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# TOWARD A NATO OF THE GULF? THE CHALLENGES OF COLLECTIVE DEFENSE WITHIN THE GCC

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Jean-Loup Samaan





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**Jean-Loup Samaan**

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## FOREWORD

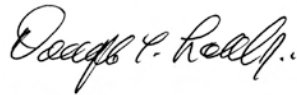
The stability of the Gulf remains a priority of U.S. national security interests. Because of its importance both politically and economically, the region is and should likely remain a critical area for U.S. Armed Forces in the near future. But if for a long time, the Gulf Arab kingdoms seemed to be passive actors of their own region—leaving either Iran, Iraq, or Western powers to shape the power plays—they now reached an unprecedented level of strategic ambition. As evidenced by their active diplomatic agendas in the Middle East and their increased military involvement in regional crises, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are now players that matter.

Does this mean that the GCC could become a credible regional organization enforcing collective security in the Peninsula? For years, this has been a dream that even the most optimistic planners of the U.S. Department of Defense considered distant, if not farfetched. The recent new crisis between Saudi Arabia and Qatar reminds us that diplomatic cooperation remains fragile in the region.

But recognizing the constraints of contemporary political disputes should not prevent us from discussing the idea of collective security in the Gulf. It is in this spirit, that in his new monograph, Dr. Jean-Loup Samaan looks at the operational issues behind the concept of the GCC as a security organization. Too often overlooked by the scholarship, topics like the building of a joint command, the development of a common military culture, or the reinforcement of maritime coordination, require a serious discussion among practitioners. In this context, based on in-depth research and interviews conducted in the region, this monograph

provides us with an up-to-date evaluation of the feasibility of this project which will be beneficial not only for scholars, but also for the U.S. defense community.

For this reason, the Strategic Studies Institute is pleased to offer this monograph on the challenges of collective security in the Gulf and the manner in which this major issue can impact U.S. national security interests.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.  
Director  
Strategic Studies Institute and  
U.S. Army War College Press

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JEAN-LOUP SAMAAN is an associate professor in strategic studies for the United Arab Emirates (UAE) National Defense College. Prior to that, he was a researcher for the Middle East Faculty at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Defense College in Rome, Italy between 2011 and 2016. His areas of expertise include Middle East strategic balance and Gulf security diplomacies, as well as cyber defense. He was a policy advisor at the French Ministry of Defense from 2008 to 2011, where he was responsible for several net assessment studies covering transatlantic military affairs. While working for the French Ministry of Defense (MoD), Dr. Samaan participated in various French-American strategic foresight exercises with the National Intelligence Council as well as with the U.S. Air Force. From 2009 to 2011, he was also an adjunct lecturer in international security at the French Institute for Political Studies, Sciences Program, and gave lectures to civilian and military audiences in various countries. In 2006, he was a visiting scholar at Duke University, and from 2007 to 2008, he was a researcher at the RAND Corporation in Washington, DC. Dr. Samaan has authored three books and several academic articles for various international journals such as *Survival*, *Orbis*, *Comparative Strategy*, *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, *Politique Etrangère*, and *Internationale Politik*. He is a regular columnist for the online magazine, *Al Monitor*. Dr. Samaan is a former student of Arabic at the French Institute of Oriental Languages and the French Institute for the Near East in Beirut, Lebanon. He graduated from the Institute for Political Studies in Grenoble, and he holds a Ph.D. in political science from the University of Paris, La Sorbonne.



## SUMMARY

Since the Arab revolutions started in early 2011, the Gulf countries have raised the level of their strategic ambitions. In various cases, countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) flexed their diplomatic muscles—Qatar and Saudi Arabia being at the forefront on the Syrian file—and demonstrated military resolve—via the interventions in Bahrain (2011), Libya (2011), and Yemen (2015). With traditional Arab powers like Egypt coping with post-revolution internal troubles, Gulf kingdoms seemed now to be the major players in the arena of the Arab League. This shift in Arab geopolitics led observers to refer to this era as the so-called Gulf moment.

As a result, the new assertiveness from Gulf countries in the international arena stirred a discussion on the prospects for stronger military cooperation at the level of the GCC itself. For a long time, collective defense was a distant prospect in the Peninsula. The modest size of local armed forces, the traditional reliance on the three major Western powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) and occasional disagreements among Gulf countries concerning their strategic priorities all concurred to postpone progress in the field of joint military cooperation.

Additionally, the 2017 political crisis between Qatar and three of the GCC members (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) obviously reminds us the need for a cautious evaluation of the prospects of collective security in the Gulf. But rather than detailing the numerous caveats that still exist concerning the Gulf regional security system, this monograph puts the alliance politics aside and looks at the security environment and the operational requirements for the GCC. In other words, it aims to discuss

the practical steps required to turn the Council into an effective collective defense organization. By no means does this approach dismiss the politics behind the making of the GCC. Only the resolution of local disputes can bring about the needed momentum for regional cooperation, but the political dimension too frequently prevents observers to discuss the concrete feasibility of the project.

Against that backdrop, the monograph starts by looking at the GCC as a regional organization. It details its origins, underlines the role played by the security environment in shaping the GCC agenda, and assesses its main achievements so far in the military field. The second part provides a detailed account of the contemporary security challenges that call for enhanced military cooperation: the increasing demands for GCC expeditionary capabilities in light of regional crisis such as Yemen; the maritime security in the Gulf in the context of Iranian assertiveness on the sea; and the ballistic arms race led by the same Iran. Following this appraisal of the contemporary security environment, the document looks at some of the most significant projects within the GCC to enhance its military cooperation: the building of a joint command; the emphasis on joint naval activities; and the making of a regional missile defense coordination structure. It also identifies some of the long-term needs for the national armed forces to fulfill these objectives: the need to strengthen education and training programs in the Peninsula and to foster a multilateral culture among Gulf militaries. Finally, it reflects on the relations with Western allies in that perspective. In particular, it explains how initiatives such as the U.S.-Gulf Strategic Forum and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Istanbul Cooperation Initiative could prove instrumental to support GCC's collective defense project.

