

Oman resets GCC ties, joins Saudi anti-terrorism coalition

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Oman has officially joined the Saudi-led anti-terror military coalition known as the Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFI), an indication that it wants to improve ties with its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members.

The official Saudi Press Agency said Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, who is also the country's minister of Defence, received a letter from Omani Defence Minister Bader bin Saoud al-Busaidi announcing that Oman would join IMAFI. It is the 41st country to enter the alliance.

The Omani Foreign Ministry said the decision to join the alliance "comes within the common understanding of the Islamic countries and in particular the role and leadership of the sisterly kingdom of Saudi Arabia".

“Talks on an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Oman are nothing new.”

Joseph Kechichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh.

The sultanate's decision comes when there has been rampant speculation about strained relations between Oman and other GCC members – Saudi Arabia in particular – regarding Muscat's relationship with Iran.

IMAFI includes countries with large established armies such as Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey. Other Gulf countries in the counter-terrorism coalition are the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar. The alliance does not include Iran, Syria or Iraq.

Oman has traditionally been the most independent of Arab Gulf states with regards to foreign poli-

cy. When the war in Yemen broke out in March 2015, Oman was the only GCC member not to actively join the Saudi-led alliance fighting the Iran-allied Houthis, opting for a more intermediary diplomatic role in the conflict.

News that Muscat was instrumental in clandestinely bringing Iran and the United States to the negotiating table that led to the Iran nuclear deal also did not sit well with Oman's Arab Gulf neighbours.

In November, a Bahraini official said a proposal to turn the GCC from an alliance to a union might not include Oman.

Ganem Albuainain, Bahrain's minister of Parliament Affairs, told the London-based Al Hayat newspaper: "The position of Oman vis-à-vis the union is well known and respected but this should not freeze us. There might be a Gulf union and a Gulf Cooperation Council for those interested in the formulas."

Plans for a Gulf union gathered steam in 2013, with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain calling for the shift but Oman outwardly rejected the move. The United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Kuwait abstained from endorsing the proposal. Albuainain said he thought there was "great enthusiasm for the union from the other Gulf members".

However, the announcement of Oman joining IMAFI seems to have set a possible rapprochement in motion. A Saudi official said Prince Mohammed would make an official trip to Muscat, paving the way for a visit by Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

"The recent return to the fold is a realisation that the destiny of Oman is in the Arabian Peninsula," said Joseph Kechichian, a senior fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh adding that "Omanis are Arabs not Persians and cannot be anti-Arab".

"We need to remember that the alliance was created for the purpose of preventing the spillover from the Iranian revolution; therefore, from the very beginning, there were disagreements. More re-



Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said attends a military parade in the capital Muscat, marking the sultanate's 46th National Day, on November 18th, 2016.

(AFP)

cently, there has been some pretty tough decision-making within the GCC in that regard," he said. "Now the Omanis have publicly stated: 'We are part of the alliance for better or worse. We are going to be a part of the larger alliance against terrorism.'"

Talks on an alliance between Saudi Arabia and Oman are nothing new, Kechichian said.

"At the very beginning it wanted to create the peninsula shield,

which is the joint force that exists, to something much more powerful. At the beginning, Sultan Qaboos [bin Said Al Said] was even proposing that there would be an army of 100,000 men under command of a GCC general, presumably a Saudi, but the bulk of the soldiers would come from Saudi and Oman. That project was postponed a number of times since then.

"Eventually, Oman is going to be part of the GCC union. There really

is no alternative. Small countries cannot make it by themselves in the international arena. They need to be part of strong regional alliances," Kechichian said.

"There is no escaping that Oman is part of the GCC, was a founding member and will also become a part of the union. It's just a matter of time."

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

Manhunt in Bahrain after jailbreak

The Arab Weekly staff

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Bahraini authorities have intensified the search for gunmen who stormed Jaw prison near Manama, killing a policeman and freeing ten people held on terrorism charges.

A force of up to six gunmen attacked the prison, one of Bahrain's biggest, at 5:30am January 1st. One policeman was killed and a second officer suffered "moderate" injuries during the assault, authorities said.

The inmates who escaped had all been convicted of terrorism-related charges, mostly tied to violent anti-government protests and attacks on Bahraini security services, authorities said.

■ Iran's Ahl Al Bait channel described the individuals behind the prison break as "heroes".

Jaw prison houses more than 2,400 inmates, including 1,000 convicted of terror-related offences. Last June, 17 inmates broke out of Al-Hadd jail, east of Manama, but most were captured the next day.

Authorities in Manama suspended three officials, including the Jaw prison director, and referred the

case to the prosecutor's office.

"The decision follows the recommendations of an investigation committee that was set up by the Interior Minister to investigate the circumstances of the terrorist attack on the Reformation and Rehabilitation Centre in Jaw on January 1st," a statement carried by Bahrain News Agency said.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) officials labelled the attack on the prison an act of terrorism. In a statement a day after the prison break, GCC Secretary-General Abdul Latif al-Zayani condemned "the heinous act of terrorism" while affirming the GCC's continuing support for Bahrain's security. Kuwait's cabinet and Saudi Arabia and Qatar's Foreign ministries issued similar statements of support.

The Arab League condemned the attack on the prison and expressed its support and solidarity in what it described as Bahrain's "war on terror and refusal of foreign interference in the Bahraini internal affairs", a reference to Iran.

Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit stressed that such interference undermines confidence in building constructive relations with Tehran.

"Iran is adamant on interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries and fuelling unrest by exporting a heinous and sectarian-tainted mantra. Such a subversive policy undermines the confidence of Arab countries in the possibility of building normal and constructive relations with Iran on the basis of

good neighbourhood and mutual respect," Gheit said.

"No stability in the Middle East can be guaranteed without a total change in behaviour by Iran."

Iran's Ahl Al Bait channel described the individuals behind the prison break as "heroes". Bahrain's Interior Ministry accused the channel of supporting terrorism.

"The channel gloated over the death of the fallen serviceman while performing his duty, describing the runaway terrorist elements as 'champions seeking freedom,'" a statement from the ministry said.

■ The inmates who escaped had all been convicted of terrorism-related charges.

"This represents an additional evidence of Iranian direct support for the terror acts and reflects at the same time an Iranian persistence to interfere in the internal affairs of Bahrain."

The GCC views Iran and its proxies, such as Hezbollah, as a cause of regional instability, pointing to situations in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen and Bahrain. Tensions were heightened last January when Riyadh severed diplomatic ties with Iran following the storming of its Tehran embassy by protesters angered at Saudi Arabia's execution of a radical Shia cleric convicted of involvement in the killing of police.

This resulted in Saudi Arabia



cancelling a \$3 billion aid package to the Lebanese Army over the Lebanese government's failure to condemn the attacks on the king-

dom's diplomatic missions in Iran. This was followed by travel bans by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Kuwait.