

# The Global Ambitions Of Saudi Arabia's New "Anti-Terror" Coalition

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*Saudi Arabia's recent announcement that it somehow managed to bring together a coalition of 34 Muslim states was strange enough as it was, let alone adding to the fact that it's under the guise of purported "anti-terrorist" efforts. While most of the world certainly got a few chuckles out of what certainly looks to be a poor geopolitical joke, the disturbing reality is that there are actually concrete reasons to take Riyadh's announcement very seriously. To the trained analyst, Saudi Arabia's decision reveals a lot about its leadership's global vision and the tactical aspects in which it hopes to achieve it, and observers stand to gain much insight about the future trajectory of the Kingdom's foreign policy if they take the time to soberly interpret the messages that it's sending.*

## Buying Friends

The Saudi elite have grown progressively more suspicious of the previously unquestionable American commitment to their regional military ambitions, despite having formerly gone along with Washington's [Lead From Behind](#) War on Yemen. The Saudis were cognizant of the US' self-imposed constraints in directly involving itself in the conflict (notwithstanding the [substantial back-end support](#) that they provide), but they felt confident enough in their own military abilities and that of their contracted allies to be able to win what was supposed to have been a very brief campaign.

As fate would have it, the purportedly weeks-long operation is now stretching into its ninth month and Riyadh has been unable to fulfill any of its on-the-ground military objectives aside from seizing Aden. In effect, the campaign proved to the world that the Saudi military is one of the world's most expensive paper tigers, capable of launching multimillion-dollar munitions against civilian targets but woefully unable to handle anything else of significance. It's thus been compelled to defer to contracted armies such as the GCC and [Latin American mercenaries](#), but these soldiers of fortune have no personal stake in the conflict and are reluctant to throw their full potential into someone else's war.

Faced with such a predicament of uncommitted contractors and a hesitant formal ally, yet stubbornly unwilling to give up the War on Yemen, the Saudis have endeavored to boost the internationalization of the conflict by framing it as part of a subset in a larger "War on Terror", with the inference being that the Ansarallah are "terrorists" on equal par with ISIL and Boko Haram. It's clear by the terminology that was used during the announcement that the Saudis are trying to replicate the American and Russian trends of anti-terrorist coalition building, though of course following the US template of being "anti-terrorist" in name only. What Riyadh is aiming for is to recruit a fresh batch of 'coalition members' that would sign up and support it in Yemen (be it through mercenary or other

means) and other theaters in exchange for vague reciprocal support (most likely money) against their own subjectively defined “terrorist” groups that will be explained more in-depth later. There’s also the issue of ‘positive’ image-building as well, and that brings the research along to the next section.

## **The “Big Shot”**

Saudi Arabia self-assuredly believes that it has more normative clout than any other Muslim state in the world due to its custodianship over the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina. Imbued with the overconfidence that this position gives it, the Saudis have strived to capitalize upon their religious responsibilities by forming the core of a Muslim-led “anti-terrorist” coalition in order to deepen their influence over all 34 of the states that have joined it. For Riyadh, the semi-integrated grouping is nothing more than an unprecedented power grab from the Atlantic to the Pacific through which it aspires to become the ‘civilizational leader’ for all Muslims. Saudi Arabia is thus subtly intimating that neither Russia nor the US have the ‘moral’ or ‘religious’ right to fight against Islamic terrorism and that the only ‘legitimate’ actors that can do this are other Muslims, albeit a specifically curated group of pro-Saudi governments that conspicuously leans towards Sunni sectarianism.

As the Muslim “big shot” (or so it fancies itself), Saudi Arabia is infused with the belief that its ultra-radical misinterpretation of Islam known as Wahhabism is the only true form of the religion and that it has a ‘God-given’ right to militantly evangelize its ideological perversions all throughout the world. The Saudis believe that all non-Wahhabi Sunnis are susceptible to conversion and that their governments’ closer ties with Riyadh under the aegis of the “anti-terrorist” coalition will help bring this about with time. Along a similar strand of ideological radicalism, Saudi Arabia believes that all non-Sunni sects such as Shiites and Alawites are apostates that must be killed in as brutal of a manner as possible, ergo the omission of Iran, Iraq, and Syria in the alliance (though none of them would have joined a Saudi-led military organization even if offered the ‘opportunity’ to do so).

