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The Emirates Center and Gulf Think Tanks: The Next Twenty Five years

By Anthony H. Cordesman
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*Presentation to the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies
and Research (ECSSR), December 10, 2014, Abu Dhabi, UAE*

Request for comments:

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Let me begin by congratulating the Emirates Center and Dr. Jamal Sanad Al-Suwaidi for so many accomplishments over the last 20 years. It has been a privilege to watch its growth, its sustained quality, and its steadily increasing influence.

I believe that the Emirates Center is a key demonstration of the fact that think tanks that seek to provide objective, fact-based analysis are a critical aspect of both modern governance and civil society.

The Emirates Center also shows that such think tanks can provide an effective route to evolutionary change in the role of government at a time when radical change has produced little more than chaos. It provides effective outside policy initiatives for – and critiques of – governments.

It shows that objective think tanks can provide the intellectual depth that far too much of modern media – and its focus on instant communication and analysis – lacks. It shows that such think tanks can act as a common bridge of rational analysis that crosses regions, cultures, and faiths at time when far too many divisions are shaped by conspiracy theories, fear, prejudice, and anger.

What I would like to focus on today, however, is not what the Emirates Center and other regional think tanks have accomplished. It is rather the new and evolving challenges that the Center and other regional think tanks must meet in the future and on the increased support they will need from Gulf governments. The motto the Center has displayed for this twentieth anniversary is “defining the future is our mission,” and this is precisely the motto it should have chosen.

Let me stress that I am speaking for myself and not for CSIS, and that I have not worked for the US government for some 20 years. Having made that disclaimer, let me make it clear that while there is much to celebrate, that there is still much to be done

First, there is a need for objective, regional net assessments of the relative capabilities of Iran, GCC forces, and those of outside powers like the US, Britain, and France.

Creating effective strategic partnerships requires a strong voice that speaks for the common interests of all the GCC states, and provides a clear picture of the region's calculations and interests to its outside allies. No partnership is stronger than all of its partners.

The goal should be to set priorities based on realistic assessments of the overall threat, current capabilities, and mission priorities. They should be based on hard numbers and facts. They should not rely on exaggerated estimates of either the threat or friendly capabilities, or fears of what Iran does not have and cannot execute, and conspiracy theories about neighboring states and outside allies.

Iran is not a regional superpower. Most of its conventional forces are obsolete or do not compare to the forces of the GCC states, much less to the combined forces of the GCC, the US, Britain, and France. The Gulf has a decisive superiority in air power, land-based air defenses, and modern land and naval weapons.

- Even if one ignores the forces that partners like the US, Britain, and France can deploy to the region, Iran falls far short of matching critical aspects of GCC military forces.
- Iran has not acquired any new aircraft or surface-to air missiles from the West since 1980, and much of its air force consists of systems delivered in the 1960s and 1970s. Even its most modern Russian aircraft are older export versions of the MiG-29 and Su-24. Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE each have far more modern combat aircraft than Iran.
- Most of its surface-to-air missile forces date back to the 1970s, although Iran has tried to upgrade it. Its only modern systems consist of a small number of a short range TOR-M medium range surface to air missiles.
- Its major surface vessels also date back to the 1970s.
- It has far fewer modern armor and artillery systems than the GCC states.
- A detailed assessment of these aspects of the balance is laid out in a long series of CSIS studies of the trends in regional forces. They are available on the CSIS web site at <http://csis.org/program/us-and-iranian-strategic-competition>, and <http://csis.org/program/burke-chair-saudi-arabia-gcc-gulf>.

What such Gulf net assessments should reveal, however, is that Iran does pose a real military threat in two key areas. It has built up a powerful ballistic missile force, and a sophisticated mix of asymmetric air, sea, and anti-ship missile forces in the Gulf, and a major potential threat if it can actually arm enough delivery systems with nuclear weapons to matter.

Iran's Al Quds force and MOIS are active in Bahrain, Yemen, Gaza, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria, although almost always in ways where their influence is limited, their partner is as interested in using Iran as Iran is interested in exploiting its partner, and Iran is limited to exploiting local tensions and a spoiler role. The tendency of Arab states to exaggerate Iran's role and blame Iran for internal problems and tensions does not

mean Iran actually has that level of influence.

Iran is seeking the ability to deploy precision guided missile forces. Its present missile forces, however, lack the lethality and accuracy to attack point targets and are largely terror weapons that can only be used against large area targets. The combination of GCC and US missile defenses provides a steadily better defense against even this threat.

