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Perspectives On the Issues Shaping Policy

France in Saudi Arabia: Defensive Deployment or a New Strategic Footprint?

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France's decision to deploy troops, radar systems and air-defense assets to Saudi Arabia marks more than a limited response to attacks on Yanbu. On the surface, it is a narrowly defined defensive mission: protect a vital Saudi oil-export terminal from missiles and drones. At the strategic level, however, the deployment fits into a much broader French effort to preserve influence in the Middle East, protect European energy security, strengthen its bilateral relationship with Riyadh, and demonstrate that France can act independently of a US-led military coalition.

It also carries an interesting historical resonance. France has previously intervened militarily at Saudi Arabia's request—in the 1979 seizure of the Grand Mosque in Makkah. The circumstances are entirely different, but both episodes demonstrate a long-standing French willingness to provide highly specialized security assistance to the Saudi state when its core interests are threatened.

Yanbu: The Immediate Strategic Calculation

President Emmanuel Macron announced on September 24 that France would send

soldiers, radar systems and air-defense systems to protect Yanbu, while explicitly stressing that the mission was not intended to involve France in the wider conflict.²

The choice of Yanbu is strategically significant. The Saudi East-West Pipeline provides an alternative route for exporting oil when the Strait of Hormuz is disrupted. With Hormuz severely constrained by the wider regional conflict, Yanbu has acquired an importance extending well beyond Saudi Arabia. Macron himself subsequently linked the attacks on the Saudi pipeline to the deterioration of global energy supplies and rising prices in Europe.³

The French calculation: Protect Yanbu → Preserve Saudi Oil Exports → Reduce Pressure on Global Energy Markets → Protect European Energy Security.

This explains why Paris can describe the operation as defensive without regarding it as a peripheral Saudi security matter. The Houthis' missile and drone attacks have effectively created a second pressure point on Saudi Arabia's alternative to Hormuz. If both Hormuz and the East-West Pipeline/Yanbu route remain vulnerable, Saudi Arabia

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² Reuters, "France to Send Military to Protect Saudi Arabia on Red Sea Oil Route, Macron Says," *Defense News*, September 25, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/09/25/france-to-send-military-to-protect-saudi-arabia-on-red-sea-oil-route-macron-says/>

³ Emmanuel Macron, "Situation internationale : réunion avec les chefs des partis," *Élysée*, September 18, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/18/situation-internationale-reunion-avec-les-chefs-des-partis>

loses much of its ability to compensate for disruption in the Gulf. France consequently has an interest in keeping at least one major energy corridor functioning.

Why France Instead of Another Coalition?

The most interesting feature of the arrangement is its bilateral character. France is not simply joining an American military operation. It is establishing a direct security relationship with Riyadh. This fits developments that preceded the Yanbu deployment. During Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's August visit to France, Paris and Riyadh agreed to strengthen defense cooperation, including armaments and training. They also described their relationship as part of a broader effort to contribute to regional and global security.⁴

There is therefore a degree of continuity between the August agreement and the September deployment.

The French Objective Appears to Have Several Layers:

1. Protect European energy security.
2. Demonstrate French strategic autonomy.
3. Strengthen the France-Saudi strategic partnership.
4. Maintain French influence in the Gulf and wider Middle East.
5. Create a European capacity to protect critical infrastructure without automatically depending on Washington.
6. Preserve France's position as a diplomatic actor capable of talking to different sides of regional disputes.

The last point is particularly important. France wants simultaneously to remain a security partner of Gulf countries and an advocate of diplomacy, international law and a two-state settlement in Palestine. This combination is central to understanding Macron's Middle East policy.

The Gaza Paradox

At first glance there appears to be a contradiction. On September 22, addressing the 81st UN General Assembly, Macron delivered an unusually forceful criticism of the situation in Gaza and the West Bank. He spoke of the destruction of civilian infrastructure and violations of international humanitarian law, and questioned how the international community could remain inactive in the face of Gaza's suffering. He also criticized developments in the West Bank and argued that violations there were making a Palestinian state increasingly difficult to achieve.⁵

France has gone beyond rhetoric. Paris recognized the State of Palestine in 2025, and in September 2026 France, Britain and Canada jointly described settlement expansion and settler violence in the West Bank as a direct threat to the two-state solution. They also announced measures concerning settlement products and targeted measures against settlements and those facilitating them.⁶

So how does this sit alongside the deployment of French troops to Saudi Arabia? The answer lies in how Paris distinguishes between offensive warfare and defensive security. France is arguing that protecting Saudi infrastructure from incoming missiles and drones is not equivalent to participating in

⁴ Emmanuel Macron, "Déclaration commune de la France et de l'Arabie saoudite à l'occasion de la visite de Son Altesse Royale le Prince Mohammed ben Salmane ben Abdelaziz Al Saoud, Prince héritier et Premier ministre du Royaume d'Arabie saoudite, en République française," *Élysée*, August 25, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/08/25/declaration-commune-de-la-france-et-de-larabie-saoudite-a-loccasion-de-la-visite-de-son-altesse-royale-le-prince-mohammed-ben-salmane-ben-abdelaziz-al-saoud-prince-heritier-et-premier-ministre-du-royaume-darabie-saoudite-en-republique-francaise>