# TOWARD A NATO OF THE GULF? THE CHALLENGES OF COLLECTIVE DEFENSE WITHIN THE GCC

## INTRODUCTION

Since the Arab revolutions started in early 2011, the Gulf countries have raised the level of their strategic ambitions. In various cases, countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) flexed their diplomatic muscles, Qatar and Saudi Arabia being at the forefront on the Syrian file, and demonstrated military resolve via interventions in Bahrain (2011), Libya (2011), and Yemen (2015). With traditional Arab powers like Egypt coping with post-revolution internal troubles, Gulf kingdoms seemed now to be the major players in the arena of the Arab League. This shift in Arab geopolitics led observers to refer to this era as the so-called Gulf moment. In a recent monograph from the U.S. Army War College, Dr. Florence Gaub from the European Institute for Security Studies argued that:

the implosion of some, previously strong, regional actors (such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt) has given way to other players—all of which are now located in the Gulf. In terms of regional relations, the Arab world has therefore entered a Gulf moment, and is likely to remain in it for the time being.<sup>1</sup>

The expression “Gulf moment” was first coined by the Emirati scholar Abdulkhaleq Abdulla before the upheavals of 2011. In a research paper written for the London School of Economics, Abdulla stated:

This is the Arab Gulf moment in contemporary Arab history. The six mostly small but oil-rich states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman and the United

Arab Emirates (the Arab Gulf states or AGS) are taking the lead, influencing events, assuming greater financial responsibilities, projecting socioeconomic confidence, and becoming increasingly conscious of their newly acquired status as a regional power that far transcends the rest of the Arab countries.<sup>2</sup>

The statement, coming from an eminent Gulf scholar, revealed the new confident mind-set in the Peninsula. In several other publications after the revolutions occurred in Tunisia and Egypt, Abdulla reiterated his message.<sup>3</sup> However, what the Emirati researcher did not anticipate with his concept was if and how this moment would progressively lead to a more cohesive security structure at the regional level. As a matter of fact, the new assertiveness from Gulf countries in the international arena stirred a discussion on the prospects for stronger military cooperation at the level of the GCC itself.

For many years, collective defense was a distant prospect in the Peninsula. The modest size of local armed forces, the traditional reliance on the three major Western powers (the United States, the United Kingdom [UK], and France) and occasional disagreements among Gulf countries concerning their strategic priorities all concurred to postpone progress in the field of joint military cooperation.

For the last 3 decades, each year GCC summits would commit the stakeholders to the building of a stronger regional defense organization, but it usually remained in the background, as economic initiatives were deemed more effective and less politically sensitive. The difficulties experienced by the GCC were nothing exceptional, as they are a reminder of the long struggle within the European Union to build a strong military component.



Our research question finds its origins in the latest developments in Gulf security and the way these events could lead the GCC to become a new actor of collective defense. In December 2012, the 35th GCC summit in Doha, Qatar, evidenced this trend with the announced creation of a joint naval force and a common counter-terrorist organization. This followed earlier rumors that a joint Gulf command also would be established. Furthermore, amid the latest Saudi-led operation in Yemen against Houthi rebels in March 2015, the idea of an “Arab North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)” resurfaced in policy circles. Approximately at the same time, Arab League Secretary General Nabil Al Arabi called for a unified multinational Arab fighting force, unearthing the distant memories of the defunct Arab Deterrent Force that was deployed in Lebanon in 1976.<sup>4</sup>

Today, the idea of a multinational Arab force mostly gained traction in the Gulf, a region that remains to this day the most integrated one within the Arab World (compared to the quasi-absence of cooperation in the Maghreb and the Middle East).<sup>5</sup> However, the road toward an Arab, or to be more accurate, a Gulf, NATO is full of political and operational uncertainties. The 2017 political crisis between Qatar and three of the GCC members (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) obviously reminds us of the need for a cautious evaluation of the prospects of collective security in the Gulf. Rather than detailing the numerous caveats that still exist concerning the Gulf regional security system, this monograph puts the alliance politics aside and looks at the security environment and the operational requirements for the GCC. In other words, it aims to discuss the practical steps required to turn the Council into an effective collective defense organization. By no means does this approach dismiss

the politics behind the making of the GCC—only the resolution of local disputes can bring about the needed momentum for regional cooperation—but the political dimension too frequently prevents observers to discuss the concrete feasibility of the project.

Our reference to measure the achievements in the Gulf will be NATO, as the organization remains today the most integrated military structure for regional security. NATO is by no means a perfect organization, it experiences many shortcomings such as regular strategic disagreements among its 28 members; a command structure still heavily based on a Cold War model; and an imbalance between American and European capabilities. Nevertheless, these limitations are also the very reason why the NATO analogy is worth testing. Because the Atlantic Alliance is not an ideal institution, it provides a realistic assessment on the making of a collective defense system.

Moreover, the purpose of this monograph is not to recommend a mere transposition of a NATO model into the Gulf context. Not only would this idea deny fundamental cultural differences, but also there are many objective parameters that limit the values of the analogy. These include the number of country members and the size of the territories covered by the organization; the nature of threats and challenges facing the actors; the general political sensitivity among neighbors regarding regional cooperation; and, finally, the level of readiness of national armed forces. Despite these forewarnings, some aspects of NATO structure can be worth exploring for the GCC: the making of its joint command, its training and education programs, and overall the Alliance's experience in building a strong multilateral culture among its members' armed forces.

Based on these elements, this monograph is divided into four main sections. The first section starts by looking at the GCC as a regional organization. We retrace its origins, underline the role played by the security environment in shaping the GCC agenda, and describe its main achievements so far in the military field. The second section provides a detailed account of the contemporary security challenges that call for enhanced military cooperation: the increasing demands for GCC expeditionary capabilities in light of regional crisis such as Yemen; the maritime security in the Gulf in the context of Iranian assertiveness on the sea; and the ballistic arms race led by the same Iran. Following this appraisal of the contemporary security environment, we look at some of the most significant projects within the GCC to enhance its military cooperation: the building of a joint command; the emphasis on joint naval activities; and the making of a regional missile defense coordination structure. We also identify some of the long-term needs for the national armed forces to fulfil these objectives: the need to strengthen education and training programs in the Peninsula and to foster a multilateral culture among Gulf militaries. Finally, the fourth part of the monograph considers the relations with Western allies in that perspective. In particular, we argue how initiatives such as the U.S.-Gulf Strategic Forum and NATO's Istanbul Cooperation Initiative could prove instrumental to support GCC's collective defense project.

