

A New Axis of Security? What the Mecca Defense Agreement Signals

Jannatul Toba Jhumu¹



Source: Al Jazeera

On 7 August, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey signed a Defense Agreement in Mecca amid the ongoing war involving the US, Israel and Iran and a fresh conflict involving the Houthis and one of the signatories, Saudi Arabia. The timing of the agreement is significant because it came at a moment when the long-standing US-led security architecture in the Middle East was facing new pressures. Before 28 February 2026, regional states had largely relied on the US for military protection. However, when the US-Iran war kicked off, Saudi Arabia, along with several other

¹ Jannatul Toba Jhumu is a Research Assistant at Bangladesh Institute of Peace and Security Studies (BIPSS). She completed her BSS and MSS in Development Studies from Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP).

Middle Eastern countries, faced threats and direct attacks from Iran. The Houthi forces in Yemen and Shia militias in Iraq also expanded the security risks across the region. Attacks and threats involving Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Jordan have exposed the limitations of the existing security architecture. As this unfolded, it raises questions about whether Riyadh has perhaps begun to doubt the protection the US could guarantee now and in the future. The Israeli strikes on Iran, alongside its simultaneous conflicts in Gaza, southern Lebanon and Syria, also complicated the regional security environment. There is also concerns over the vulnerability of Gulf states as reports of Israeli aircraft crossing Gulf airspace to reach Iranian targets and the earlier Israeli strike on Doha circulates. There is no debate that Riyadh will continue to rely on the West for security protection. However, the move may indicate that Riyadh is rethinking the security dynamics and moving to reduce its overreliance on Washington.

Pakistan Foreign Minister clarified that the agreement is not directed against any country.² The Islamabad's effort to mediating truce provides validity to the statement. In fact, Riyadh and Ankara also have been actively advocating for truce, with Islamabad being the most successful one. This development indicates that neither of the country wants instability in the region. This move goes beyond the security questions. For Islamabad, the agreement provides an opportunity to strengthen its regional diplomatic relevance and improve an image damaged by economic and political pressures. For Ankara, closer defense cooperation with Saudi Arabia offers an important market for drones. For Riyadh, meanwhile, the agreement can be a part of a broader effort to diversify its security partnerships and reduce excessive dependence on US protection. Although, these countries maintain significant ties with one another, particularly, Saudi-Pakistan just last year, signed a mutual defense agreement, this new agreement, with no questions signals a change in the geopolitical landscape in the Middle East.

Reading the Ambiguity

The agreement implies a mutual-defense commitment and explicitly mentions that any armed attack against one of the three signatories would be regarded as an attack against all. The agreement also calls for broader defense cooperation, including intelligence sharing, joint exercises, training

² Munir Ahmed, "Pakistan Says New Defense Pact with Saudi and Turkey Is 'Purely Defensive' and Open to Others," *AP News*, August 9, 2026, .

and defense technology cooperation.³ However, how it will be operationalized remains a mystery as there is not public document explaining it fully, nor any of the signatory country clarify things. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan acknowledged the uncertainty when he said, “There is no common threat that we have put in writing.”⁴ This leaves potential adversaries unsure about how the three countries would respond to a particular attack. A strike on Saudi Arabia, for example, could lead to Turkish or Pakistani military support, but there is no clear indication of when or how such a response would occur.



Source: DW

The Mecca pact appears to rely on consultation and the exercise of national discretion. Fidan has indicated that its practical scope will be developed through a ministerial mechanism and a permanent secretariat in Saudi Arabia.⁵ A state facing an attack would also need to request

³ Saudi Press Agency, “Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, and Pakistan Issue Joint Statement of the Makkah Al-Mukarramah Summit for Joint Defence,” August 7, 2026, [Saudi Press Agency](#).

⁴ Gizem Nisa Demir and Fatma Zehra Solmaz, “Mecca Joint Defense Agreement Does Not Target Any Country: Turkish Foreign Minister,” *Anadolu Agency*, August 8, 2026, updated August 9, 2026, .

⁵ Reuters, “Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Defence Pact Technically Same as NATO’s Article 5, Turkish Minister Says,” August 8, 2026, [Reuters article](#).

assistance and specify what kind of support it requires. This gives Ankara and Islamabad room to decide how far they want to become involved in a particular conflict, and it reduces the risk that a single incident will draw all three countries into a war.

This is why some analysts see the pact primarily as a political and strategic signal rather than a fully operational military alliance. The agreement provides a framework for consultation, coordination and collective security, but it does not establish the kind of automatic military obligations associated with NATO. The choice of Mecca as the venue and namesake also gives the agreement a strong political and symbolic dimension.⁶ It presents Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye as three states willing to take greater responsibility for their security at a time when confidence in traditional external security guarantees is under pressure. Other assessments similarly describe the pact as a form of strategic hedging, allowing the three countries to signal collective resolve without committing themselves to an open-ended military confrontation.

