfully would strengthen interest in the grouping, while either failing to protect Saudi Arabia or drawing its allies into a protracted campaign would undermine its prospects. Riyadh, Ankara and Islamabad must now demonstrate that their agreement can deliver security amid real differences of interest, for this is where the distinction emerges between a durable alliance and a pact liable to unravel at its first encounter with the cost of its own promises.

The unfolding confrontation with Ansar Allah demonstrates that the Mecca Pact must prove its worth not through declarations but through calibrated action. Defensive measures, intelligence sharing and diplomatic engagement may offer Riyadh protection without dragging allies into open-ended conflict. Yet the alliance's durability will rest on its ability to reconcile divergent interests, define reciprocal obligations and prevent escalation into regional polarisation. If Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Pakistan can navigate this test with proportionate responses and credible guarantees, the pact may evolve into a lasting framework for regional security. If not, it risks unravelling at the very moment it is called upon to justify its existence.

References

1. Ansar Allah—better known as the Houthis—is the Yemeni movement that is now in a rapidly escalating confrontation with Saudi Arabia. As of 17 September 2026, this is considerably more serious than the Saudi-Houthi tensions of the last few years.

2. Also written as Makkah Pact which closely reflects the correct Arabic pronunciation (with the doubled 'k' sound). It is preferred in official diplomatic and regional contexts originating from Saudi Arabia. However, 'Mecca' is widely accepted and used in international media, global legal texts, and standard English dictionaries and both are used interchangeably in global reporting.

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