Think tanks like the Emirates Center can play a critical role in providing independent assessments of common priorities, core realities shaping the military balance, and the best way to avoid conflict through effective defense and deterrence, as well as potential ways of reaching a stable level of forces if Iran's politics ever permit this.

They can also address the fact that a third -- and even more serious -- threat will develop if the P5+1 negotiations with Iran fail, and Iran develops and deploys nuclear weapons. The members of the GCC need independent assessments of both Iran's nuclear programs, of the effectiveness of any P5+1 agreement with Iran, and the prospects for a regional WMD-free zone. If the negotiations fail, it will be equally important for think tanks to provide a GCC and regional voice in assessing the options for preventive strikes, containment, and deterrence. The same will be true of the hard choices that GCC states will have to make between reliance on extended deterrence from the US or the options for acquiring their own nuclear weapons.

Let me stress, that the goal of such net assessments should not be simply to assess the threat and the military balance. Such net assessments have a clear goal: creating more effective deterrence, more effective defense, and opportunities to negotiate more stable security arrangements.

They also should play a key role in building public trust and confidence in national security efforts, in the value of the GCC, and in partnerships with outside powers like the US, Britain, and France. The assessments should be public and transparent. They should be based on regional analysis that regional media and public opinion can trust.

Second, the GCC states and allied states need to do far more to develop effective joint warfare capability, interoperability, standardization, and common mission priorities to deter and defend against Iran.

There is far too much hollow praise of the GCC for far too little real world progress. The most recent meeting of the GCC -- its 35th annual summit -- is scarcely a triumph of effective cooperation in security. Its main goal has been to paper over the difference between Qatar and Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. It has called for a new joint naval force to be based in Bahrain, a joint command in Riyadh, and GCC-wide police force to be based in Abu Dhabi. If actually implemented with any effectiveness, these could all be real steps forward.

The fact remains, however, that 35 years of similar reports of progress have disguised the fact that national differences have left the GCC a hollow military shell in far too many areas where close cooperation is needed. There is a need for GCC-wide studies and plans that address the key areas where immediate improvement is needed in

real-world cooperation within the GCC, and there should be government sponsorship and support of Gulf efforts to provide such analysis.

To provide a few examples, the GCC states need to make far more progress in creating:

- Integrated missile defenses that can deter and defend against both conventionally armed missiles and the risk of nuclear-armed systems.
- Truly integrated air and land-based air defenses, and capabilities for integrated offensive air operations that cover both strike missions and fixed and rotary wing close air support missions.
- Integrated joint naval-air-missile defense and deterrent capabilities to deal with the growing asymmetric threat from Iran that ranges from anti-ship missile-armed patrol boats to smart mines.
- Full interoperability in each key mission area in terms of technology, training, operations, standardization and specialization where possible.
- GCC-wide examinations of arms purchases to determine what priorities really exist, what levels of spending are really needed, encourage competition between arms sellers, and achieve the economies of scale that a cumulative purchasing power of over \$50 billion in new arms orders could achieve.
- A net assessment approach to future arms buys that fully exploits the massive advantage GCC states have in acquiring advanced military technology over Iran at a time when a declassified US intelligence estimate of regional new arms import agreements during 2008-2011 – systems now actually being delivered and absorbed into regional forces – put Iran's five year total at only \$300 million. The total for the GCC was \$75.6 billion, some 250 times higher. Saudi Arabia alone imported \$52.1 billion worth – 174 times higher.

Even the wealthiest nations need to make better use of scarce funds in spending on defense and internal security. There is a clear need to seek collective economies of scale, to examine every key expenditure in terms of its mission priority, and to avoid spending on weapons that have only limited priority.

If there is one iron law in public policy; it is to follow the money and to ensure that governments bring the best minds and ideas to bear in making public expenditures as effective as possible.

The GCC states have an immense pool of resources to work with:

- There are many ways to estimate military spending, but the IISS estimates that Iran's defense spending was a much higher \$23.9 billion in 2012 – before sanctions fully began to bite.
- The IISS estimates total US spending at \$645.7 billion or 42% of a world total of \$1,525.7 billion, which would still be 27 times Iran.