However, describing the pact as merely symbolic would also be misleading. Its ambiguity sits on top of existing bilateral military relationships, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. In 2026, Pakistan reportedly deployed several thousand troops, a fighter squadron and Chinese-made air-defence systems to Saudi Arabia under the earlier bilateral security arrangement.⁷ This suggests that there is already a degree of military substance behind the new trilateral framework. The important distinction is that the bilateral relationship appears more operational, while the trilateral agreement leaves much of its practical application open.

The Nuclear Debate

The most sensitive dimension of this ambiguity concerns Pakistan's nuclear capability. Pakistan is the only nuclear-armed state among the three signatories, and the question of whether its deterrent has any relevance to Saudi Arabia has remained deliberately unresolved. Following the 2025 Saudi-Pakistani bilateral agreement, Pakistani Defence Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif initially suggested that Pakistan's capabilities would be available to Saudi Arabia under the arrangement, before subsequently telling Reuters that nuclear weapons were "not on the radar."

⁶ *Financial Times*, "The Realignment of the Middle East," August 2026, *Financial Times* article.

⁷ Asif Shahzad, Saad Sayeed, and Mubasher Bukhari, "Exclusive—Pakistan Deploys Jet Squadron, Thousands of Troops to Saudi Arabia during Iran War," *Reuters*, May 18, 2026, [Reuters article](#).

He nevertheless added that if a partner state faced a threat, “this arrangement will become operative.”⁸

Saudi officials have been similarly careful. When Reuters asked whether Pakistan would now be obliged to provide Saudi Arabia with a nuclear umbrella, a senior Saudi official did not confirm or deny such a commitment, saying only that the agreement was “a comprehensive defensive agreement that encompasses all military means.”⁹ The wording is significant precisely because it leaves the nuclear question open without establishing a formal nuclear-sharing arrangement. The publicly available text does not explicitly mention nuclear weapons, and there is no evidence that Pakistan has formally extended its nuclear doctrine to Saudi Arabia. Pakistan’s nuclear posture has traditionally been centered on deterring India, not on providing an extended nuclear guarantee in the Middle East.



Source: The Economist

⁸ Saeed Shah, “Saudi Pact Puts Pakistan’s Nuclear Umbrella into Middle East Security Picture,” *Reuters*, September 19, 2025, .

⁹ Saeed Shah, “Saudi Pact Puts Pakistan’s Nuclear Umbrella into Middle East Security Picture,” *Reuters*, September 19, 2025, .

The Non-State Actor Problem

The uncertainty becomes even more important in the case of non-state actors. The Houthis have recently attacked Saudi Arabia and claimed strikes against Saudi-linked vessels as part of their “siege for a siege” campaign.¹⁰ Saudi Arabia was also preparing for possible Houthi and Iran-linked Iraqi attacks on energy facilities, ports and airports before the pact was signed. A fire at an Aramco refinery in Jizan on 9 August, only days after the agreement, further highlighted the problem, although its cause was not disclosed. The key question is whether an attack by the Houthis would be treated in the same way as an attack by a state. The pact does not appear to answer this.

This ambiguity, however, may be one of the pact's main strategic advantages. This could be deliberate move to serve the strategic purpose. It allows Saudi Arabia to project that an attack could bring in Pakistan and Türkiye, while allowing Ankara and Islamabad to avoid a clearly defined commitment to every Saudi conflict. It also makes it harder for potential adversaries to calculate the exact limits of the three countries' response. But ambiguity has a cost. If an adversary concludes that the pact is unlikely to produce a military response, its deterrent value could quickly weaken. The Mecca pact therefore sits somewhere between a political declaration and a traditional defense alliance: its collective-defense language is significant, but its real strength will depend on how the three countries interpret and apply that language when an actual crisis occurs.

The Neighbor's Reaction

The significance of this shift becomes clearer when compared with Iran's reaction to the earlier Saudi-Pakistan agreement. When Riyadh and Islamabad signed the agreement in 2025, Iranian state media largely treated it as unremarkable and even suggested that it could eventually become part of a wider security framework that Tehran might itself join. However, the regional context has changed significantly in the eleven months since then. Iran's immediate response suggests that Tehran is not treating the agreement as an immediate or existential threat. Rather than reacting with alarm, Iranian officials have sought to question the pact's credibility and emphasise Iran's

¹⁰ Bridget Toomey, “Houthis Escalate Attacks in Red Sea and on Saudi Arabia, Riyadh Evaluates Options,” *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 6, 2026, .

own preparedness. Mahmoud Nabavian, a member of Iran's parliamentary National Security and Foreign Policy Commission, warned that cooperation with Türkiye and Pakistan would not guarantee Saudi Arabia's security, while another commission member, Ebrahim Rezaei, dismissed the pact as a "paper agreement." Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, without directly referring to the agreement, urged regional states to rely on themselves and stressed the strength and readiness of Iran's armed forces.¹¹ This posture suggests that Tehran believes it retains sufficient military capability and deterrence to manage the emerging arrangement, at least for now, rather than viewing it as an immediate strategic threat requiring a direct response.

