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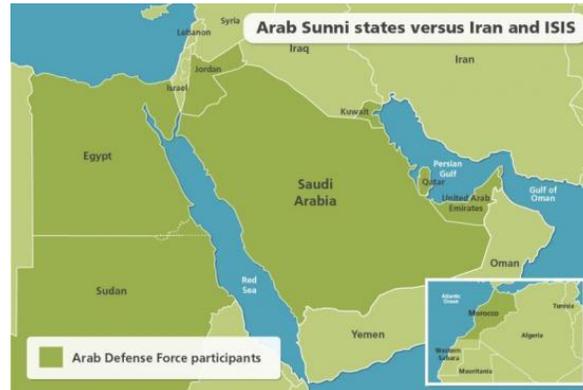
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Saudi-led buildup of ADF erects new bulwark against threats to Sunni states

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ADF participant states

THE CREATION of an Arab Defence Force (ADF) marks the emergence of a Saudi-led coalition ready to fight the twin threats of Iran and Islamic State.

Whether the new grouping will prove a regional support for endangered Sunni regimes following the US's disengagement from the Middle East will depend on how ADF operations fare in Yemen and, probably, Libya, writes World Review expert Bernard Siman.

Unveiled at the last Arab League Summit in Cairo in March 2015, the ADF is to be made up principally of the Sunni Arab states, led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The force may be deployed at the request of any Arab nation facing a national security threat and to combat terrorist groups, according to a resolution passed at the summit.

President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, where the force will be based, emphasised to participants that the ADF is for strictly defensive purposes.

At 40,000 soldiers, the ADF's planned size would be almost twice as large as Nato's Response Force. The bulk of the troops will come from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Jordan and Morocco. Smaller states, including Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, will contribute specialists such as air defence, intelligence and special forces units.

The combined force will reportedly be commanded by a senior Saudi officer. This reflects Saudi Arabia's dominance in the region's defence spending and its sponsorship of al-Sisi's government, including the co-funding of US\$17 billion in aid to stabilise Egypt's economy.

The ADF is an extension of the joint Peninsular Shield Force deployed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). A more distant precedent is the Arab Joint Defence Treaty of 1950, which was signed to create a framework for military cooperation against Israel, but which proved ineffectual in practice.

In this sense, the ADF represents a paradigm shift by Arab regional players, as they redefine geopolitical risk away from Israel and towards two other existential threats against which they must mount a common defence: Daesh, as the Islamic State is known in Arabic, and Iran.

The participation of non-Gulf Sunni states, especially Egypt, Jordan and Morocco, increases the potential power and logistical reach of the ADF to perform this mission.

Operation Decisive Storm, the Saudi-led air campaign to degrade the capabilities of the Iran-backed Houthis militants in Yemen, was the operational debut of the prototype ADF. A first glimpse of the relative contributions of different Sunni states to the new force can be gleaned from the composition of these tactical air strikes.

At the beginning of the operation, Saudi F-15s and Tornados accounted for roughly 100 of the 170 warplanes deployed. The UAE deployed some 30 F-16s and Mirage 2000s fighter-bombers, while more F-16s came from Bahrain, Jordan and Morocco. The Egyptians added naval forces to the campaign, sticking to their strategic focus of keeping the Suez Canal open for navigation by protecting freedom of movement in the Red Sea.

The creation of the ADF reflects geopolitical anxieties in Sunni states across the region that go beyond Iran and Daesh. It shows a lack of trust that the US is ready to provide support for the

current order, as well as an underlying fear that President Obama's foreign policy has divorced regional stability from regime security.

That concern was reinforced by the US's strategic pivot towards Asia and the shale energy revolution. The latter, in the eyes of the Gulf states, downgraded the Middle East in the global pecking order as North America moved to the verge of energy self-sufficiency.

The Saudis and Gulf states are also worried about the US-brokered nuclear deal with Iran. Their fear is that the agreement will embolden Iran to expand and deepen its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and even have in their midst Bahrain, which has a Shi'ite majority.

From the US standpoint, the ADF would be a handy defence umbrella that could take on a more direct combat role against Daesh, while serving as a check against Iran's regional ambitions.

Whether the ADF develops into an effective security bulwark depends on how far the member states develop mutual trust, without which there will be no serious intelligence sharing, interoperability or effective command.