- The IISS's latest figures for the GCC states, which use 2011 data for Qatar and the UAE and 2013 data for the rest, total \$77.7 billion or 3.25 times Iran.
- To return to the issue of arms sales, The CRS reports that the GCC states took delivery on more than \$106 billion dollars' worth of arms between 2004 and 2011 versus only \$2.4 billion for Iran. SIPRI reports that the Arab Gulf states placed over \$13.1 billion in new orders between 2009 and 2013 versus only \$194 million for Iran.
- What is even more striking, is that reports by the US Department of Defense Security Assistance Cooperation Agency show that the US alone signed \$54.8 billion in new FMS agreements with Saudi Arabia during FY2006-FY2013, \$18.3 billion with the UAE, and over \$80 billion worth with the entire GCC, and has well over \$50 billion worth still in delivery.
- These arms transfers are backed by US-led exercises and access to US intelligence, battle management, and targeting capabilities. This aspect of strategic partnership is more than a matter of rhetoric, but it needs to be backed by independent Gulf assessment of how the GCC can best develop its own integrated capabilities and use the capabilities that outside countries like the US can provide.
- Independent assessment is also needed of the efficiency of the way GCC state import arms, contracting procedures, ways of reducing costs, and savings from standardization and interoperability. Warnings of waste and corruption, and poorly structure options for offset programs and expensive white elephants like federated defense industries. Integrity and effectiveness need to become the key focus of analysis in a region where far too many sales disguise payoffs and side payments, involve unnecessary "glitter factor" features, and ignore the economies of scale and increased effectiveness that standardization, interoperability, and common facilities can bring.

There is immense collective potential here, but not if military spending is not managed in ways that achieve common needs and common goals. As think tanks outside the Gulf have already shown, need outside criticism and review, and that even the best policy and plans cannot be effective without effective programming and budgeting. Moderate and objective think tanks like the Emirates Center can be a key source of advice about how to spend money that governments vitally need.

Third, equal improvements are needed in both counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capability.

The greatest single regional security lesson of what has been a very a grim year is the emergence of Daesh (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" or al-Dawla al-Islamiya al-Iraq al-Sham). and the clear warnings that every regional state faces a threat from violent religious extremism, insurgency, terrorism, and non-state actors.

Creating a GCC military command in Riyadh and a GCC police force based in Abu Dhabi will be little more than hollow exercises in symbolism unless these efforts are given real meaning in dealing with both Iran and the growing threat of terrorism and insurgency. These are critical areas where every analytic technique needs to be used to address the best ways of directly countering terrorism and insurgency, reducing its causes, and reintegrating the young men and women who become caught up in extremism back into civil society.

It is also time that the GCC states stopped trying to fight a 21st century set of terrorist movements using mid-20th century techniques. Think tanks need to help develop counters to the extremist use of the Internet, cell phones, and other media. They need to target critical age groups, help poll and measure the reasons extremist movement get volunteers, and focus on actually reaching youth rather than simply generating statements from authority figures and clerics. This is a war of ideas and communications where the use of counterterrorism force can only treat the symptoms and not the disease.

Every GCC state – and state in the Arab and Islamic worlds also needs to recognize that these are not simply national threats and cannot be dealt with effectively on a national basis. They are GCC, regional, Arab, and Islamic problems. They also involve sectarian, cultural, ethnic, and tribal issues that no state outside the Islamic and Arab worlds can fully address. Only Islam can deal with the ideological aspects of Islamic extremism; only local states can deal with the full range of the various internal drivers of extremism.

There are also clear indicators that this challenge will become even more urgent in the future. The START global terror database demonstrates that major incidents have risen from less than 300 major incidents a year in the MENA region during 1998 to 2004, to approximately 1,600 in 2008, and increased again from around 1,500 in 2010 to 1,700 in 2011, and jumped to 2,500 in 2012, and 4,650 in 2013. This is a fifteen-fold increase since 2002, and threefold increase since 2010.

A RAND Corporation study on trends in terrorism in 2014 found:

- A 58-percent increase in the number of Salafi-jihadist groups from 2010 to 2013.
- The number of Salafi jihadists more than doubled from 2010 to 2013, according to both Rand's low and high estimates.
- Significant increases took place in the number of attacks by al Qa'ida-affiliated groups between 2007 and 2013, with most of the violence in 2013 perpetrated by Daesh (43 percent), which eventually left al Qa'ida; al Shabaab (25 percent); Jabhat al-Nusrah (21 percent); and al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (10 percent).
- Approximately 99 percent of the attacks by al Qa'ida and its affiliates in 2013 were against "near enemy" targets in North Africa, the Middle East, and other regions outside of the West.