Israel's discomfort runs on a different track entirely. Normalization talks with Riyadh have stalled, relations with Ankara have deteriorated sharply over Gaza, and Israel now watches a security architecture take shape that isn't built around Washington or Jerusalem at all. A Times of Israel analysis is careful not to overclaim: the pact doesn't prove the collapse of the American-led order, and it isn't yet a fully integrated alliance. But a bloc Israel can't monitor or shape, sitting on Turkey's NATO-standard capabilities and Pakistan's nuclear status, is a genuinely new variable regardless of how loosely the obligations are currently defined.¹²

India's unease has its own separate logic, rooted less in the Iran war and more in the India-Pakistan rivalry that predates all of this by decades. Turkey has supplied drones to Pakistan, including during a recent clash with India in which Pakistani JF-17s reportedly held their own against French-built Indian Rafales. A formal defense tie between Ankara and Islamabad, sitting on top of Saudi financing, gives New Delhi genuine reason to watch closely, even without any immediate trigger for concern.¹³

Washington's read is more measured than either Tehran's or Tel Aviv's. Ten days after the signing, President Trump welcomed the pact publicly, describing it as evidence that Middle Eastern countries could take greater responsibility for their own defense.¹⁴ Washington's response suggests

¹¹ Al Jazeera Staff, Anadolu, and Associated Press, "Türkiye Says Mecca Defence Pact Not Aimed at Iran," *Al Jazeera*, August 8, 2026, .

¹² Raghu Kondori, "Mecca Pact Implications for Israel and Washington," *The Times of Israel*, August 8, 2026, .

¹³ K. M. Seethi, "Mecca Joint Defence Agreement Raises Stakes for Iran, India," *Policy Circle*, August 8, 2026, .

¹⁴ Abid Hussain, "Trump Hails Mecca Pact: Can It Replace the Region's US Security Umbrella?" *Al Jazeera*, August 17, 2026, .

that it does not perceive the pact as a direct challenge to the existing US security architecture in the Gulf. As Yasmine Farouk puts it, all three signatories remain committed US partners who recognize there's no framework that replaces the American security relationship outright, and that reading the pact as a step toward confrontation with Iran gets the motivation backwards, all three governments have pushed for de-escalation since February, not for a wider war. Her preferred term for what the pact actually buys its members is "normative deterrence": a signal, rather than a fully operational shield, aimed as much at reassuring domestic and regional audiences as at deterring any specific adversary.¹⁵

The agreement remains in its infancy, with no publicly established mechanisms demonstrating how its mutual-defense commitments will be operationalized in practice. Until the command structures, response mechanisms, scope of the security commitment, and other practical dimensions become clearer, it is difficult to determine how far the pact will alter the regional balance of power. This uncertainty is likely to encourage regional and external actors to exercise restraint in their public assessments rather than immediately treating the agreement as a fully fledged military alliance. For now, careful observation may be the more rational response.

What Comes Next

The pact is open to other countries, and Egypt is one of the most frequently discussed possibilities. Turkish officials have identified Cairo as a potential fourth member, while Qatar University's Ali Bakir has argued that Egyptian participation could increase the pact's political and military weight.¹⁶ Egypt already maintains relations with Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye through the informal R4 grouping, although differences between Cairo and Ankara remain. Talks on a possible quadrilateral arrangement were reportedly held during a March 2026 summit in Riyadh, but no agreement has been reached. For now, however, it is too early to know whether the Mecca pact will develop into a wider regional security arrangement. Its future will depend on whether the three members can turn their political commitment into practical cooperation and agree on how to respond to different types of threats. Questions over non-state attacks, the role of Pakistan and

¹⁵ Brian Osgood, "What Could the Mecca Defence Pact Mean for the US Role in the Middle East?" *Al Jazeera*, August 8, 2026, .

¹⁶ Reuters, "Turkey, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia Defence Pact Technically Same as NATO's Article 5, Turkish Minister Says," August 8, 2026, [Reuters article](#).

Türkiye in a Saudi crisis, and the absence of clear operational procedures will become more important as the pact develops. The possibility of further expansion could give the agreement greater regional importance, but expansion alone would not make it an effective alliance. Its credibility will ultimately depend on what happens during an actual security crisis. If a member comes under attack and the others provide meaningful support, the pact will gain practical weight. If the response is limited to consultations and political statements, its role will remain largely symbolic.

For now, therefore, the Mecca pact should be viewed as an emerging framework rather than an established regional alliance. Its significance lies in the willingness of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Türkiye to strengthen their own security cooperation at a time when traditional security arrangements are being questioned. How far this develops will depend not on the announcement itself, but on what the three countries do next.