⁵ Emmanuel Macron, "81e session de l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies à New York : deuxième journée," *Élysée*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/22/81-session-de-lassemblee-generale-des-nations-unies-a-new-york-deuxieme-journee>

⁶ Emmanuel Macron, "80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York: Opening Day," *Élysée*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/09/22/80th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-in-new-york-opening-day>

an offensive regional war. Macron explicitly described the Yanbu mission as protecting a site rather than entering the conflict.⁷

This distinction is important for French diplomacy. Paris is attempting to construct a position in which *international law + humanitarian protection + Palestinian statehood + Israeli security + Gulf security + freedom of navigation* are treated as complementary rather than mutually exclusive objectives. Whether this can be sustained in practice is another question. But it explains the logic behind the apparently contradictory policies.

The 1979 Makkah Precedent

The historical comparison with 1979 is particularly fascinating. When Juhayman al-Otaybi and his followers seized the Grand Mosque in Makkah in November 1979, Saudi forces struggled to dislodge the insurgents from the enormous sanctuary and its underground areas.

Saudi Arabia subsequently requested French assistance. The French GIGN was called upon to help. The French government’s own GIGN history records that three of its personnel were sent to assist and trained Saudi guards in the operation because non-Muslims could not enter the Grand Mosque.⁸

Historical reporting gives somewhat different figures concerning the French personnel involved. Le Monde, for example, reported that five GIGN specialists assisted Saudi forces between November 23 and December 3, while later accounts describe a smaller core group.⁹

The important point is not the precise number. It is that France was prepared to provide specialized military expertise when the Saudi state faced an extraordinary threat to its internal security and the sanctity of Makkah.

That precedent tells us something about the durability of the Franco-Saudi relationship. In 1979 the threat was an internal insurgency. In 2026 the threat is an external missile-and-drone campaign. In both cases, however, the Saudi requirement is essentially the same: specialized external assistance to protect a strategically or symbolically vital national asset without handing over sovereignty or inviting a foreign occupation. That is a useful distinction.

From Makkah to Yanbu: What Has Changed?

The transformation is striking.

1979	2026
Grand Mosque in Makkah	Yanbu energy infrastructure
Internal insurgency	External threat: Missile and drone strikes
Juhayman and his followers	Houthi forces
GIGN specialists	Troops, radar and air defense
Counterterrorism/ security	Air and infrastructure defense
Saudi domestic crisis	Regional/ international conflict
Highly discreet French involvement	Public bilateral defense arrangement

The common denominator is *French security assistance at Saudi request*. But the strategic geography has expanded enormously. In 1979 France was helping protect the Saudi regime and one of Islam’s holiest sites. In 2026 France is helping protect an energy corridor whose security has consequences for Europe and the global economy. The relationship has therefore evolved from

⁷ Reuters, “France to Send Military to Protect Saudi Arabia on Red Sea Oil Route, Macron Says,” *Defense News*, September 25, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/09/25/france-to-send-military-to-protect-saudi-arabia-on-red-sea-oil-route-macron-says/>

⁸ GIGN, *Gendarmerie nationale*, “Tradition,” Gendarmerie nationale, January 23, 2025, updated April 1, 2025, <https://www.gendarmerie.interieur.gouv.fr/gign/le-gign/tradition>

⁹ *Le Monde*, “Cinq gendarmes français ont aidé les Saoudiens à mettre fin à la rébellion de La Mecque,” January 29, 1980, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1980/01/29/cinq-gendarmes-francais-ont-aide-les-saoudiens-a-mettre-fin-a-la-rebellion-de-la-mecque_2800223_1819218.html

a primarily bilateral security connection into something approaching a *strategic interdependence*.

The Deeper French Objective: Strategic Autonomy

There is another layer to this. For years France has advocated greater European strategic autonomy. The Yanbu deployment provides an opportunity to demonstrate what that concept means operationally.

France possesses expeditionary forces, sophisticated air-defense technology, intelligence and surveillance capabilities and an established military relationship with Gulf countries. A bilateral deployment allows Paris to demonstrate that European powers can protect critical infrastructure without every operation having to be organized through Washington.

This does not mean France is seeking to replace the United States in the Gulf. Rather, it suggests an attempt to create greater European capacity to act alongside or, where necessary, independently of the United States. Britain's support for Saudi air defense and France's Yanbu deployment can consequently be viewed as early examples of a possible European security role around critical Middle Eastern infrastructure.

That could eventually include:

- air and missile defense;
- maritime security;
- protection of energy infrastructure;
- surveillance and early warning;
- Red Sea security;
- protection of shipping;
- Counter-drone capabilities.