## **DEFINING THE GULF SECURITY SYSTEM**

To discuss the topic of military cooperation in the Gulf, we first need to characterize its regional security system. The literature on the subject is abundant. Back in 1998, Emirati political scientist Abdulkhaleq

Abdulla argued that the Gulf constituted a coherent regional system (*nizaam iqlimi*).<sup>6</sup> This view has been challenged by other scholars, such as Michael Barnett and Gregory Gause III, who argued that a system implied regulating processes and a form of cohesion that do not yet exist in the Gulf. They pointed out the various territorial disputes, the power plays, and the ideological differences as obstacles to the emergence of such security system. For these researchers, the Gulf should rather be described as a “security complex,” in the sense given to this expression by British scholar Barry Buzan:

a security complex is a set of units whose major processes of securitisation, desecuritisation, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot be reasonably analysed or resolved apart from one another. The central idea remains that substantial parts of the securitisation and desecuritisation processes in the international system will manifest themselves in regional clusters.<sup>7</sup>

In the view of Gause and Barnett, there is no institutionalized regional security system with identifiable political mechanisms to mitigate a potential crisis, but all the stakeholders share an understanding of threats, challenges, and alliance distribution. More precisely, the Gulf security complex would center on the Saudi-Iranian strategic competition, which defines all subsequent policy options. In many ways, the “Iranian threat” is driving the security policies of the kingdoms of the GCC, so that it can be characterized as a matrix through which all the troubles in the Gulf (discontent in Bahrain and insurgency in Yemen) are analyzed and framed.<sup>8</sup> Although this idea is revealing, it downplays the distinct policy conducted at least by one of the GCC members, Oman, which has traditionally maintained closer diplomatic relations with Iran.<sup>9</sup> Still, think tanks

and media outlets frequently refer to this competition as a new cold war according to which the “two main actors are not confronting each other militarily; rather, their contest for influence plays out in the domestic political systems of the region’s weak states.”<sup>10</sup> This metaphor led observers to portray the GCC as the new NATO of this cold war.

However, we believe that the values of a NATO analogy have less to do with the geopolitics than with the lessons regarding regional integration in the military field. Labeling the GCC as a Gulf NATO would run the risk of dismissing its existing structure and its development over the last 3 decades. This is why to understand the values and limitations of a NATO analogy in the Gulf, one needs to look carefully at the existing regional architecture, in particular the history of the GCC.

On May 25, 1981, six Arab states (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) gathered in Abu Dhabi to build the GCC. The GCC was born in a time of war in the region: in September 1980, Saddam Hussein launched an attack on Iran that would lead to a bloody 8-year war. Iran had only ended its revolution against the Shah to put into place a new Islamic regime with a messianic agenda. In the Levant, the Lebanese civil war was escalating with the unravelling of the remnants of Lebanon’s state and the strengthening of sectarian militias—of which Iran would soon create and support its own, the Hezbollah. As the pan-Arab ideology declined, Islamist extremist organizations also were becoming a major threat to Arab states, a phenomenon Saudi Arabia witnessed with the siege of the Grand Mosque in Mecca in 1979.<sup>11</sup>

The original agreement for the GCC did not mention these regional developments but underlined the “special relations, common characteristics, and

similar regimes” of its members, adding the “belief in a common destiny and unity of objectives.”<sup>12</sup> Subsequently, three main bodies were established. The Supreme Council gathers the heads of state of member countries with its presidency held on a rotational basis. It meets twice a year for normal sessions. The Ministerial Council composed of the foreign ministers prepares the meetings for the Supreme Council and meets every 2 months. Finally, the permanent structure of the GCC is its Secretariat General, with its headquarters in Riyadh.

Although the 1981 Charter mentioned various fields covered by GCC regulations (e.g., economic affairs, customs, education, and tourism), defense was not included. Interestingly, the 1981 Charter did not delve into the details of security cooperation. Compared to the NATO Treaty, the GCC Charter describes much more the functioning of the organization but tells us nothing about the strategic environment, except a brief mention to the Arab League. For instance, there is no article that would be similar to the famous Article 5 of NATO that epitomizes collective defense.<sup>13</sup>

However, the international security environment was discussed explicitly by Gulf leaders in their declarations during the founding summit in the United Arab Emirates capital. In addition to their refusal of any foreign interference in the region, the heads of state expressed their desire to end the Iran-Iraq war, although they refrained from suggesting any end-state desired.<sup>14</sup> Apart from these statements, the message conveyed in 1981 was that the creation of the GCC was more about building a common economic area than about establishing a military alliance. In that perspective, it shared more with the European Union project that looked at security only as a means to ensure prosperity than with NATO that was perceived as the primary agent

of collective defense for the North-American European zone. For instance, a project for a monetary union to create a single currency was launched, although it is still struggling today with political sensitivities. All of these go against the idea of simply making the GCC a military alliance comparable to NATO.

Security and defense affairs progressively, though cautiously, appeared on the agenda of GCC summits. For instance, in 1987, the Riyadh Summit approved a common “comprehensive security strategy”<sup>15</sup> but it was an initiative led by Interior Ministers.<sup>16</sup> The 1987 Summit also endorsed the recommendations by GCC defense ministers on military cooperation. At that time, one of the most significant items on the agenda was Egyptian contribution to GCC military development. There were exchanges regarding an Egyptian involvement in the building of a joint Gulf arms industry, and Cairo also offered to deploy 15,000 troops to a joint Arab force to protect Gulf States in the context of the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>17</sup>

Heavily influenced by the Gulf war, in 1991, the annual summit increased the military rapprochement through joint military exercises and the creation of a GCC force—soon to be named the Peninsula Shield.<sup>18</sup> Integration of national air defenses was discussed for the first time at the Riyadh Summit in 1993. Again, a new step was reached in 2000 with the joint defense agreement signed at the Manama Summit.<sup>19</sup>

Over the years, many specialized committees within the structure of the GCC dealt with security matters: strategic planning, counterterrorism cooperation, drug control, civil defense, and cooperation against nuclear and radioactive risks. As for any international organization, the inflation of new bureaucratic units meant more demands for interagency exchange and coordination.

