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The trilateral Mecca Joint Defence Agreement – A regional paradigm shift?

Dragoș C. Mateescu



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Dragoș C. Mateescu [2]

Senior analyst, Romanian Diplomatic Institute

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Abstract

In this policy brief, the focus is on the question whether the Mecca Agreement could become the basis for the aggregation of the security interests of the tree signatories and for the integration in this mechanism of other countries in the wider Middle East, the main objective being enhanced regional security and stability. The first step is to outline the main constitutive aspects of the Mecca Agreement. This is then followed by a brief review of points of convergence that brought together Saudi Arabia, Türkiye and Pakistan in the first place. Later, I also draw attention to the points of divergence between them and provide brief insights into incentives and counterincentives for other regional actors to join or refrain from joining the Mecca Agreement mechanisms. The main idea that drives this approach is that although the pact makes sense for the three partners currently involved in it and despite its declared inclusiveness, there are more reasons to believe that it will eventually fail to transform into a regional organisation with a decisive stabilising effect.

Keywords: Mecca Agreement, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, Pakistan, Middle East, security.

[1] This publication draws exclusively on open-source materials. The opinions expressed herein are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the institution.

[2] dragos.mateescu@idr.ro

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, security arrangements in the Middle East seem to have entered a new era following the signing of the tripartite Mecca Agreement in August 2026. The context is dominated by armed conflicts and the new US policy combining force withdrawal with various diplomatic initiatives that change regional settings. These are linked in turn with proposals for development projects of global importance, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which benefits from direct US support within the context of the Abraham Accords. In this environment, on August 7, 2026, major regional actors Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye have signed a joint defence agreement in the holy Saudi city of Mecca. It should be noted that Mecca is a holy site to all Muslims, whether Sunni or Shiite. Therefore, the public message that the signatories seemed to send to the world was that the pact was open for all Muslim nations wishing to adhere, although obviously not to the non-Muslim ones.

In this policy brief, the focus is on the question whether the Mecca Agreement could become the basis for the aggregation of the security interests of the three signatories and for the integration of other countries in the wider Middle East in this mechanism, the main objective being enhanced regional security and stability. The first step is to outline the main constitutive aspects of the Mecca Agreement. This is then followed by a brief review of points of convergence that brought together Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan in the first place. Later, I also draw attention to the points of divergence between them and provide brief insights into incentives and counterincentives for other regional actors to join or refrain from joining the Mecca Agreement mechanisms.

The main idea that drives this approach is that although the pact makes sense for the three partners currently involved in it and despite its declared inclusiveness, there are more reasons to believe that it will eventually fail to transform into a regional organisation with a decisive stabilising effect. Actors from outside the Middle East and especially from Europe, Romania included, should therefore be advised to encourage the enlargement of the Agreement, but without expecting it to become an organisation capable of mitigating regional tensions efficiently.

THE MAIN POINTS OF CONVERGENCE FOR THE SIGNATORIES OF THE MECCA AGREEMENT

Though the text itself has not been released for public scrutiny, signatories indicated that it makes reference to Article 51 of the United Nations Charter, which preserves a country's natural right to individual, or collective self-defence in case that country is attacked. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan admitted that the collective defence clause is "technically similar" to the NATO Article 5 (Demir & Solmaz, 2026). This has led many to argue that the Mecca Agreement sets the ground for an organisation that could become an Islamic, Sunni Muslim NATO at the heart of the Middle East. In the current regional context, some observers suggest that the pact may thus be conceived as to counter perceived threats represented by Israel and Iran, along with their allies and proxies (see *inter alia* Hamad, 2026; Restelli, 2026; Zimmt, 2026).

At this point, it must also be noted that the signatories stressed the defensive character of the alliance and that it is not at all an "Islamic NATO" designed against anyone. Its objective is to safeguard regional stability and security, while allowing each state to retain existing security partnerships, including within NATO (Türkiye) and the deep bilateral security ties of each signatory state with Washington, Beijing (especially in the case of Pakistan), and other partner countries.