The inclusion of Shiite-majority Bahrain and Shiite-influential Lebanon are nothing more than smokescreens to deflect Western criticism about the Sunni-majority nature of the group and any fears about its ethnic cleansing and genocidal ambitions. Bahrain is ruled by a Sunni monarch that regretfully ascribes to the sectarian principles of his Saudi patrons, while Lebanon is politically dysfunctional and Saudi dual-citizen and former (and perhaps once again [future](#)) Prime Minister Saad Hariri still holds sizeable decision-making clout there. Interestingly, however, considering the earlier forecast that the Saudis will support their new allies’ subjectively defined “Wars on Terror” and the obvious sectarian hatred that the Wahhabi Monarchy espouses, it’s quite possible that Shiite anti-government protests in Bahrain and maybe even Hezbollah could eventually be seen as “terrorist threats” by this alliance that require Saudi and other Sunni-sectarian support to eliminate. The possibility of the coalition’s governments resorting to politically ‘convenient’ and subjectively defined “terrorist” labels in pursuit of multilateral support for their self-interested agendas will be described later on in the research, but for now, it’s worthwhile to map the broad geographic extent of the Saudi-led alliance.

## **From Sea To Sea**

Riyadh’s “anti-terrorist” coalition spans the breath of three separate oceans, with respective membership outposts on the Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific coasts. There are [34 countries that](#)

[have signed up for the alliance](#), with Indonesia being partially shaded to represent the second thoughts that its government is now having about joining (and which will be expanded upon further when discussing that country):

### **Africa:**

#### **Guinea/Sierra Leone/Ivory Coast/Togo/Benin:**

As can be visibly observed, the lion's share of coalition members is located in Africa and comprises many destitute and impoverished states such as Guinea/Sierra Leone/Ivory Coast/Togo/Benin. It's all but impossible for these states to provide any worthwhile military contribution to the Saudi's Wahhbi-promoting agenda aside from handfuls of mercenaries and UN General Assembly support for whatever forthcoming aggression's Riyadh embarks on. None of those five aforementioned states are subject to any terrorist threats either, meaning that there's little formal reciprocity that the Saudis can give them for whatever symbolic "anti-terrorist" support they ever happen to provide. What it can do, however, is bequeath generous 'gifts' to these countries in the form of Wahhabi mosques and misguided preachers (better described as hate-mongers) in order to spread its perverse misinterpretation of Islam.

#### **Gabon:**

Gabon makes for a very peculiar member of the alliance because it's both far from being a Muslim-majority state and is relatively wealthy, so it's not immediately clear exactly what the country stands to gain by signing up for the bloc. Upon further research, however, it's revealed that President Ondimba is a Sunni Muslim, which by itself doesn't make him susceptible to the Saudis' influence, but taken together with his country's former OPEC membership and its presently curious inclusion in the coalition, the facts convincingly prove that he's likely a bought-and-paid-for puppet at this point.

#### **Comoros:**

The Comoros' participation is also quite strange, although for completely different reasons. This Muslim-majority state is deeply impoverished and its elite would of course welcome millions of dollars of Wahhabi assistance, but the island chain's prime importance is as a future jihadist springboard for destabilizing Chinese-ally Tanzania. In sum, China is depending on its decades-long ally to be a primary node in the One Belt One Road ("New Silk Road") policy for East Africa, owing to its enormous market, capital, and resource potential. The latter doesn't just include its connective links with the copper-rich countries of Zambia and the Congo (specifically Katanga Province) and potential infrastructure integration with oil-rich Angola, but is focused importantly on its [copious off-shore gas deposits](#). As geography would have it, [4 out of 12 of its exploitable blocks](#) are located in very close proximity to the semi-autonomous and majority-Muslim Zanzibar Archipelago. The future risk is that Wahhbi influence in the Comoros could be exported to Zanzibar to provide foot soldiers in any forthcoming independence agitation, predicated not on legitimate interests but in separating Tanzania's off-shore gas wealth from the mainland and giving it to Western and Gulf interests instead.

#### **Most Of Africa, The Cameroonian Exception:**

The rest of the African members at least have a surface pretense for joining the nominally

“anti-terrorist” coalition due to the ongoing threats that they face from Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), Boko Haram, ISIL, and/or Al Shabaab, all of which are ironically in one way or another supported by the Gulf states. Out of the four countries fighting against Boko Haram, it’s notable that Cameroon declined (or perhaps was never offered) an invitation to join, but this can be explained by President Paul Biya being a Christian and thus less vulnerable to the Saudis’ ideological ‘persuasions’. It’s not known whether or not any money was offered in lieu of this, but if it was, then it makes it even all the more honorable that Cameroon refused to join.