Although these efforts were mostly limited and could not be used to depict the GCC as a military alliance, this view gained traction among pundits in the West that frequently portrayed the Council as a strategic united bloc against Iran and Iraq. For instance, Harvard professor Stephen Walt portrayed the GCC as an organization “intended to limit potential pressure from both Iran and the Soviet Union.”<sup>20</sup> Walt’s depiction is at odds with the reality of the GCC as a very modest military organization.<sup>21</sup> King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia famously declared at the GCC summit of 2001:

We are not ashamed to say that we have not been able to achieve the objectives we sought when we set up the Gulf Cooperation Council 20 years ago . . . We have not yet set up a unified military force that deters enemies and supports friends.<sup>22</sup>

The statement from King Abdullah emphasized the long difficulties GCC countries faced in order to come together regarding to the objective of collective defense. From the outset, there was a strategic dimension to the GCC project, but several factors concurred to restrain it: the numerous wars in the region, the reliance on the United States as an external provider of security to the region, and national differences over the type of multilateral framework under which the Council should operate. Finally, as in Europe and elsewhere, Gulf leaders feared for the loss of their own sovereignty that a stronger GCC would bring.

Furthermore, the unequal level of readiness and interoperability of GCC forces is acknowledged by political leaders as well as by military representatives



from the region, but it has to be considered in a long-term perspective. For the most part, the contemporary forces of Gulf countries were built after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The Gulf War led to two main trends: a reinforcement of bilateral military cooperation with Western allies (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) and a pause regarding collective regional initiatives. It is worth remembering that back in the 1990s, GCC members still argued over territorial disputes: in 1992, tensions at the border between Saudi Arabia and Qatar led to the death of a Saudi sheikh and two Qatari soldiers. Qatar was also involved in a dispute with Bahrain regarding the sovereignty of the Hawar Islands, and in 1993, Oman expressed its disagreement over the Saudi-United Arab Emirates border agreement, arguing that it was covering parts of the Omani territory.

These two trends—reinforcing ties with Western allies and building modern national forces—barely left room for a regional framework. Over time, this generated a fair amount of skepticism among those who monitored Gulf security developments and witnessed repeated attempts to reenergize the GCC collective defense component.<sup>23</sup> Therefore, caution and realism should prevail regarding the feasibility of a “Gulf NATO.” This does not mean dismissing the current momentum, but looking at it through its historical perspective and identifying the real novelty with the ongoing developments.

## **THE EVOLVING SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GULF**

In theory, collective defense is an arrangement committing the members to protect each other. It posits that the security of one is the concern of all, and

therefore, the community seeks a collective response to the threats. This implies that countries consider these threats or challenges are commonly perceived and faced by the other members. In that context, we present three major challenges that affect the GCC as a whole. First, we look at the internal instability affecting neighboring countries (in particular Yemen), and how this led the GCC states to bolster their military power to either contain or resolve the crises. Additionally, the steady build-up of Iranian naval capabilities, combined with the assertiveness of the Revolutionary Guard, create a dangerous maritime environment in the Gulf. Finally, the missile arsenal assembled by Tehran puts the major urban centers of the GCC under the threat of a ballistic attack.

### **The Demands of Regional Interventions**

Although a few years ago Gulf armed forces were described as mere symbols of national power rather than as active and ready militaries, regional interventions over the last years dramatically changed this assumption. In spring 2011, Qatari and Emirati forces joined NATO in Operation UNIFIED PROTECTOR in Libya to protect civilians from attacks by the Gadhafi regime.<sup>24</sup> Meanwhile, starting in 2014, air forces from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates conducted strikes in Syria and Iraq as part of the U.S.-led coalition to counter the Islamic State, although this contribution has been statistically modest.<sup>25</sup> The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait also have allowed coalition members (the United States, France, the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and Italy) to deploy their air assets on their military bases to launch strikes against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

The frequency and the format of these Gulf interventions were a major change compared to the previous deployments.<sup>26</sup> It evidenced a new sense of common security interests and willingness to conduct joint operations. Then, in March 2015, a new step was reached when Saudi Arabia decided to build an international coalition to restore the rule of Yemeni President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi after his government had been overthrown by a competing alliance comprised of the Houthi insurgents and loyalists of former president Saleh. The Saudi-led intervention in Yemen—although not a GCC intervention per se—was the first of its type regarding its mandate and the means assembled to conduct the operations.

Although the war started mostly as an air campaign, its scale increased dramatically to include ground forces. In southern Yemen, a complex amphibious operation was necessary to retake cities such as Aden. By the end of 2015, the three biggest contributors to the intervention were Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Although the operation was commanded by the Saudi leadership, the United Arab Emirates provided roughly two-thirds of the personnel (4,000) including 1 brigade, special forces units, and 2 to 3 armored battlegroups. Apart from Saudi and Emirati capabilities, the equipment of the coalition remained rather limited, and the participation of a country like Kuwait has been mostly political.<sup>27</sup>

The lessons from these recent developments are several fold. First, the Yemen crisis demonstrated that GCC countries progressively acquired the ability to intervene on their own in regional crisis. The political decision was taken quickly and the build-up of the coalition likewise.<sup>28</sup> This constitutes a positive step that also demands them to sustain such capacity.

In the current security environment, GCC armed forces are more likely to be engaged in local low-intensity conflicts occurring in their direct vicinity than in a major regional war. As of today, the biggest risk for the stability of the Peninsula comes from the security vacuum in its neighboring countries, in particular Yemen and Iraq. In both cases, the collapse of state authority engendered internal strife and opened a window to private actors such as militias and terrorist organizations. Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State benefited from this void to plan operations in and from these countries. Moreover, the weakness of central governments also enabled Iran to meddle into domestic politics, supporting at different levels its local partners (the Houthis in Yemen and the Iraqi governments of Nouri al-Maliki and Haidar al-Abadi).