Undoubtedly, the US disengagement in the region and the ongoing war with Iran do represent important factors in this context. In turn, Israel and Iran, too, have proved their military capabilities and are undoubtedly perceived as threats by a number of regional actors. Despite all these, the commitment of the signatories of the Mecca Agreement to safeguard regional security and the declared openness for further expanding their alliance should not be underestimated. In fact, rumours emerged soon after the signing ceremony about Iran being in fact invited by Saudi Arabia to join along with other states (Al Mayadeen, 2026a). However, it is generally accepted in the relevant political and diplomatic circles that the continued support from Teheran for the Hezbollah in Liban, for Hamas, and for the Houthi rebels in Yemen, along with the blockage of the Hormuz and Bab El-Mandeb straits, represent the most important threats to regional stability. The Mecca Agreement is to be understood therefore, at least in the current context, as a step toward mitigating this threat. The interests of the signatory states do converge to this end and each has the potential to contribute significantly to achieving this goal.

Saudi Arabia, for instance, has been under the threat of the Iran-sponsored Houthis for years, more precisely following Riyadh's intervention in their conflict with the Yemeni authorities back in March 2015. After the United States and Israel struck Iran, in February 2026, the kingdom also became the target of direct attacks with rockets and drones from Iran. Over the last months, the Iranian-sponsored Houthi threat has grown exponentially with the group advancing in Yemen, while also striking numerous strategic Saudi targets. Energy infrastructure is a predilect target, which affects exports of oil and natural liquified gas from the Gulf region to the world. In particular, insecurity at home and in the Straits of Hormuz and Bab El-Mandeb meant a significant increase in the costs for Saudi oil exports.

On this background, the US has been unable to supply Saudi Arabia and other partners in the region with sufficient defensive weapons. This inability, among other reasons, seems to have determined Riyadh to think of adding alternatives to its otherwise long and strong relationship with Washington. Joining the trilateral defence accord with Ankara and Islamabad seemed a logical option. It is conceived as to enhance regional capabilities for immediate defence and for the production of weaponry and ammunition adapted to modern warfare.

Pakistan, on the other hand, does not recognise Israeli sovereignty and has a delicate, occasionally tense relationship with Iran. That is while the country depends on Saudi Arabia and other partners in the Gulf region for capital and energy. To some experts, this gives Riyadh ascendancy over Islamabad in foreign policy (Eshetu, 2026). The Mecca Agreement builds in fact on the bilateral Strategic Mutual Defence Agreement that Pakistan has signed with Saudi Arabia back in 2025. That bilateral act, in turn, represents the continuation of around six decades of Pakistani training and advisory support to Saudi forces ever since the signing of an even older bilateral security cooperation agreement in 1982. The Mecca Agreement brings Ankara aboard this already existing bilateral cooperation scheme between Islamabad and Riyadh. Although some underline Pakistan's role as the alliance's nuclear guarantor, it should be noted that its original pact with Saudi Arabia made reference only to conventional forces. Pakistani Defence Minister at that time told Reuters that nuclear weapons were "not on the radar" of that deal (Shah & El Dahan, 2025). The Mecca Agreement does not mention explicitly any reference to Pakistani nuclear deterrence either. Islamabad is probably more interested in extending its defence industrial capabilities with Turkish know-how and Saudi investments in the face of perceived threats from India and, potentially, Iran. Although not having formal relations with Israel, Pakistan has indeed little to fear from Jerusalem.

Türkiye, on its part, supplies NATO's second largest military, a fast-developing defence industry, and years of operational experience across Syria, Iraq, or Libya. It may also bring in more pragmatism. Beyond its institutional experience in NATO, Ankara has already developed security relations with Qatar and still has important military contingents in the northern territories of Iraq and Syria. This allows the Turks to act as guarantors for regional stability and, more specifically, for the security of the current regime in Damascus. Under Erdoğan, Ankara has also expanded its military footprint across Africa, utilizing defence agreements, drone exports, training bases, and direct interventions. Aside from operating Camp TURKSOM in Mogadishu, Somalia, since 2017, Türkiye has signed broad military and intelligence-sharing agreements with countries in the Sahel and West Africa. Moreover, almost twenty African nations – including Ethiopia, Niger, Burkina Faso, Sudan, and Libya – operate Turkish military hardware and unmanned aerial systems. The Mecca Agreement offers new possibilities of international expansion for a Turkish defence industry with strong orders from Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and from other current and potential allies. It is doubtful nevertheless that the NATO decades-long experience could serve as a model for a similar Turkish role in the future institutionalisation of the Mecca Agreement. Analysts familiar with regional mentalities will agree that it would be difficult at best for Arab partners to accept a permanent coordinating role for Türkiye. This is also indicated by the choice for the experienced retired general Nauman Mahmood from Pakistan as the secretary general of the Agreement for the first three years of its existence.