The significance of Yanbu, therefore, extends beyond Yanbu.

The Gaza Connection is not Incidental

There is an even broader diplomatic calculation. France wants to be seen in the Arab World as a Western power willing to acknowledge Palestinian rights while simultaneously maintaining security partnerships with Arab governments.

This is why Saudi Arabia occupies an increasingly important place in French diplomacy. In 2025, Macron and Mohammed bin Salman jointly chaired the UN conference on implementing the two-state solution. France subsequently recognized Palestine.¹⁰ In September 2026, Macron again emphasized Palestinian sovereignty while also insisting upon Israeli security.¹¹ Consequently, Riyadh is not merely a military customer for France. It is also a diplomatic partner in the search for a broader Middle Eastern settlement.

The relationship gives Paris something that purely military diplomacy cannot provide: access to a major Arab power that has influence in the Gulf, the Muslim world and the Palestinian question. This may explain why France has been careful to separate its defensive military deployment from participation in the wider regional conflict. Paris wants the military relationship with Riyadh without becoming a combatant in every Saudi regional confrontation.

A Message to Iran and To Europe

The Yanbu deployment also sends a message to Iran and the Houthis, although France is unlikely to describe it in those terms. The message is that attacks on critical Saudi infrastructure may now encounter not merely Saudi air defenses but European military capabilities. At the same time, France is signaling to Europe that Middle Eastern instability can no longer be treated as geographically distant. Macron's own statements about the consequences of the regional war for French energy prices make this explicit.¹² The security of the Gulf, Red Sea and European energy markets has become interconnected. This is perhaps the

¹⁰ Emmanuel Macron, "80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York: Opening Day," *Élysée*, September 22, 2025, <https://www.elysee.fr/en/emmanuel-macron/2025/09/22/80th-session-of-the-united-nations-general-assembly-in-new-york-opening-day>

¹¹ Emmanuel Macron, "81e session de l'Assemblée générale des Nations unies à New York : deuxième journée," *Élysée*, September 22, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/22/81-session-de-lassemblee-generale-des-nations-unies-a-new-york-deuxieme-journee>

¹² Emmanuel Macron, "Situation internationale : réunion avec les chefs des partis," *Élysée*, September 18, 2026, <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2026/09/18/situation-internationale-reunion-avec-les-chefs-des-partis>

most important strategic lesson.

France Can Become Involved In the Wider Conflict

The greatest danger for Paris is “mission creep.” A deployment initially designed to protect Yanbu could become complicated if:

- French personnel are attacked;
- French air-defense systems intercept missiles launched from Yemen;
- Saudi forces undertake retaliatory operations;
- the conflict expands into the Red Sea;
- Iranian forces become directly involved;
- French assets are drawn into protecting wider Saudi territory.

At that point the distinction between “defensive protection” and participation in the war could become increasingly difficult to maintain. This explains the emphasis on Macron’s words: protect the site, not enter the *conflict*.¹³ The sustainability of the French policy will therefore depend upon maintaining a tightly defined mission.

The Long-Term Picture

The French deployment should consequently not be viewed simply as another Western military reinforcement of Saudi Arabia. It represents three overlapping French strategies:

1. Strategic autonomy: France wants to demonstrate that it possesses the capability and political will to act independently in a strategically important region.
2. Energy security: Yanbu is effectively part of Europe’s wider energy-security architecture because it provides an

alternative to the vulnerable Hormuz route.

3. Diplomatic positioning: France wants to remain simultaneously a security partner of Gulf monarchies, an advocate of Palestinian statehood and international humanitarian law, and a European power capable of engaging all sides in Middle Eastern diplomacy.

The 1979 Makkah episode provides an illuminating historical backdrop. Then, French specialists quietly helped Saudi forces recover the Grand Mosque from Juhayman’s insurgents. Nearly half a century later, France is publicly deploying military personnel and sophisticated air-defense capabilities to protect another vital Saudi asset.

The scale and circumstances are radically different. Yet the underlying principle is remarkably familiar: France is prepared to translate its relationship with Saudi Arabia into practical security assistance when Riyadh faces a threat to a critical national interest.

The deeper change is that Saudi security and European security are now much more closely connected. Macron’s UN speech and the Yanbu deployment therefore need not be interpreted as contradictory. His Gaza position emphasizes sovereignty, international law, humanitarian protection and a political settlement; the Yanbu mission is presented as protection of sovereign Saudi territory and critical infrastructure. The real test for French policy will be whether Paris can maintain that distinction if the regional conflict widens.

France is, in effect, attempting something difficult: to become a stronger security actor in the Middle East without becoming another belligerent in the region’s wars. That balancing act may ultimately define the next phase of French foreign policy in the Gulf.

¹³ Reuters, “France to Send Military to Protect Saudi Arabia on Red Sea Oil Route, Macron Says,” *Defense News*, September 25, 2026, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2026/09/25/france-to-send-military-to-protect-saudi-arabia-on-red-sea-oil-route-macron-says/>