GCC countries logically are concerned about the potential spillover effects of these crises. For instance, in Kuwait, policymakers still have vivid memories of Saddam Hussein's invasion in 1990 and explicitly rank Iraq as their top security priority.<sup>29</sup> Usually now forgotten in the United States, the 1990 invasion remains the central driver of Kuwaiti security strategy for the current generation of decision makers in the policy and military spheres.

However, given the geography of the area, Saudi Arabia is the most concerned. The kingdom constitutes roughly 80 percent of the Peninsula and shares borders with seven countries. Not only does the kingdom eye the crisis in Iraq and Yemen, but also it carefully observes the tremendous pressures the Syrian war has put on its Jordanian ally. Given its coastline on the Red Sea, Riyadh has also a critical interest to the stability in Egypt and Sudan. This explains the strong support it provided to the regime of Marshall Al Sisi since 2013,

injecting at least \$12 billion into the Egyptian government according to *The New York Times*.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the other GCC members, their small size and population generally make them vulnerable to regional shocks. As a result, the GCC leaders have today the choice between two approaches: containment and crisis management. Both options call for significant resources in terms of military personnel and financial means. For instance, it is acknowledged by Gulf decision makers that the eventual resolution to the war in Yemen will demand some form of nation-building: training the Yemeni military, restoring the central authority of government, and securing the borders against illicit trafficking.<sup>31</sup>

This new regional agenda implies for the GCC to build and sustain armed forces that would not only be required to secure their own territory, but be able to deploy in distant theaters. It is a challenge European forces faced after the end of the Cold War, when most of them had to shift from a focus on territorial defense to expeditionary missions.<sup>32</sup> It requires critical capabilities to project power far away. Moreover, the GCC as a whole will have to discuss and select the scenarios driving its force structure: should its militaries be able to engage into one or two simultaneous small conflicts? Should they keep resources for a third contingency? These are delicate choices that can only be decided through a multilateral process.

## **The Issue of Maritime Security**

Maritime security has always been a major concern in the Gulf. Back in the era of the British Empire, London allied with the leaders of the Trucial States to ensure stability in the area so as not to disrupt its sea-lane to the British Raj. In the 20th century, the Gulf became one of the most critical sea passages for world

economy, first with the pearl trade and then with the oil revolution, in the following decades. Today, a good share of the international crude oil and liquefied fuels movements depend on transport through two choke-points in the area: Bab el Mandab, located between Somalia and Yemen; and the Strait of Hormuz, between Oman and Iran.

In the confined waters of the Strait of Hormuz, the probability of incidents is high, taking into account the number of vessels that go through it.<sup>33</sup> In recent years, Iran has shown increased boldness in the area. For instance, in January 2008, Iranian boats approached three U.S. Navy ships in the Strait, threatening to explode the American vessels. The U.S. forces were on the verge of firing on the Iranian boats when those boats eventually moved away. At that time, a Pentagon official said, "It is the most serious provocation of this sort that we've seen yet, the Iranian boats turned away literally at the very moment that U.S. forces were preparing to open fire."<sup>34</sup> The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) subsequently denied the U.S. version of the events, claiming that the Iranian boats were conducting "an ordinary identification."<sup>35</sup>

The number of such incidents only increased in recent years. In December 2015, Iran fired a rocket near the U.S. aircraft carrier, *USS Harry Truman*. A month later, the IRGC captured 10 American sailors when their boats accidentally approached the waters near Farsi Island. In July 2016, Iran's ships moved close to the *USS New Orleans* while the Commander of Central Command, General Joseph Votel, was aboard. All these cases show the assertiveness of Iran in the maritime domain and the risk of miscalculation that emerges from the repetition of these skirmishes.

In terms of capabilities, the Iranian Navy remains poorly equipped, most of its ships were purchased

during the Shah's era in the 1970s.<sup>36</sup> Confrontation between the U.S. Navy and the Iranian Navy, as well as the Pasdarans' own navy, is certainly conceivable, and that possibility should not be dismissed in terms of contingencies.<sup>37</sup> As Tim Ripley argued, a naval confrontation between Iran and the United States would likely take the form of "a protracted conflict involving harassing attacks against U.S. forces and international maritime trade."<sup>38</sup>

Closing the Strait would deny the global economy of approximately 25 percent of oil supplies, causing a major disruption of the markets. This is the reason why a country like the United Arab Emirates opened a new pipeline that runs from Habshan to the port of Fujairah on the Gulf of Oman to avoid shipping its barrels of crude oil through the Strait.

Generally, experts have been cautious about the prospects of escalation in the area and repeatedly pointed out that Iranian forces had not the ability to enforce such closure for more than a few days.<sup>39</sup> Scenarios based on the frequent threat from Tehran to close the Strait of Hormuz are unlikely to occur.<sup>40</sup> In an article for *International Security*, Caitlin Talmadge raised an important issue:

The question is whether Iran can harass shipping enough to prompt U.S. intervention in defense of the sea-lanes. Given that the United States has staked its credibility on promises to do just that, this is a threshold that Iran's significant and growing littoral warfare capabilities can cross, even with fairly conservative assumptions about Iranian capabilities.<sup>41</sup>

Talmadge's analysis provides a detailed account of the U.S.-Iranian standoff in the Gulf, but it does not really look at the capabilities of local actors, and in particular, how this could develop in the case of a confrontation, excluding—at least in the first phase—U.S.

forces. If the Iranian conventional forces do not constitute a strong competitor to the forces of GCC navies, in particular Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, then the IRGC has designed an asymmetrical strategy whose maritime component is rather significant. The naval forces of the IRGC include more than 6,000 mines, 65 missile-armed combat warships, as well as anti-ship missiles, Kilo class submarines, and midget submarines that are superior to the capabilities of the GCC.<sup>42</sup> Altogether, these capabilities support an Iranian strategy that does not aim to conquer territories but to deter and, if needed, deny the access to its areas of influence.

