

BIPSS EXPLAINER

Understanding The Multinational Maritime Defense Alliance: Implications for a Changing Middle East

1. The Multinational Maritime Defense Alliance (MMDA) is a Saudi-led maritime security coalition formed in Riyadh on July 30, 2026, amid the Iran-US war. Fourteen states signed its founding declaration: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Pakistan, Qatar, Somalia, Sudan, Türkiye, Yemen and Nigeria. Representatives from 43 of the 51 invited countries attended the founding meeting, alongside a European Union delegation. The coalition remains open to additional countries that share its vision and wish to join.
2. The alliance has a specific maritime-security mandate: protecting freedom of navigation and securing international trade and energy supply routes through the Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. It describes itself as a defensive initiative that does not target any particular state and operates in accordance with the UN Charter and international law. Its institutional structure includes a Joint Command, Command and Control Center, Combined Maritime Operations Center and General Secretariat, all based in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia serves as the coalition's founding and leading state and permanent host. Saudi has assumed the post the commander while Pakistan is appointed the deputy commander. The coalition has now moved beyond the planning stage and entered its operational phase, with its command headquarters functioning and personnel from member states being deployed.
3. The coalition emerged at a time when the maritime security situation in the region was deteriorating. In July, increased Houthi activity, including attacks on Saudi-flagged vessels and threats to shipping in the Red Sea, added to the wider tensions caused by the Iran-US war and the disruption of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. This increased pressure on the Bab al-Mandeb Strait, a key chokepoint connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the wider Indian Ocean. Around 12 percent of global trade, 11 percent of global maritime oil trade and 8 percent of global LNG trade normally pass through this route.
4. The coalition gives Saudi Arabia a greater role in shaping regional security instead of depending mainly on outside powers. It signals that Riyadh wants to reduce its reliance on Western security guarantees, especially as the Iran war exposed some of the limits of the existing security architecture. Rather than relying entirely on Western powers, Saudi Arabia

appears increasingly willing to work with regional and middle powers to build its own collective capacity to protect its security and economic interests. However, the coalition could



Source: Britannica

also create a more difficult security environment with Iran as the two chokepoints, Hormuz and Bab al-Mandeb have become increasingly interconnected in terms of regional and global energy security. Questions arises, whether the coalition would contribute to another source of regional confrontation instead of improving maritime security.

5. This danger has already begun to materialize. Shortly after the MMDA moved into its operational phase, Houthi forces pushed Saudi-backed Yemeni government troops out of the Red Sea port of Mocha and then out of Perim Island. Houthi forces as now controlling the entire western coast of Yemen, giving the group what one official called unmatched control over the strait. Houthi military spokesman stated that maritime navigation remains safe for all companies except those flying the Saudi flag. Regional and Yemeni government sources said the coastal offensive came with direct guidance from Iran's Revolutionary Guards, who sought

to open a new front in US-Iran war. The advance pushed oil prices above the \$100-a-barrel mark.

