

PolicyWatch #1577

Changing Conventional Military Balance in the Gulf

By [Michael Knights](#)

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In a September 7 interview with al-Jazeera, U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated, "The more that our Arab friends and allies can strengthen their security capabilities, the more they can strengthen their cooperation, both with each other and with us. I think this sends the signal to the Iranians that the path they are on is not going to advance Iranian security, but in fact could weaken it." His comments reflect a dawning realization in the face a growing Iranian nuclear threat: that a new conventional military balance is slowly emerging in the Persian Gulf.

Background

Three factors have driven the improved military capabilities of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states since the mid-1990s. The first has been the development of improved procurement processes, with more focus on appropriate systems that better meet the needs of the GCC states. Among the highest defense spenders in the Middle East, the GCC states have leveraged their defense expenditure through threat-based procurement planning and effective bargaining that ensures they have received the most advanced technologies at the best prices.

A second factor has been a more-balanced approach to military development that has stressed military education, training, and maintenance capabilities. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is a leader in this effort, seeking to develop technical interoperability between the U.S. military and future generations of UAE military personnel. UAE military recruits, for instance, must attain an international computer driving license before they enlist, and the UAE Air Force High School and Khalifa Bin Zayed Air College feed well-educated recruits to the UAE Air Force and Air Defense Institute.

A third factor has been a major change in the nature of GCC threats. In the early 1990s, the focus was on a possible overland Iraqi invasion, which meant that the northern Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain) were frontline states, and that land warfare forces (mechanized forces, antitank helicopters, and artillery) were prioritized. With the eclipse of Saddam Hussein's Iraq as a major military power and the later overthrow of his Baathist regime, the focus shifted back to Iran as the key GCC threat. This broadened the number of frontline states -- making the UAE, Oman, and Qatar more important -- and shifted the procurement focus to air and missile defense and naval patrols. A broader range of GCC states are now able to focus their efforts across a narrowed range of military missions.

Key GCC Military Missions

As a recent Washington Institute study by David Crist ([PolicyFocus #95](#)) notes, Iran's military strategy and operational planning have witnessed few significant changes since the last time the GCC and Iran came to blows -- during the Tanker War in the late-1980s. As such, the GCC needs to defend or deter Iran in two key areas:

Offshore infrastructure and coastal sea lanes. In 1986 and 1987, Iran undertook or planned attacks on UAE

and Saudi offshore oil and gas facilities, as well as Saudi coast guard facilities. In the late 1990s, Iranian gunboats periodically embarked on machine-gun attacks on unmanned gas rigs within Qatar's offshore exclusive economic zones (EEZ).

GCC airspace. During the Iran-Iraq war, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were subject to air incursions and missile attacks, respectively, and in 1991 and 2003, the three northern GCC states (Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain) were attacked by Iraqi cruise and ballistic missiles. Since 2003, Tehran has stated that GCC military bases and ports could be subject to attacks in the event of a U.S.-Iranian confrontation.

Air Superiority Over the Gulf

Encouraging signs suggest that the GCC states will, within half a decade, be able to maintain local air superiority over their national territories and EEZs, although Iran's numerous long-range tactical rockets represent a more difficult challenge. The UAE will be able to field a very powerful air umbrella, consisting of eighty Lockheed Martin F-16 Block 60 aircraft, \$3.3 billion worth of Patriot Advanced Capacity (PAC-3) surface-to-air missiles, and potentially the Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system. The Royal Saudi Air Force has seventy-two Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft, while Oman has twelve new F-16C/D Block 50/52 aircraft.

A profusion of long-range strike aircraft is also increasing the ability of GCC states to threaten precision attacks on Iranian economic and political targets. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman are each preparing to procure sizeable long-range strike aircraft fleets to add to their already impressive inventories. The GCC states are also determined to invest in sophisticated land-attack weaponry, advanced self-protection suites, and powerful air-to-air defense capabilities.

Naval Capability

Some Gulf Arab states are approaching a major new level of naval capability. If the UAE continues on its current course, it will deploy the most powerful naval force of all the Gulf states by the middle of the next decade. The UAE's six French-built Baynunah corvettes will be the most capable class of warships in the Gulf, backed by an impressive fleet of twenty-four major amphibious assault ships and seventy new transport and attack helicopters, which together will be capable of projecting a reinforced battalion of armored infantry and light infantry forces to islands and coastal areas. Oman is similarly investing in at least three offshore vessels for Indian Ocean and Red Sea patrolling, which will be supported by thirty-six naval transport and attack helicopters. In May 2008, Bahrain took command of Combined Task Force 152, a multinational flotilla in the Gulf, and the UAE will take over command of the force in November 2009. In the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia is leading an eleven-nation Arab naval flotilla undertaking antipiracy duties.

Although the U.S. Navy will likely always be required to defend against major Iranian efforts to close the Strait of Hormuz, the GCC states are becoming increasingly well prepared to defend their EEZs. Qatar's National Security Shield is a network of radar and coastal surveillance systems linked to a growing fleet of response forces that include combat aircraft, helicopters, patrol vessels, and protective barriers on unmanned offshore rigs. The new UAE Critical National Infrastructure Authority will purchase thirty-four fast interceptor vessels for the defense of offshore infrastructure and ports. As part of Saudi Arabia's \$8 billion border security system, Riyadh will purchase coast guard vessels, surveillance aircraft, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles, and a telecommunications network.

Implications for U.S. policy

Fostered by bilateral planning assistance from the United States via the Gulf Security Dialogue, GCC militaries are making rapid advances and may eclipse Iranian capabilities in the Gulf within ten years. By 2015, for instance, the combined forces of the UAE military will likely be able to prevent Iranian naval operations in UAE territorial waters and EEZs, seize and hold Iranian-held islands, and intercept some Iranian

missile and air attacks on the UAE in the event of a conflict.

Whether the UAE or other GCC states have the intention or resolve to resist Iranian pressure is another matter, but building defensive capability is an important tool in fostering self-confidence in U.S. regional allies. For the United States, the lesson is to sustain its focus on GCC military development and to ensure that affordable and sustainable security assistance initiatives continue to receive the attention and the funding they deserve.

Michael Knights is a Boston-based Lafer fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states.

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