In light of this Iranian anti-access strategy, it is worth remembering that, for the last 4 decades, Iran and the United Arab Emirates have been engaged in a major territorial dispute over the three islands taken over by the Shah in 1971: Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. In spite of previous international commitments, the Shah had justified the occupation by claiming they belonged to Iran from ancient times until the early 20th century. They repeatedly called for the United Nations (UN) to reach a diplomatic settlement, but these efforts have all stumbled. Moreover, the Iranian regime not only ignored the Emirati demands, but also proceeded to use the islands for military purposes, organizing military exercises, and storing arsenals. In Abu Musa, the IRGC built an airport and upgraded the port facilities. In addition to its troops, it deployed anti-aircraft and anti-ship missiles. This Iranian footprint on the three islands is supported by the numerous bases built on its shores, in particular Bandar Abbas and Bandar Lengeh. In 2011-2012, as tensions rose in the GCC-Iran relations, President Ahmadinejad visited Abu Musa, and several officials conveyed the message that Iranian forces were ready to use force to defend its hold



on these islands. This triggered a collective statement from the GCC supporting the United Arab Emirates in its claim over the territories. Because there is no end in sight for this dispute over the three islands, and as Iran gets more assertive in the maritime domain through its anti-access strategy, GCC armed forces will have to include in their planning processes the risk of miscalculation and small naval clashes that could escalate by accident.

### **The Ballistic Threat**

Since the beginning of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been developing an indigenous missile production capability that supports its naval strategy of anti-access. For instance, the country is reported to have launched more than 600 ballistic missiles during its war with Iraq in the 1980s.<sup>43</sup> Originally, the purpose of its program was not Iranian ambitions vis-à-vis the GCC, but its concerns regarding the Iraqi arsenal. Throughout the 1980s, Saddam Hussein's regime had become the first ballistic power in the region. In July 1990, the CIA wrote in a memo, "Iraq has the most aggressive and advanced ballistic missile development program in the Arab World."<sup>44</sup> Between February 29 and April 20, 1988, Iraq launched 190 Al Hussein missiles on Iranian cities. Overall, Iraqi missiles killed more than 2,000 Iranians and injured 6,000.<sup>45</sup> The Iraqi ballistic strategy even made the difference and forced the Ayatollah Khomeini to concede the end of the war. In other words, Saddam Hussein used Scud missiles, striking Tehran as new means to compel surrender. Revealingly, in 1984, the Iraqi leader was explaining to his Air Force officers:

Sometimes what you get out of a weapon is when you keep saying, 'I will bomb you' [and] it is actually better than bombing him. It is possible that when you bomb him the material effect will be 40 percent, but if you stick it up to his face the material and the spiritual effect will be 60 percent, so why hit him? Keep getting 60 percent!<sup>46</sup>

The following decade saw a major shift in the regional ballistic arms race. With the international embargo ensuing from the Gulf War, the Iraqi arsenal declined and allowed Iran to become the rising challenger in that field. The Iranians benefited from the same proliferation network as the Iraqis had: North Korea, China, and Russia. Generally, opacity surrounds the state of Iran's current arsenal. It is said to include hundreds of short-range missiles such as the Shahab-1 and Shahab-2.<sup>47</sup> There is contradicting information regarding another short-range ballistic missile (SRBM), the Quiam, which allegedly was only tested once in August 2010. Sources assess "the Quiam to be based on the Shahab-2, with a range between 500 and 1,000 kilometers (km)."<sup>48</sup> The Fateh-110 is another SRBM whose development started in the mid-1990s. Although Iranians claimed its range to go up to 300 km, independent experts argue that it is likely nearer 200-250 km.<sup>49</sup> Iranian MRBM include the Ghadr-1, a variant of the Shahab-3. The Sejil, a solid-fueled ground-mobile ballistic missile, was tested successfully in November 2008. Able to reach a target up to 2,200 km, the Sejil has a payload capacity that could accommodate a nuclear warhead. Iran has also developed numerous rockets such as the Fajr, the Zelzal, and the Fateh-110.<sup>50</sup> Finally, starting in the late 1990s, the U.S. intelligence community assessed that Iran was on the path to acquiring intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) by 2015.<sup>51</sup> Yet, this date was cautiously revised in recent years by U.S. analysts as the progress

of the program depends on a certain level of foreign assistance, in particular from North Korea.

In terms of strategy, the Iranians appeared to learn the lesson from the so-called “war of the cities,” that missiles can be effective means of coercion. As the search for parity at the conventional level between Iran and the two major GCC armed forces—Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—became unsustainable for Tehran, its leadership invested its resources in asymmetric capabilities. In that perspective, the Iranian ballistic arsenal allows it to circumvent the deficiencies of its air force. It also supports its maritime strategy of occasional harassment and access-denial.<sup>52</sup> Like the risk of naval escalation, the prospect of Iran launching missiles, loading them on its ships close to the maritime space of GCC countries, or displaying them on the United Arab Emirates occupied islands is of concern for the whole region. A scenario of Iran ostentatiously stationing long-range missiles on Abu Musa is a daunting one that could turn into a kind of “local Cuban missile crisis,” with the United States being forced to intervene to prevent escalation, while reassuring its Arab partners. As we explain in the next section, one of the solutions to address this threat can be found in the increased regional cooperation in the field of missile defense.

All in all, these three major challenges—security vacuums, maritime instability, and missile proliferation—are likely to grow in coming years, and they will affect the security interests of the GCC as a whole. In the next section, we look at how the on-going strengthening of collective defense in the Peninsula through specific projects could address these threats.

## **THE OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS FOR A GULF NATO**

In the following pages, we analyze four recent and critical projects that could both address the previous threats identified and enhance the regional security architecture in the Peninsula: the making of a GCC united military command; the creation of a common naval group; the establishment of a missile defense coordination cell; and the establishment of a GCC defense college.