Another report by the Institute for Economics and Peace found that:

- Fatalities related to terrorism soared 60 percent last year, and five countries — Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan and Syria — accounted for four-fifths of the almost 18,000 fatalities attributed to terrorism in 2013.
- The highest terrorism index in the world was for Iraq at 10. Iraq had the bloodiest record of all, with more than 6,300 fatalities. Syria had a score of 8.12. Yemen had a score of 7.31. Egypt was 6.5. Lebanon was 6.4. Iran had a score of 4.9. Bahrain was 4.41. Saudi Arabia was 2.71. Jordan was 1.76. The UAE was 0.29. Kuwait was 0.04. Oman and Qatar were zero.

If there is any one lesson from the tragedy of events since 2011, it is that intelligent evolution is the necessary alternative to the chaos of revolution. The Emirates Center and other regional think tanks need to help meet the challenge of finding ways to both improve direct counterterrorism and ensure it does not become a source of abuses that create new extremists or turn prisons into training centers.

The Gulf states and the Arab world need to work collectively to address both the causes and the growing level of violent religious extremism, and what has become a struggle between Sunni and Shi'ite, and between violent extremists and the moderate mainstream of Islam.

Even the most stable states need to examine their current and potential sources of instability – in terms of religion, demographics and the problems created by the current youth bulge, economics, governance, ethnic and sectarian differences. It is time to go beyond the initial findings that can be found in various Arab Development Reports and focus on the present in ways that lead to action.

Fourth, there is a clear need for a better-coordinated GCC and Arab response to the problem of the ongoing civil wars in the region that now are more threatening than terrorism.

Think tanks also need to react to the fact that there are civil wars or near civil war in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, and the risk of future conflicts in other regional states.

It does not take great vision to see that defeating Daesh, and similar movements in other countries, will be pointless if the end result is only to see other extremist movements prolong the fighting or new forms of authoritarian repression, breed another cycle of failed governance that leads to another and even more serious wave of violence.

The GCC must find better and far more integrated ways to deal with the fact the Daesh is only part of the struggle. The divisions and low-level civil war in Iraq threaten its unity, ability to recover its territory, and its Arab identity. GCC think tanks need to examine the options for helping Iraq develop the unity and security that will make it both a partner and prevent it from becoming a threat and center for Iranian influence.

The same is true of developing more effective options for dealing with the Syrian civil war that has also done so much to empower Daesh, divide the Arab world, creating the threat of lasting sectarian divisions, and make refugees a threat to Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq. The deep divisions in the GCC approach to dealing with Syria have both gravely weakened their own efforts and their influence over the efforts of the US and other Western states. They have empowered Iran and Russia in supporting Assad.

It is equally important to develop options for dealing with Yemen, which could become an even more direct threat and source of instability to key GCC states like Saudi Arabia and Oman. A single-minded focus on Daesh is no substitute for a region-wide strategy and plan of action, or force cooperation with the other key states like Egypt, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco.

Regional think tanks like the Emirates Center can play a critical role in supporting such efforts by providing objective analysis, examination of options, and plans for the kind of aid that will help warn-torn nations recover.

- Far better coordinated and collective action is needed to help Iraq restore its unity, and to put an end to both the Assad regime and destructive forces like Daesh.
- The civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen and the violent tensions in other Arab states are leaving a legacy that may often take more than a decade to heal.
- Unless some collective solution can be found to both ending civil war -- and moving the states involved towards stable recovery -- these and lesser upheavals threaten governance and development throughout the region indefinitely into the future.
- Yemen is an extremely poor nation with some 26.1 million people, and a per capita income of only \$2,500 before its central government virtually collapsed because of fighting in the capital in late 2014. It now faces three sets of civil conflict: Houthi versus Sunni tribes, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula versus the Yemeni army, and a renewed struggle between the central government and Southern secessionists.
- Iraq is a nation of 32.6 million people that is now deeply divided between Arab Shi'ite, Arab Sunni and Kurd. The solution may be some form of federalism, but this was further complicated in October 2014 by a conflict that put some 5.2 million Iraqis at risk, 2.8 million needing food aid, and an increase of 1.8 million IDPs since the start of the year. A \$7,100 GDP per capita in 2011 may have dropped by as much as 50% by late 2014.
- The Syrian civil war killed well over 195,000 civilians by mid-November 2014 and wounded or injured more than 400,000 in a nation of some 17 million remaining residents. There are some 3.2 million refugees outside Syria and 6.45 million displaced persons – half of them children. A total of 9.2 to 10.8 million Syrians are at risk, 4.6 million are in besieged or hard to access areas,

and a \$5,100 per capita income in 2011 may have been cut by 50%.