Main possible outcomes

Beyond currently less important aspects, the most significant outcome of this trilateral pact may be advanced industrial defence cooperation between the three signatories, potentially involving other partners from the region and from the world. Nowadays, policy-making in this domain has to take into account fundamental security paradigm changes in the wake of wars in Ukraine and the Gulf. These include the growing strategic and tactical weight of missiles, drones, and heavy artillery, together with adapted aircraft and sea-borne military equipment. In the end, it has never been the most sophisticated armament and ammunition that won on the ground, but the capacity of military industries to

provide lethal quality in massive quantity with efficient communication between forces on the ground (Herman, 2012).

This is eventually the main lesson also delivered by the Houthi rebels in Yemen. It was thus not incidental that the Turkish defence ministry mentioned "deeper defence industry cooperation" as an important objective of the Agreement. The respective communique also indicated the focus of cooperation on the joint development and production of military equipment, priority being given to unmanned and autonomous systems, electronic warfare and artificial intelligence capabilities (Reuters, 2026). And if the Turkish and Pakistani military industrial bases can already work toward these goals, Saudi Arabia can definitely contribute funding, while also developing its own engineering and industrial capabilities.

A crucial aspect from a political perspective is that the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement translates as an indigenously negotiated commitment to collective defence that neither goes through a Western capital, nor excludes other actors from joining. It can therefore be interpreted as an exemplary diplomatic exercise, although it remains to be seen whether and how it can contribute efficiently to regional stability. Approximately two months after the signing ceremony, Saudi Arabia invoked the Agreement following the intensification of Houthi attacks on its airports and strategic energy infrastructure. Türkiye, which had not yet ratified the document in Parliament at that moment, committed nevertheless to sending defensive military equipment and intelligence sharing to aid the Saudi partner (Gumrukcu & Azhari, 2026). All these however did not need the tripartite Mecca Agreement to happen. Bilateral cooperation would have been enough, similar to that which has already allowed Greece to send a Patriot battery, which has augmented the Saudi air defence since 2021.

POINTS OF DIVERGENCE: THE MECCA AGREEMENT MAY NOT ENSURE LONG-TERM STABILITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Despite the important international status of the three signatories of the Agreement, their foreign policy agendas in the Middle East are problematic when the common contribution to regional stability comes into question. And although the possibility of conflict between those three agendas is remote, points of divergence could easily undermine common stances in crisis situations. Moreover, other actors in the region could easily undermine cooperation and the overall objective of the tripartite agreement to regional stability.

Of the three partners, Türkiye is the most complex actor. Its interests currently span from the South Caucasus and Central Asia to Europe and North America, and from Africa to the Balkans and Ukraine. Ankara also competes with Iran for influence in northern Iraq and post-Assad Syria, while its ambitions are increasingly at odds with Israel, Greece, and Cyprus in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean. Ankara's Blue Homeland doctrine (Tr. *Mavi Vatan*), asserts Turkish rights across the Eastern Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea against Jerusalem, Nicosia and Athens. In spite of newly formed criticism to this view (Milshtein, 2026), influential voices in Israelis politics have insistently described Türkiye as the new Iran and accused Ankara of building a hostile Sunni axis alongside nuclear armed Pakistan.

The complications sketched above raise serious questions concerning the participation of another important regional actor, Egypt, despite being mentioned by all sides as a potential partner in the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement. Egyptian armed forces remain heavily dependent on American military imports and financial support, while Cairo's defence industry is rather small by comparison with others in the region. Additionally, the country's leadership has cultivated strong relations with Cyprus and Greece, hoping to develop with them connections for exporting its energy to Europe in the form of liquified natural gas (LNG) and green electricity. The projects initiated toward this end would benefit Israel as supplying partner, Cyprus and Greece as consumers and transit stations toward, but Türkiye continues to oppose them (Mateescu, 2022; Mateescu, 2025).

