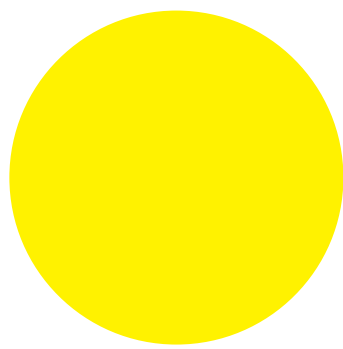


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Mecca Pact signals eroding trust in US security role

By Delaram Ahmadi
Staff writer

INTERVIEW
EXCLUSIVE

Amid heightened regional tensions following the US-Israeli military aggression against Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey have signed a defense pact. With Pakistan as the only Muslim nuclear-armed country on one side and Turkey, a Muslim country with significant military capabilities and a NATO member, on the other, the pact clearly carries a message for the international community.



Speaking to Iran Daily, international affairs expert Omid Khazani said the Mecca Pact was in fact a response to the United States, following the weakening of trust in defense arrangements with Washington amid Middle Eastern tensions in the aftermath of the war in Iran. He said that although the three countries had Iran partly in mind when concluding the pact, their deeper concern

was Israel's aggression and the United States' inaction in the face of it.

IRAN DAILY: What message does the Mecca defense pact carry, and what does it mean for the region's security equations and extra-regional actors?

KHAZANI: In my view, this will not have radical effects on the region, but it will not be without consequences either. Ultimately, when tensions escalate, any country seeking to harm one of these countries will have to take a step back and reassess the situation, because such a crisis could trigger defense alliances and cause tensions to escalate further.

However, it cannot be considered comparable to NATO in terms of its ability to fundamentally alter the region's overall equations, particularly from a defense standpoint.

Can this agreement be seen as an effort to establish independent regional mechanisms for providing security following a decline in regional countries' confidence in the US role in providing their security after the war in Iran?
Yes, absolutely. The security and

defense partnership that existed between the United States, as a security, trade and economic partner of the Persian Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, has now become shaky. Despite having various military bases in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and even Iraq and Jordan, the United States has failed to provide security for these countries. So, these countries have sought to draw on the military capabilities of regional powers.

This is particularly true for Saudi Arabia, which is the world's largest energy exporter. It is certainly compelled to rethink its security arrangements and will undoubtedly take a different approach toward the United States.

In practice, the United States prioritized the defense of Israel. It even tried not to use its Patriot systems extensively, and the defense systems of these countries effectively fell apart. At any moment, Iran could have chosen to target their infrastructure as well. Therefore, this defense alliance can also be seen as a response to the United States.

What security and strategic concerns have driven each of the

three member states toward such an agreement?

The circumstances and characteristics of these countries are different. In principle, Turkey does not have particularly serious security and strategic concerns because it is a NATO member. Although verbal disputes between Turkey and Israel have intensified recently, and Israel has also threatened Turkey in one way or another, Turkey is a NATO member, and the United States, as Israel's main ally, cannot attack another NATO member in defense of Israel. However, it cannot be said that the Turks are taking this issue lightly.

At the same time, Turkey, as the heir to the Ottoman Empire, has seen its sphere of influence in the Middle East diminish over the years and wants to regain that influence in the region. From this perspective, the collective defense pact can also be significant for Turkey because it allows it to restore its traditional influence in the region, which is accompanied by economic influence as well as security and defense influence.

Pakistan, meanwhile, is economically dependent on Saudi Arabia. It relies on Saudi Arabia for loans, en-

ergy and economic assistance. Saudi Arabia certainly cannot provide Pakistan with direct support in its crisis with India, but Pakistan benefits from Saudi Arabia economically and in terms of energy supplies and the loans it receives.

What impact could this agreement have on Iran? Should Tehran view this development merely as a defense arrangement among the three countries, or should it also consider it in the context of the emerging regional security architecture?

Iran has established a number of red lines, stating that if any country takes action against Iran's interests, Iran will carry out a retaliatory operation.

But it is highly unlikely that if Saudi Arabia were attacked, for example, by Iran or Iran's allies, Turkey and Pakistan would immediately enter a war with Iran or with Iran-aligned forces.

It should not be assumed that because this is called a collective defense pact, an attack on one country would immediately lead the other countries to declare war. Even NATO, which has a very long history of collective defense agreements,

dating back roughly 75 years to the post-World War II period, does not have such an automatic operational mechanism. Countries retain a degree of independence in making decisions.

However, Iran can view the issue from two angles. First, regional countries providing their own security from outside, are now turning to regional countries instead of making defense agreements with the United States and through the presence of US military bases in their territories. This is something Iran would prefer. From another perspective, these regional defense and security agreements do not necessarily constitute a threat to Iran. After all, Iran's regional defense doctrine has always been based on the principle that regional security should be defined through the participation of regional countries. If these countries replace the United States, there should certainly be a quiet welcome from Iran for such a development.

Besides, it is true that this agreement comes against the backdrop of tensions between Iran and the United States and Israel, and Saudi Arabia certainly had Iran partly in mind when entering into the pact.

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