6. This development is the MMDA's first real test. The key question is how Riyadh responds to the loss of control over the strait the coalition was created to protect. If Saudi Arabia responds through the MMDA, the coalition would move from a declaratory body to an operational one. Member states may then face obligation to provide ships, personnel, or intelligence support. If Riyadh acts alone, relies on its separate anti-Houthi coalition, or coordinates with Washington, the MMDA could remain on the sidelines. Either way, the crisis will test the coalition's purpose and reveal how much support its 14 members are willing to provide.
7. This is where the founding declaration's central ambiguity resurfaces. The MMDA outlines broad responsibilities, including intelligence sharing, operational coordination, joint exercises and maritime patrols. However, it does not specify how many ships, aircraft, personnel or financial resources each member must provide. Participation in specific activities remains, as the charter states, a sovereign decision for each country. This gives the members flexibility but leaves the coalition's actual military capacity uncertain. As the Houthis have stated that they will target only Saudi vessels, the crisis will test what assistance or support the member states would provide under the framework. This uncertainty itself becomes a problem for Riyadh. If other members hold back, the more the immediate burden of responding to the loss of Bab al-Mandeb falls on Saudi Arabia, precisely at the moment the crisis is most acute.
8. The MMDA, especially the Saudi-led coalition in which the UAE and Oman are absent, also points to the emergence of two possible regional security networks. One appears to be increasingly centered on Saudi Arabia and its formal security partnerships, while the other is more closely linked to the UAE's flexible network of strategic, commercial and security relationships. However, it would be too early to describe these as two separate blocs. Saudi Arabia and the UAE still share important interests, particularly in dealing with Iran, maintaining regional stability and protecting maritime security. The more significant development is the growing strategic competition between them. If this competition deepens, regional cooperation could become more fragmented. Smaller states may then increasingly balance between different networks rather than align permanently with one side.
9. Despite the ambiguities and potential risks, Bangladesh has joined the alliance. Dhaka has identified "establishing peace and stability in the region" as its main rationale, but participation also provides an opportunity to reinforce a relationship built around labor migration, remittances, investment, energy and religious ties. Membership gives Bangladesh a seat at a new regional maritime-security platform and greater diplomatic visibility on issues affecting international shipping.

10. The decision is also a departure from Bangladesh's previous approach to foreign security arrangements. Bangladesh joined the Saudi-led Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition in 2015, but its participation remained largely symbolic and it did not assume an operational role. Bangladesh also participated in the US-led multinational coalition during the 1990–91 Gulf War, deploying troops to the Saudi Arabia–Kuwait theatre; however, that coalition operated with explicit authorization from the UN Security Council. The MMDA would therefore be qualitatively different. If Bangladesh eventually contributes personnel or naval assets, it could mark the country's first significant participation in an operational military arrangement under a foreign-led command structure outside the UN framework.
11. With Saudi Arabia now facing its most acute test, Bangladesh's own posture within the MMDA has become a genuinely critical question rather than a hypothetical one. How Dhaka is expected to respond, whether Bangladesh possesses the naval and logistical capacity to fulfil any obligations arising from the arrangement, and, more importantly, whether such a response would serve Bangladesh's own national interests have now become questions of immediate significance. Since Bangladesh retains the sovereign right to decide the extent and nature of its participation, any decision to operationalize its role should be guided by its national interests, strategic priorities and wider foreign and security policy. A calibrated approach that protects Bangladesh's strategic autonomy while preserving its relations with Saudi Arabia and other partners would be essential.
12. Deeper involvement in the MMDA could expose Bangladesh to significant strategic, diplomatic and economic risks. A direct role in securing Bab al-Mandeb could draw Dhaka into the Houthi conflict and complicate its relations with Iran, which supports the group. Bangladeshi naval assets, personnel and commercial vessels could face greater risks of retaliation if Dhaka is perceived as supporting military operations against the Houthis. This creates a strategic dilemma: Bangladesh joined the coalition to protect maritime routes essential to its trade, yet a more active military role could increase its exposure to attacks along those same routes. More broadly, deeper involvement could risk positioning Bangladesh on one side of a wider Middle Eastern conflict, potentially entangling it in regional rivalries and military confrontations in which it has no direct interest. Moreover, instability in the Red Sea could spill over into the Strait of Hormuz, threatening Bangladesh's energy supplies and trade.
13. Finally, there are unresolved questions over operational responsibility, liability and strategic autonomy. It remains unclear who would bear responsibility if Bangladeshi personnel or assets were harmed during coalition operations, including whether a common compensation mechanism exists or whether liability would remain with individual states. Bangladesh is also geographically distinct from most of the coalition's members, with Pakistan being the other major non-Arab military partner. These factors make Dhaka's navigation of the MMDA particularly consequential. As the situation evolves, Bangladesh will need to approach its role

strategically, carefully assessing the implications of any commitment for its national interests, strategic autonomy and wider foreign policy objectives.