

Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)

The Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC), was established in 2015 as a result of a Saudi-Gulf initiative. The founding members of the alliance are: Bahrain, Bangladesh, Benin, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Guinea, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Palestine, Qatar,¹Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Togo, Tunisia, Turkey, Yemen, United Arab Emirates. Afghanistan and Oman joined in 2016. The alliance is a response to criticism, that Arab states are not doing enough to fight Daesh (ISIS) and to overrun internal radicalisation. The IMCTC aims to build a unified, pan-Islamic front against terrorism by providing an integrated platform for members to propose, debate, and collaborate on the execution of counter terrorism solutions in four domains: Ideology, Communications, Counter Terrorist Financing, and Military.

Since its founding the IMCTC specifically targets jihadi ideology, recruitment, military capabilities and the financing of terrorist groups. The focus on ideology is a direct reflection of Gulf efforts to de-radicalise the region and to address the impact of extremist preachers. The impacts of the dissemination of violent extremist ideology have been significant and range from encouraging a record number of people to fight for jihadist causes, to the proliferation of terrorist attacks in the region. In turn, it was concluded that only a strong focus against extremist preachers, turn back the clock on radicalisation.

The IMCTC increasingly focuses on the communications strategies of terrorist recruiters. Due to the safe-havens in Iraq and Syria becoming increasingly less attractive to potential Daesh recruits, the terrorist propaganda increasingly encourages foreign fighters not to travel but to commit atrocities in their states. The coalition is preparing for the return of terrorist cells from these war zones. As such, the IMCTC has instituted a protocol for the training of the security forces of its members involving joint planning, cross training and exercises in urban, rural conditions in hostile environments. The IMCTC also aims to tackle financial support for terrorists through the Counter Terrorism Financing Center. This center aims to strengthen the mechanisms of cooperation and to enhance the capabilities of coalition countries regarding the methods of countering terrorism financing.

¹ Qatar has been excluded from IMCTC's decision making as Doha stands accused by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain and the UAE of supporting terrorism

Amid these ambitious plans, it is important to acknowledge potential limitations of an organisation which only very recently had its first meeting. The absence of Qatari officials—despite Qatar being a full member of the IMCTC—reveals an important problem. An engaged Doha, due to its financial power, could enhance the coalition, but its absence highlights diversity in the political vision of members states in identifying a common definition of terrorism. And, in the case of Qatar, alleged financial support to nefarious groups.

The IMCTC is made up of a variety of states, different in structure and political objectives. The presence of countries with large established armies such as Egypt, Pakistan and Turkey, alongside war-torn states such as Libya, Yemen and Somalia is only one of the several factors pointing to difficult cooperation between members as some are security providers and others recipients. Another limitation is the absence of tangible operational achievements coordinated by the IMCTC. Operational initiatives in fighting terrorist groups are, as of 2017, relegated to individual members of the coalition. Such are the prominent Saudi, Emirati roles in conducting air raids in Syria, as part of the US-led anti-Daesh coalition, or Egypt and Pakistan's military efforts in securing Sinai and Waziristan respectively. When and if the IMCTC would launch joint operations, one of the main dilemmas will be which groups the coalition will decide to target. The exclusion from the coalition of Shia-majority countries such as Iraq is problematic, especially as the Arab country struggles to recover from its internal sectarian conflict and continues to constitute a breeding ground for the rise of new terror groups. Countries of the coalition should be careful not to create an anti-Shia front which has the potential of further fuelling sectarianism and sectarian violence thorough the Muslim world. Ensuring that Iraq joins the IMCTC should, therefore, be a priority for countries in the coalition, despite Baghdad being firmly in Tehran's orbit. The current lack of joint operational endeavours could be addressed by the coalition by crafting an active role for the militaries of members in the ongoing fighting taking place in both Syria and Yemen against Daesh and Ansar Allah. This would allow the security forces of all IMCTC countries to gain key counter-terrorism experience.

Despite its current limitations, the IMCTC is making an impact in the fight against international jihadism by enabling the highest possible degree of coordination among members and supporting states. The IMCTC is also set to provide an Information and Intelligence Sharing platform to collect and disseminate a wide range of information on counter-terrorism programme and best practices undertaken by members to support states and international organisations. It is also important to consider the important role of the IMCTC in providing financial aid to Egypt and Nigeria following the recent terrorist attacks that struck Sinai and Nigeria's North-East. In the wake of the two attacks, the IMCTC was also able to generate a solidarity network across Muslim nations.

At EGIC, we encourage initiatives that promote international cooperation against terrorism. It is also important to consider that the IMCTC has already attracted support from the US, Canada and Germany and could potentially cooperate with NATO and the EU in the future. This could make efforts against international terrorism more effective than ever before.

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