It was thus not accidental that, one day after the signing of the Mecca Agreement, Greece reacted with two decisions. Firstly, it changed the extension of its military mission in Saudi Arabia from an annual to a monthly basis. This means Athens could practically call back to base its Patriot defence battery deployed since 2021 to protect strategic infrastructure used by Saudi Arabia to refine its oil and also to export about 60% of its production to international markets (Nedos, 2026). Secondly, Greece also approached Cairo after Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan declared that Ankara expects Egypt to join the Mecca Agreement as a "natural partner" (Aktas, 2026). Two days later (Monday, August 10), the Greek Foreign Ministry announced on social media that Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis had a phone conversation with his Egyptian counterpart Badr Ahmed Mohamed Abdelatty. The announcement by the Greek side read as follows: "As pillars of stability in the region, both FMs reaffirmed their shared positions on key regional issues and their commitment to close

coordination in support of regional security & peace".[3] In case it attempts to impose its *Mavi Vatan* agenda on the development of the Mecca Agreement, Ankara could easily disrupt regional stability, too, instead of augmenting it.

Additionally, Pakistan's tensions with India also keep Egypt away from the Mecca Agreement. Cairo wants to avoid being drawn into any confrontation given New Delhi's strong cooperation with the UAE and Israel, two countries with which Egypt also has deep relations (Becker 2026). In the end, as suggested by undisclosed diplomatic sources to *Mada Masr*, the defence pact may look to other countries in the region more like the inauguration of a Saudi-led political bloc. For experienced diplomats, it is difficult to imagine Türkiye being ever attacked by a neighbouring country. It is also difficult to imagine Pakistan and Saudi Arabia running to the aid of Türkiye in case this country is attacked by, say, Israel or Iran. Instead, the undisclosed diplomats suggest that the Mecca Agreement seems more like a message from Riyadh to Iran and other potential enemies that important partners in the region back the Saudi kingdom in case it is threatened. This sort of political alignment is difficult to accept by other countries in the region, including Egypt (Salah & Dawoud, 2026).

And, in the Turkish case, there is yet another complication, this time in relation with the peace process initiated by Ankara with the terrorist organisation PKK and with the political representatives of the Kurdish minority. Efforts on behalf of the Erdoğan government on that issue are less and less credible for certain Kurdish leaders as long as the overall process does not solve what they see as the roots of the so-called 'Kurdish problem'. These include the formal recognition by Türkiye of the Kurdish language and culture together with minority cultural rights, all that in addition to freeing the PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan and creating the necessary conditions for him to lead the peace process (Abdulrazek, 2026; ANF News, 2026). Ankara's old and currently unsurmountable problems may become the problems of Riyadh and Islamabad under the Mecca Agreement and there are serious doubts that the two capitals will lend their support to the Turks on such sensitive issues. All these could undermine rather than strengthen regional stability.

Other countries in the region also boast agendas that may eventually conflict with the stated goals of the Agreement. Qatar, for instance, has strong ties with both Türkiye and the US, which maintain important military bases on its territory. At the same time, Doha enjoys

[3] See posting of MFA Greece on X network at https://x.com/GreeceMFA/status/2086834135255982427

fairly close relations with both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, but even closer with Iran. Although a former Qatari prime minister recently named Iran as the main enemy to countries in the Persian Gulf region (Al Mayadeen, 2026b), it is difficult for other Middle Eastern capitals to gloss over not only the traditional ties of Doha with Teheran, but also the direct support it gave to Hamas and to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Bahrain and Kuwait, too, remain highly dependent on the US for security and it is currently far from clear whether and to which extent the Mecca Agreement relates with the US agenda for the Middle East. Syria, too, remains a rather problematic actor at the moment. As underlined in an analysis for *Al Majalla*, the country is still at the beginning of a long process to build functional institutions following the collapse of the Assad regime. Although the current leadership in Damascus lacks full democratic legitimacy, it still needs to clearly break traditional ties with Iran and build strong relations with neighbours Lebanon and Iraq as to form a stable regional network of cooperation. That should come long before President Ahmed al-Sharaa even starts contemplating, as reported recently, the possibility of sending thousands of Syrian fighters to join Yemeni forces against the Houthi rebels (Hamidi, 2026).

Iraq, too, is still dealing with chronic instability and should as such represent a living warning for Damascus. A country yet unable to forge its own future should not expand its geographic reach beyond capabilities, especially while facing strong pressure from Teheran on major political issues at home. With economies only beginning to recover and institutions far from stable, both Syria and Iraq are two actors that could not possibly contribute to regional stability by participating in a pact like the Mecca Agreement.

