



Stuck in the barracks: the Joint Arab Force

by Florence Gaub

It all seemed too good to be true: the Arab world was to get its own collective security architecture at last. In January 2015, the Arab League Secretariat went beyond previously mooted ideas of a limited military alliance and proposed a joint Arab rapid intervention force. The objective of the force would be to combat terrorism and it would fall under the 1950 military defence pact. Egypt's President Sisi swiftly picked up on this proposal, declaring that 'the need for a unified Arab force is growing and becoming more pressing every day'.

King Hamad of Bahrain backed this call, and the Arab summit in March 2015 endorsed the idea in what its Secretary General dubbed a 'historic development': a Joint Arab Force (JAF). Alas, in late August it all came to an abrupt halt: Saudi Arabia, with support from other Gulf states, has delayed the next meeting concerning the force's establishment indefinitely. What went wrong, and is the project doomed?

The features of the force

The announcement of the JAF was met with a large degree of cynicism: perhaps unsurprisingly, given the number of times Arab states had sought to establish such a joint military force in

the past. But this time, the common threat of terrorism provided an important glue. The new force's task was to take on 'rapid military intervention missions and other tasks to confront the challenges to the security and safety of any member state that would pose a direct threat to Arab national security, including terrorist organisations'.

Uncharacteristically, the League's council moved rapidly to first amend the statute of its peace and security council in order to enable its twice yearly meeting at ministerial level (until then, the body created in 2006 had no executive power and consisted of only five rotating members). It also assigned the council the task of preparing strategies to maintain regional peace and security, and to improve Arab security capabilities.

In addition, the summit resolution tasked the Secretary General to coordinate with the Arab chiefs-of-staff regarding the actual implementation of these new provisions. Details about the force were still vague but initial figures mentioned a force of up to 40,000 troops (35,000 ground troops, 5,000 naval forces and 500-1,000 air forces) headquartered in Egypt and commanded by a Saudi general.

Membership of this force was to be on a voluntary basis; it was to have an integrated and permanent command structure much like NATO, with specified warfighting components (air, sea, land and special forces). As in NATO, costs for troops would be covered by the respective member states, whereas the command structure was to be financed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It was also envisioned to establish an Arab peacekeeping force made up of military and civilian elements deployed at their countries of origin and ready for rapid deployment when necessary.

There were to be four levels of command, two of which would be permanent (the supreme defence council and the council of chiefs-of-staff), whereas the joint general command and the field command were to be appointed on a case-by-case basis. The supreme defence council, already in place, would have its function enhanced. The joint general command was to be headed by a general appointed by the supreme council for two years. He would be assisted by a council of chiefs-of-staff consisting of representatives of all member states. The field commander was to be appointed by the chiefs-of-staff council. This appointment was to be agreed in consultation with the country in question and the commander general.

Assistance from this force could be sought by member states by submitting a request to the Arab League. In the event that the state was unable to make that request, the Secretary General was to be empowered to make it on its behalf.

Issues such as a status of forces agreement were still to be finalised. In a series of meetings following the announcements, the Arab states tried to work through the remaining questions, aiming at a final protocol to be handed to the Arab League Council by the end of the summer of 2015.

From 'historic development' to history repeating itself?

But at the end of August, the force was suddenly postponed indefinitely: Saudi Arabia refused to sign the last decision necessary to

move the process forward; in this, it was supported by Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iraq. Once more, a regional idea for regional security had been stalled.

The main reason for the current hiatus on the JAF is disagreement between Saudi Arabia and Egypt over the deployment of this force into Libya – or more generally, into states without an uncontested government in place. This is a concern that other Arab states such as Algeria share: they fear that the JAF might be used as a pretext to invade other states rather than maintain security – which is why Tunisia called the whole idea 'neither realistic nor achievable'. Even Morocco, technically on board for the project, thought it primarily as a prevention rather than intervention force.

But the force has not only suffered from a lack of trust among its the Arab League member states – it is unclear what it seeks to achieve, and furthermore it appears much more ambitious than any previous collective security arrangement. The League's Secretary General summed it up when, at the first meeting of the chiefs of staff tasked to prepare the groundwork, and apparently in defiance of rumours and concerns, he

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pointed out that ‘the proposed joint Arab force will not be a new military alliance or an army that is targeting any country’. Rather, he declared that ‘the new force is aimed at fighting terrorism and maintaining Arab national security along with regional stability’ adding that it ‘should be able to deter any

foreign enemy and prevent the eruption of internal disputes.’

But his statement succinctly highlights the ambivalence surrounding the projected force: is it a collective defence pact along the lines of NATO and therefore protects states inside the alliance from those outside? Or is it a collective security system along the lines of the United Nations with provisions in place to tackle inter-state conflict – and, if necessary, even intra-state conflict? Is it a European Union-like body of states cooperating also on internal security matters? And how does the fight against terrorism fit either of these structures if Arab states

have trouble agreeing on what constitutes terrorism?

As the current proposal of a joint force seeks to kill three birds with one stone – deterrence against an outside aggression, inter-state aggression within the Arab security space as well as internal security concerns such as terrorism – it is seeking to become NATO, the UN and the EU in one go. Although this is the logical consequence of the region's conflation of internal and regional security, it nevertheless means going further in terms of surrender of sovereignty than any other region in the world.