### **The Significance of a Robust United Military Command**

The project of a Gulf joint military command has probably been the most discussed project regarding cooperation in the region. Although its existence is not yet mature, the project itself surfaced almost 2 decades ago. The first step toward a collective approach was reached in Manama, Bahrain, in December 2000 during a GCC summit where the Gulf Security Agreement was signed. The document indicated the willingness of the GCC to go from consultation and cooperation on defense to a genuine collective defense posture. It strengthened the central function of the GCC Defense Council's High Military Committee and the coordinating role of the Adjunct Secretary General for Military Affairs. The agreement paved the way to the recent reinforcement of the Peninsula Shield in limited-scale crisis.<sup>53</sup>

Still, the idea of a united military command was expressed officially at the 33rd GCC summit in December 2012. The rationale for such a structure was to centralize the efforts of the GCC in military affairs. By that time, numerous committees were dealing with

different files: military training, procurement, technology, and the Peninsula Shield. This had generated overlapping and loose supervision; therefore, a united military command was seen as the logical step to reinforce the military cohesion of the GCC.<sup>54</sup> Foreign Minister of Bahrain Sheikh Khalid Bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa clarified the ambitions:

We want to create a central command that coordinates between all sub-commands and makes them work under one umbrella. But, the new structure [the Unified Military Command] won't replace the Peninsula Shield forces.<sup>55</sup>

A year later, the project again was mentioned in the official documents of the 34th Summit held in Kuwait City, although only a few details were conveyed to the media. The new command would gather about 100,000 men, half of whom were sent by Saudi Arabia.<sup>56</sup> It would oversee air, land, and maritime forces of the GCC militaries.

Based on the information available, this GCC united military command might look similar to NATO's Allied Command for Operations (ACO) located in the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers in Mons, Belgium. ACO is responsible for the planning and execution of NATO military operations and operates at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels. Although its permanent structure was much bigger during the Cold War, the new format approved by NATO defense ministers in June 2011 is getting leaner. Noticeably, both the ACO and the Gulf projects acknowledge the prevailing role of the biggest defense contributors to the alliances: respectively the United States and Saudi Arabia. In the same way that the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe traditionally is held by a U.S. flag officer, Saudi Arabia plays a central role in the

united command. Not only does the country host the command, but also it provides by far the biggest share of its resources. Even though there has not been any official nomination yet, it is very likely that the commander would be a Saudi military representative.

Some of the major obstacles NATO structures faced would not be relevant in the Gulf context. For instance, within the military structures of the Atlantic Alliance, standardization has always been a challenge. NATO countries for a long time have organized their own procurement policies, their own force generation processes, and their own doctrines. There is not exactly one NATO military culture, but rather the aggregation of 28 different ones. This meant for the ACO that commanding an operation involving a dozen of different armed forces was a daunting task. Standardization within NATO has never been an easy endeavor because it challenges national prerogatives. Moreover, the fact that NATO standardization practically implies American standardization led some European countries eager to protect their national defense industries and their doctrinal traditions to impede such process.

Another problem of NATO allied commands relates to the language constraints. It could sound a mundane issue, but for many European allies, finding mid to high-ranking officers able to operate and to hold critical command responsibilities in English is not an easy task. This linguistic factor certainly played a role to hinder the building of the NATO command structure.

Within the GCC, these issues would not represent the same problems. First, the language constraint does not exist, as all members share Arabic. Second, the standardization process is likely to be less difficult. Most of the military platforms of GCC members are bought

from the United States and the United Kingdom or France and, therefore, could operate under similar processes. This also means that doctrines and military cultures could adapt more easily. Additionally, although there is a growing indigenous defense industry (in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia), it would not be affected by a standardization process the way European military companies (Airbus and Finmeccanica, among others) are within NATO.

### **The Importance of Maritime Coordination**

As the Kuwait City Summit of 2013 reaffirmed the creation of a united command, it also announced the foundation of a coordination center for maritime security, to be hosted by Bahrain. As mentioned earlier, the threats and challenges GCC countries face in the waters of the Gulf are demanding a collective response.

The choice of Bahrain is a sound one in terms of geography but also in terms of international cooperation. The kingdom already hosts the U.S. Fifth Fleet that is responsible for naval forces in the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Arabian Sea, and parts of the Indian Ocean. Given its size and its missions, the Fifth Fleet is a major hub not only for U.S. operations, but also for multilateral operations and exercises in the area. Moreover, the Royal Navy also is building its own naval base in Manama that will cover all British maritime activities in the area, a major move from London that reinforces the position of Bahrain as the hub for maritime cooperation both within the GCC and with Western allies.

Beyond the coordination center, in order to build a sustainable regional naval force, the GCC will need to address the same challenges NATO has been struggling with, that is, to allocate sufficient capabilities to

the national navies. There has sometimes been a gap between NATO initiatives and the resources that its members are able or willing to offer. Gulf navies are still nascent forces whose ability to project power is limited. Only the United Arab Emirates naval forces so far have been able to conduct complex operations as evidenced by their long deployment in Yemen, including amphibious landing in several cities in the south of the country between 2015 and 2016. Emirati maritime maneuvers in Yemen left American counterparts “surprised and impressed.”<sup>57</sup> The operation indicated a level of effectiveness that equaled one of the European navies, but (except for Saudi Arabia) this is not yet the case of the other Gulf navies.<sup>58</sup> For the other countries (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman), naval means are more limited, logically proportional to the small size of their overall militaries.

This imbalance between Gulf navies is not the central issue. The challenge for a collective naval force would be to identify the sufficient level of forces it needs to integrate in order to deter any aggression or, if a crisis erupts, to deploy means swiftly. This would also require defining an acceptable division of labor among Gulf navies.