Jordan, for its part, is also a fragile economy and remains dependent on energy imports from neighbours and on water supplies from Israel. Amman is also one of the regional actors unlikely to jeopardise strong, traditional cooperation with the United States by joining a regional agreement aligning the Hashemite kingdom to political lines drawn in Riyadh. Strong alignment with Türkiye, too, may be risky for Jordan given Ankara's neo-Ottoman reflexes and the sensitive issues still lingering in Türkiye-US relations (Becker, 2026).

In the end, a coda on Israel: the Iranian-sponsored Houthis have also attacked Israel and pose a continuous threat to this country. This should, at least hypothetically, make Jerusalem directly interested in cooperation with Saudi Arabia. And that is despite strained bilateral relations caused by Israel not yet accepting an independent Palestinian state and especially in the context of the ongoing campaign in Gaza (Arab Weekly, 2025). After Ankara and

Islamabad agreed on October 5, 2026, to send defensive aid, including weapon systems and troops, to aid Saudi Arabia (Uren, 2026), it should not come as a surprise if Israel finds some ways, even if informal, to assist Riyadh to the same end, including within the framework of the Mecca Joint Defence Agreement.

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

Despite public declarations insisting on the inclusiveness of the Mecca Agreement and the possibility of institutionalisation at the regional level, the points of divergence sketched above, among other aspects for which there is not enough space here, do not encourage such course of action. Moreover, the Agreement does not offer perspectives of cooperation enhancing the prosperity of signatories as others already do. The comparison here is with the project advanced by the first Trump administration with the Abraham Accords back in 2019. Although the Israeli-US attacks on Iran and Jerusalem's campaign in Gaza have seriously undermined that plan, the Accords remain in place. In exchange for the recognition of Israeli sovereign statehood, Arab countries gain economic advantages in relations with the US and participation in regional connection projects, particularly the IMEC.

It should not be forgotten that IMEC, which is strongly supported by India, the EU and influential EU Member States, has global reach. Beyond connecting the huge European and Indian markets, it is also planned to facilitate the exploitation of gas, oil and green energy resources (solar and wind) already available, or being developed in the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt and North Africa. The obstructive stance of Ankara at this moment could lead to consequences that Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and other countries in the region would not want to face. In this complex context, with global ramifications and effects, the Mecca Agreement may contribute to security cooperation among the current signatories, but could also make "coordination" with other regional partners practically impossible and thus upset rather than support regional stability.

This is an aspect crucial not only for the Middle East, but also for neighbouring regions. It is important for the functioning of the European common market in relation with the markets in the East and with the world. Let us not forget that this very aspect determined a number of policy initiatives on behalf of the European Commission throughout the years in fields of bilateral cooperation with Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council, or through

the European Neighbourhood Policy and within the framework of the Pact for the Mediterranean. In spite of the current crisis and strained relations with Iran, or Israel, the objective of regional stability remains the main priority of the EU in its approach to the Middle East. The same objective should guide the attitude of the EU and of its Member States, Romania included, toward regional initiatives, including the current Mecca Agreement. It should not be forgotten that the IMEC and the Great Sea Interconnector, which is another project for bringing energy to Europe from Eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East, link with the European networks and, in particular, the vertical corridor from Greece to Ukraine via Bulgaria, Romania and the Republic of Moldova. This should enlarge rather than limit perspectives on the essentiality of stability in the wider Mediterranean and Middle East region for our part of the continent.

Stability and various schemes of cooperation in the Middle East can only facilitate strategic exchanges with the European Union and its Member States, Romania included, from trade to security and from energy to other vital domains. Eventually, any form of cooperation is profitable, infinitely more profitable than the lack of cooperation, which can only leave room for dissentions, disruptions and eventually for conflict with always negative, regional and global effects.

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Author: Dragoș C. Mateescu (PhD) is an expert at the Romanian Diplomatic Institute – Department of Expert Analysis, lecturer at the University of Bucharest, and author at *Veridica*.

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The Romanian Diplomatic Institute - IDR
https://www.idr.ro/en/ | secretariat@idr.ro
Primăverii 17, Sector 1, Bucharest, 011972