Arab collective defence or security or both?

Currently, different levels of security are conceptually entangled, and each needs a separate legal framework.

When it comes to collective defence, a system designed to protect against outside aggression, there is a relevant treaty already in place. The 1950 Treaty of Joint Defence considers an act of aggression against any of the League's member states as an act of aggression against all – exactly like NATO's treaty. Here, the problem is not an absence of legal clarity but a lack of trust: several Arab states have been attacked in the past by external powers (Egypt in 1956, Iraq in 2003) without triggering a military reaction from their supposed allies.

If the true strength of any defence pact lies in the trust allies place in each other to act in accordance with the treaty, then this is a major pitfall. In addition, there is no shared threat perception amongst the member states when it comes to external aggressors: while some perceive Iran to be the principal foe, others believe it to be Israel, or indeed a third power.

Collective security, a system seeking to regulate the use of violence between member states, exists in theory as well, although the Arab League's charter contains several loopholes which allow acts of aggression to escape punishment. Violence as a means to solve disputes is ruled out in general, but the council's executive powers are limited should it seek to punish an

aggressor. Article 6 of the charter, which regulates cases of territorial integrity and sovereignty, foresees unanimity for any such decision (with the exception of the attacker state).

Article 5, however, provides a separate mediation possibility by the council for cases where states have a dispute not related to matters of sovereignty.

Article 5 decisions are taken by majority vote and exclude those states concerned, and are binding only for those members which voted for them.

There are three problems with this set-up. First, unanimity clauses are tricky in general but especially with a large number of member states as is the case for the Arab League.

Second, it is not clear how the decision over whether or not an act of aggression is infringing on sovereignty is to be taken. In 1958, this caused a dispute between Lebanon and Syria over which article should apply to their conflict. In the end, Lebanon decided to move the issue to the United Nations, a move which led to the deployment of US Marines to Beirut.

Third, the sanctions mechanism to be imposed on a potential aggressor has, so far, failed. Kuwait was left largely defenceless against the invasion by Iraq (which Baghdad argued was a case of re-establishing its own sovereignty), and Lebanon was occupied by Syria without receiving any Arab assistance.

The JAF has not addressed these legal and conceptual hurdles. Whereas the (arguably imperfect) United Nations has a security council to issue binding resolutions, the League of Arab States always takes decisions in plenary, and makes them binding only for those states which voted in favour. Neither NATO nor the UN has such an opt-out provision. Collective Arab security therefore always stumbles over the rule of consensus and/or the absence of penalty measures, be they economic or military in nature.

The future of the force

The new joint force was also supposed to tackle aspects of internal security, such as terrorism.



This is one of the security areas Arab states generally agree on, as most have been severely affected by jihadi terrorism, especially since 2011. However, there are several problems with cooperation in this domain.

First, Arab states cannot agree on who exactly is a terrorist and under what circumstances, and have vastly different legal interpretations of terrorism. The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, has been designated a terrorist organisation by Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE – but not by the other Arab states: in Tunisia, the Muslim Brotherhood outlet, Ennahda, is even part of the government. The same applies to Lebanon's Hizbullah, which forms part of the country's government despite being considered a terrorist entity by the GCC.

In addition, the JAF seeks to militarise counter-terrorism, including through deployment of troops. But most international cooperation in this field is of a non-military nature, such as the exchange of intelligence and information, harmonisation of laws pertaining to terrorism and the fight against the phenomenon. Not even the body which goes furthest in this regard, namely the EU, has provisions for deploying troops to another European country.

The Joint Force, however, seeks to combat terrorism first and foremost by using the military. This is the result of the rather broad regional understanding of the issue: the implosion of security in Libya, the insurgency in Yemen and the seizure of territory by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) are all considered to be acts of terrorism by certain Arab states. Syria's beleaguered regime takes it one step further, arguing that the ongoing civil war is an extended act of terrorism, too.

But issues of definition aside, Arab states have, to date, failed to cooperate on counter-terrorism at even the most minimal level – mainly because of distrust and concerns over national sovereignty. As first drafts of the JAF showed, the force's deployment was to be triggered by a request from a member state. However, concerns arise when the legitimacy of a state's government is in doubt.

In Libya, for instance, one of the two rival governments called on international and joint Arab military action in the country in the summer of 2015. But while it had the international legitimacy to do so, it lacked the required national legitimacy after a ruling of the Libyan Supreme Court rejected such a notion.

A military intervention in Libya would therefore require a mandate by the United Nations Security Council. And similar questions would be posed in the case of Syria, or indeed any other state where the government's legitimacy is openly contested.

Rebooting the JAF

The concept of collective Arab security may not be dead, but it is in need of a serious reboot. The force needs to be clearer on what is achievable and with what means: is it perhaps better off beginning with a limited membership or a limited scope, such as collective defence against an outside aggressor? Under which legal circumstances could the force be deployed in a country experiencing a full-blown civil war?

And in the meantime, military cooperation in order to achieve interoperability and build trust can still achieve the same effect. As the war against ISIL has shown, *ad-hoc* coalitions can be just as effective without the costly and cumbersome integration of forces.

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