### **Nigeria:**

Matters are also interesting when it comes to Nigeria, albeit in a completely different manner, because the continent’s largest country and [economy](#) is almost evenly split between Christian and Muslim believers. In light of this demographic situation, it could be interpreted as a very provocative move for Nigeria to side with the Wahhabist-supporting Saudis, but President Buhari probably doesn’t see it that way and is more than likely in such a weakened and subservient military position vis-à-vis Boko Haram (partially due to his own army’s corruption and incompetence) that he feels pressured to agree to any help that’s being offered no matter who that actor may be (although this doesn’t make it a wise decision by any measure). What may have motivated Abuja to agree to the alliance and not get cold feet at the last minute was the bloody provocation that took place the weekend before Riyadh’s project was publicly announced. The Nigerian military [slaughtered up to 1,000 Shiites](#) in the village of Zaria after alleging that they provoked a confrontation, but in all actuality, what likely occurred was that corrupt troops (some of which may have been on the Saudi payroll either directly or indirectly) purposefully carried out the killings in order to “justify” the government’s inclusion into what will likely later turn out to be an anti-Shiite killing bloc, with Buhari probably totally in the dark about what had really happened.

### **The Mideast:**

In the ‘traditional’ Mideast, Egypt and Turkey make up the most significant members of the bloc aside from Saudi Arabia itself. President Sisi’s government has received more than [\\$20 billion](#) from the Saudis and Emiratis ever since Morsi’s overthrow, so it’s self-explanatory why Cairo would sign on to any major proposal associated with its chief financiers. The financial leverage that the Gulf has over the Egyptian President also explains why he [sent troops](#) to fight in the War on Yemen, despite it being contrary to his country’s national interests and evoking dreaded memories of the disastrous Nasserite-era intervention in the North Yemeni Civil War.

Turkey’s involvement can be explained by Erdogan not wanting to be ‘left out’ of the regional security framework in the wake of being largely [left out to dry](#) by the US after shooting down the Russian anti-terrorist bomber last month. Turkey and its Qatari ally are proud supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood (the latter having to do it more inconspicuously ever since [patching things up](#) with Saudi Arabia over a year ago), and this will inevitably lead them into ideological conflict with the Saudis, who rightly identify the group as the terrorist organization that it truly is. The only way to maintain membership ‘unity’ in the coalition is to indefinitely retain the myth of an outside ‘threat’ to perpetuate the bloc’s cohesion, ergo yet another argument in favor of the forecast that the “anti-terrorist” initiative will soon turn out to be an anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite one.

### **South Asia:**

## Pakistan

Pakistan is recognized as one of China's most stalwart allies, but not all of the country's leadership seems to be fully on board with this relationship. It's not to suggest that they're anti-Chinese by any measure, but that their personal characteristics lead them to having a greater degree of loyalty towards the US or Saudi Arabia even more. Generous amounts of greenbacks are always a tantalizing bribe to the relatively secular elite, while the more religiously oriented ones could similarly be wooed by this and the allure of the Saudis' Wahhabism. For the most part, though, Islamabad has made a clear decision to ally with Beijing because of the latter's consistent anti-Indian support and the unprecedentedly profitable China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that the two are planning to build together, but that doesn't preclude some of the military elite from being attracted to the Saudis' coalition. While there was initially [some confusion](#) about it at first, it's now [been confirmed by the Foreign Office](#) that Pakistan is in fact party to the arrangement. This is in noticeable contravention to its [refusal to join the War on Yemen](#), but can be partially explained by the steady financial and ideological inroads that the Kingdom likely has made since then. The consequences of Islamabad's inclusion in the alliance remain to be seen, but it's unquestionable that China is displeased behind the scenes and may feel threatened that the unipolar-oriented Saudis are now trying to poach their decades-old ally from their sphere of multipolar influence.

