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By: TA | AP Insight

The Mecca Agreement in action - Pakistan sends troops to Saudi Arabia


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Pakistan's military announced Sunday that it will send troops to help strengthen Saudi Arabia's defenses against relentless attacks by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

It will be Pakistan's first known troop deployment under a joint defense agreement that Saudi Arabia signed with Islamabad and Turkey in August.

Pakistan's statement said troops would carry out duties within Saudi territory under existing defense cooperation arrangements. It did not disclose the number of soldiers, specific assignments, duration of the deployment or when troops would arrive.

Saudi Arabia, a major U.S. ally, has faced mounting pressure since the Iran war erupted in February with U.S. and Israeli strikes on the Islamic Republic.

It has turned to regional allies, including Egypt and Syria, to strengthen its defenses in the face of Houthi missile and drone strikes, some of them deadly.

The kingdom has been fighting the Houthis over the past decade in neighboring Yemen's civil war, backing the internationally recognized government in the south. The Houthis control Yemen's most populous areas, including Sanaa.

Fighting in Yemen escalated this summer. The Houthis have also launched direct attacks on Saudi Arabia's military, aviation and oil infrastructure and imposed a blockade on its shipping in what has been viewed as an extension of the U.S.-Iran war.

In recent months, the rebels made their biggest land grab in years, capturing Yemen's Red Sea coast.

This, along with the temporary closure of a key Saudi pipeline, strengthened their ability to choke off Saudi oil exports, pushing up global fuel prices and giving Iran greater leverage.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey also back diplomatic talks

Islamabad's announcement came two days after Pakistani, Turkish and Saudi defense and military officials met in Islamabad and reaffirmed their support for Riyadh under the trilateral Mecca Joint Defense Agreement that treats an attack on one member as an attack on all.

The three countries also backed diplomatic efforts to ease regional tensions.

Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey signed the agreement on Aug. 7.

They have described it as defensive and said it is not directed against any particular state.

The agreement builds on decades of Pakistani military service in Saudi Arabia, where an unspecified number of Pakistani troops have been stationed since the early 1980s to train and advise Saudi forces.

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Last month, Egypt said it would provide military support to Saudi Arabia to help it defend itself against Houthi attacks, without giving details.

A regional official briefed on the matter said at the time that Egypt would deploy air defense systems and aircraft to help repel missiles and drones.

The support was defensive in nature and wouldn't include ground troops in Yemen, the official said on condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to speak to reporters.

Pakistan says it will protect Islam's holiest mosques

Sunday's statement reaffirmed Pakistan's commitment to protecting Islam's two holiest mosques in the Saudi cities of Mecca and Medina.

It said the troop deployment would strengthen Saudi Arabia's defensive capabilities amid "emerging security concerns."

Saudi Arabia has accused the Houthis of firing missiles and drones toward Mecca and Medina since the summer escalation. The Houthis have vehemently denied attacking Islam's two holiest cities.

> Pakistan would use whatever means are available to defend the kingdom against Houthi attacks - Khawaja Muhammad Asif

The deployment follows a meeting in Riyadh last month at which the three countries agreed to implement their collective defense commitments, including arrangements for the rapid deployment of military forces and equipment to Saudi Arabia.

Pakistani Defense Minister Khawaja Muhammad Asif previously said Pakistan would use "whatever means are available" to defend the kingdom against Houthi attacks.

Pakistan is also pursuing diplomatic efforts with countries including Qatar to bring the United States and Iran back to negotiations.

Islamabad brokered an interim agreement between the two sides in June that quickly fell apart.

Houthi official criticizes Pakistan and Turkey over alliance

A senior Houthi official lashed out at Pakistan and Turkey over their alliance with Saudi Arabia.



In early November, the Houthis claimed that Pakistan had joined Saudi Arabia in strikes in Yemen

Mohamed Ali al-Houthi, a member of the Supreme Political Council, said in a statement Saturday that Ankara and Islamabad had ignored "the (Saudi) aggression, the blockade, the killings and the ongoing crimes" in Yemen.

"Just as the previous coalition against our country ... ended in failure, any future coalition will likewise fail," he said.

Al-Houthi was referring to the 2015 U.S.-backed, Saudi-led coalition that joined the Yemen civil war against the Houthis in a bid to restore Yemen's internationally recognized government to power.

In early November, the Houthis claimed that Pakistan had joined Saudi Arabia in strikes in Yemen.

The rebels' acting information minister, Omar al-Bukhaiti, said at the time that Pakistani fighter jets had struck rebel-held areas on Nov. 6 in "an extremely dangerous escalation that cannot be accepted or left unchallenged."

Pakistan has rejected the Houthis' claims.