Unless regional states do more to cooperate, and begin to plan now for the long hard task of post-conflict recovery, the tragedy of the Israel-Palestinian conflict could pale in significance compared to decades of tension between Arab factions and states.

But the same kind of analytic effort can also address this critical and similar need. Arab think tanks can play a role in examining how the Arab peace initiative could be put into practice in ways that assist the Palestinians in a Palestinian state progress, stable development, hope and dignity without new forms of tension and conflict.

No one has a greater potential to show both Israel and the world that there are real options for a Palestinian state based on peace and security, that such options have broad Arab support, and that this tragedy can have an end.

Fifth, think tanks like the Emirates Center can play a critical role in building the kind of Gulf institutions that give collective security real meaning. It is now more than three decades since the founding of the Gulf Cooperation Council. It is time to go beyond reassuring rhetoric and Ministerial declarations, focus on substance, and create the institutions that will give the GCC real effectiveness.

Alliances like NATO have shown that nations do not need to sacrifice sovereignty to develop civilian staffs and military commands that can coordinate and integrate national security efforts to achieve common goals.

Critical elements of a real alliance include strong staff elements to review and examine five year defense plans, look at defense budget and comparative efforts, develop common intelligence and assessments of the threat, focus on interoperability and standardization, and work constantly at a professional level.

There are also many areas where one central facility would be cheaper and more effective than having each nation create its own approach.

Think tanks can be a key to both developing and supporting improved institutions within the GCC and coordinating with friendly and allied states.

As part of this examination, there will also be a clear need to find the best approach to strategic partnership between the Gulf states and outside power like the US, Britain, and France.

A true strategic partnership must be based on common interest, common goals, common plans, and common actions. A strong and unified GCC voice is a critical way of achieving this, and of building effective defenses and deterrence that link outside powers to GCC forces.

I realize that all five of the priorities that I have listed are areas where the Emirates Center and other Gulf think tanks have already

made some contribution, but let me conclude by being blunt. Even the best think tank and can be no more effective than Gulf governments permit.

For all the rush to overpraise the 35th summit of the GCC, the last year has shown all too clearly that GCC governments are still trapped in feuds that sharply undermine progress toward collective defense and real cooperation.

There also are far too many areas that regional governments treat as being so secret or so sensitive that they present a serious barrier to effective analysis, and do not provide the transparency needed for effective analysis and debate.

This makes it difficult for Gulf think tanks to fully address many key policy issues, and to have all the access to the data, officials, and officers that they need. It limits the ability of some of the best thinkers in the Gulf to play their full role in shaping strategy, policy, and budgets that is the key role of think tanks.

In far too many cases, the sensitivity of governments creates a focus on broad policy recommendations rather than fact-based analysis of key issues and the development of specific policy options. It also feeds a tendency to address major problems in terms of conspiracy theories, rather than those facts and detailed research. Or, it encourages an academic approach to issues that need immediate action and decisions.

The divisions between governments also encourages public praise of Gulf and Arab cooperation where virtually everyone knows the pace and progress is far too slow, and in the process exacerbates tensions between the GCC and other Arab states rather than leading to substantive action.

It also encourages unilateral action by the US and other outside powers where real strategic partnership is needed. And, in the process, the lack of public transparency in addressing national security issues encourages formulation of hollow conspiracy theories like a secret US plan to replace its alliance with the Arab Gulf states with ties to Iran, instead of valid criticism and proposals for changes in the role and nature of the US in the Gulf.

As an American, let me note that we probably deserve much of the praise or blame for having created think tanks. If there is any one principle we have learned, however, it is that one of the most important roles of a think tank is to be a hard-edged critic and a source of objective analysis even when our government is anything but pleased by the resulting analysis and advice.

All governments make mistakes, and – in broad terms -- we have learned that the larger the government, the more mistakes it will make unless it listens to outside advice and criticism. American think tanks should have no monopoly on that advice and criticism, and once again, voices like the Emirates Center can play a critical role

This means success depends to a critical degree on how governments view their partnership with their own think tanks. In today's Arab world, it is critically

important for governments to realize that responsible think tanks can be a key path to stable, evolutionary change. They can shape opinion with a focus on facts and practical options that news media, ordinary politics, social networking, and the ordinary structure of civil society simply cannot match.

In short, strong as the Emirates Center has become, the last twenty years should only be a beginning, and the model it has created should be one that every GCC government should fully support!