## Maldives:

The Maldives are another member of the Saudi-led coalition, and its incorporation is equally controversial for how it raises questions about the country's strong partnership with China. The author exhaustively elaborated on the Maldives' geopolitical role and relationship with China in a [previous three-part series for Oriental Review](#), but to summarize, Beijing has made rapid and strategic inroads in the island chain nation that have resulted in a close geostrategic partnership between both countries. All of that's being endangered now because of the Saudis' outreaches to the archipelago, and it's very probable that the forces behind the assassination conspiracy that earlier wracked the country might have made one of their demands to stop conditional on the government moving away from China and closer to Saudi Arabia instead. Riyadh announced in early 2014 that it would [invest \\$100 million](#) in the country and it opened its [first-ever embassy](#) in the Sharia-adhering state back in August. Almost right after the assassination scare suddenly ended, the two states signed an agreement to [boost religious ties](#) (i.e. institutionalize Wahhabist influence) and the Maldives then asked Saudi Arabia to [develop a special economic zone](#) in the country. All told, just like in Pakistan, Saudi Arabia is wrestling with China for influence in a state that had hitherto been under Beijing's sway.

## Bangladesh:

It's a bit easier to explain Bangladesh's participation in the Saudi's geopolitical project because the country is currently under severe threat of becoming the next frontline state against ISIL, and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is probably desperate for whatever help she can get (despite not formally recognizing that ISIL is active in her country). As the saying goes, "desperate people do desperate things", and the Bangladeshi government is seemingly desperate to stop the country from turning into [Bangla-Daesh](#) sometime in the future. Just like with Pakistan and the Maldives' decisions, joining forces with the Saudis will likely turn out to be extremely counter-productive in the long run and will probably aggravate Wahhabist terrorism even more in the coming future. For the time being, though,

the temporary respite that the leadership may believe they'll gain and/or the 'international' (Saudi) support and financing they expect to receive may momentarily have blinded them from the larger and more far-reaching consequences of their decision. The only realistic way for Bangladesh to acquire any sort of 'benefit' from this relationship is for it to continuously pay some type of 'tribute' to Saudi Arabia in exchange for Riyadh agreeing to order its proxies to stand down. It's not immediately clear what trade-off Bangladesh may have agreed to, but contributing mercenaries or post-conflict but non-UN-decreed "peacekeepers" to Yemen (predictably under the guise of the Saudi-led "anti-terrorist" coalition", as will be explored in the final section) seems like a believable payoff.

### **Southeast Asia:**

Officially speaking, Malaysia is the only Southeast Asia country that has agreed to join the Saudis' military bloc. Indonesia [expressed confusion](#) about the group's stated objectives and said that it hadn't agreed to any military organization, but rather was under the impression that the initiative would be a "centre to coordinate against extremism and terrorism". For these reasons, it has yet to formally throw its weight behind the endeavor and might remain on the sidelines. Be that as it may, Riyadh's outreaches to Southeast Asia weren't incidental and are based on certain geostrategic interests. Both of these ASEAN-member states are Muslim-majority nations (Indonesia is the world's largest) that boast vibrant economies with rich natural non-energy resources. The Saudis are looking to diversify their [agricultural investments in East Africa](#) by geographically balancing with Southeast Asia as a production counterweight, so there are practical reasons to explain their outreach to the Malaysia and Indonesia.

From a cynical perspective, however, there are also more tangibly convincing reasons as well, and these stem from the threat that ISIL and other Wahhabist groups pose to Southeast Asia. Only lately has this emerged as a [newsworthy topic](#), but it was earlier discussed in expert circles such as the Shanri-La Dialogue back in May when the participants spoke about the potential for the "[Mindanao-Sulawesi Arc](#)" to be exploited by the group. Basically, the fear is that the tristate insular convergence area between poverty-stricken and Muslim-majority Mindanao in the southern Philippines, Sabah in Malaysia, and Sulawesi in Indonesia could present a 'black hole' of security vulnerabilities that might turn into the next terrorist hotspot. [Hundreds of terrorists invaded Sabah from Mindanao](#) in spring 2013 in a failed attempt to set up a base of operations, but the event proved the susceptibility that this 'forgotten corner' of ASEAN has to being used as a hideout and operational planning center, especially in the era of ISIL.

It's not known at this time whether that scenario was held as a Damocles' sword over the heads of the Malaysian and/or Indonesian leaders or not, but given the close ties between Gulf financiers and international foot soldier jihadis in all corners of the world including Southeast Asia, it can't at all be dismissed that the Mindanao-Sulaweis Arc will one day be (if it isn't already) an instrument of geopolitical blackmail against these two states and the Philippines.

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