Eventually, the solution to this equation depends on the scenarios of engagement selected by GCC leaders. Would a future naval coordination center monitor only low-intensity activities such as patrolling the sea against piracy, or would it progressively go as far as to become the maritime body in charge of any major crisis in the Gulf? A major question that is worth asking through that process is the place conferred to cooperation with Western allies: should local navies build their force structure, assuming allies would not intervene or would have left the area? This is the kind of security



dilemma Europeans have faced vis-à-vis the Americans for a long time. Frequently accused of free-riding, European governments have decreased their defense expenditures steadily as they faced a financial crisis since 2008. The fact that U.S. military commitment remained stable did not provide any incentive for Europeans to invest in their own forces. GCC leaders could face the very same dilemma. On one hand, planning with a U.S. naval presence is not likely to encourage countries with lesser means to invest more. On the other, planning without a U.S. naval presence assumes the Americans would not fulfil their commitment to its partners, something that remains in both cases—in Europe and in the Gulf—highly hypothetical (and contradicting current policies).

One way or another, the building of a strong GCC naval component will take time. It is a matter of decades, not just a few years. In all regions, procuring ships and deploying platforms with trained sailors are long endeavors.

### **A Regional Missile Defense Coordinating Cell**

Given the pace and scale of Iran's ballistic arsenal, it is no surprise that GCC countries have been eager to procure U.S. missile defense systems. As of today, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have been at the forefront of these purchases. In 2013, Abu Dhabi bought Patriot missile batteries as well as two Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) batteries. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia procured the biggest and the oldest missile defense capability. As a matter of fact, Riyadh started investing into this field following the Gulf War of 1990. The use of SRBMs and cruise missiles by Saddam Hussein against the country

was an obvious wake-up call for its leadership. Today, according to independent surveys, the Saudi kingdom has acquired and deployed various systems: Hawk surface-to-air missiles (MIM 23B I-Hawk and MIM J/K Hawk) and Patriot batteries, which include Pac-2 and Pac-3. As they were getting old, the Pac-3 batteries are currently going through a process of upgrading.<sup>59</sup> In recent years, there have been speculations that Saudi Arabia would go further into deploying its missile defense capabilities by purchasing Aegis destroyers and the THAAD system that the United Arab Emirates already bought.<sup>60</sup> In early 2015, a high-level representative from Lockheed Martin went public to announce that Saudi Arabia was going to order the THAAD system, but until today, this was not confirmed by an official statement from Riyadh.<sup>61</sup>

Regarding Qatar, the leadership in Doha also decided to acquire 10 Patriot batteries, which were part of a broader arms sale deal with the United States worth \$11 billion.<sup>62</sup> Finally, in June 2016, Raytheon announced that it would modernize Kuwait's Patriot systems under a \$523 million contract issued by the U.S. Army.<sup>63</sup>

While these sales evidence the strong interest from Gulf kingdoms to strengthen their defenses against Iranian ballistic means, they were national initiatives taken without consulting neighboring allies. For several years now, the U.S. Government strongly supported the idea of building a genuine GCC missile defense system that would ensure comprehensive coverage of the territories of the organization. Not only did it make sense at the military level, but also missile defense was identified as a means to foster the project of collective defense in the Peninsula. In December 2013, U.S. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel visited Gulf

capitals to announce a reinforcement of U.S. missile defense systems sold to GCC countries, adding that the Barack Obama administration aimed to do so “by working in a coordinated way with the GCC.”<sup>64</sup>

Noticeably, this U.S.-Gulf cooperation developed while the negotiations regarding the Iranian nuclear program were underway; therefore, missile defense clearly played a role of reassurance for the Gulf allies. The file progressively became a pillar of U.S.-GCC strategic dialogue. At the U.S.-Gulf Summit in May 2015, heads of state publicly committed to build a regional defense architecture. In early 2016, there were signs that Gulf States were soon to make a joint missile defense structure official. During an air force conference, on January 20, Reuters reported the words of Hamad Al Khalifah, commander of the Royal Bahraini Air Force, “we have started and hopefully it (the result) will be announced soon.”<sup>65</sup>

Although the specifics of a GCC joint missile defense architecture obviously are not open to the public, the challenges country members face are similar to those that have been at the core of NATO internal discussions—and sometimes disputes. A joint system implies joint ownership that challenges several aspects of the decision-making: the investments in capabilities, the sharing of intelligence data, and the chain of command.

First, a collective missile defense structure would need to specify the levels of burden sharing among its members regarding the allocated capabilities. The biggest specificity of the field of missile defense, compared to other arms domains, relates to the level of sophistication of these systems involving several platforms and combining numerous technologies. As a result, missile defense enterprises remain an expensive game.

Although most of the GCC members have bought some capabilities, only Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are deploying the most comprehensive systems. As in Europe, the imbalance between burden sharing is not inevitably going to block the whole project, but it has to be addressed. As NATO also faced an imbalance—which to a certain extent was much bigger between the United States and Europe than the one in the Gulf—the U.S. administration offered (to its European allies) to allocate its capabilities such as radars, interceptors, and Aegis destroyers, while the rest of the Atlantic Alliance would focus on the command and control system. The GCC solution likely is to be different, but the challenge is a similar one as it relates to the ability of allies to build a common system despite disparities regarding their own capabilities.

The second and third issues directly touch upon matters of national sovereignty. Intelligence sharing and political decision-making remain sensitive processes that in the case of a GCC missile defense would require a robust organization with clearly established and automated routines that would exclude long consultations for practical reasons. Inside NATO, there is a fear from some European members that, because the United States owns most of the capabilities and technologies, it would be the primary, if not the unique, decision maker. In the Gulf, if one imagines a scenario where Iran was to launch a missile on Saudi Arabia and radars in the United Arab Emirates and/or Qatar were to detect the launching, sharing the data with Saudi counterparts would have to be done in a few minutes, if not seconds. Likewise, if the GCC as a whole was to decide to retaliate by intercepting the missile, it could not do so by convening a meeting of heads of states but by specifying the chain reaction prior to the

crisis. It is not an easy task, as evidenced by the difficulties NATO has faced in that same domain for several years.

### **Building a Multilateral Culture through Military Education**

Another major challenge that GCC armed forces face in the build-up of a robust collective defense system relates to the multilateral culture such organization requires. Earlier we described the operational requirements to build a united command or coordination units in the field of missile defense and maritime security, but these new bodies will only become cohesive if the troops of the Gulf kingdoms become accustomed to the culture of multilateral work. In other words, technical interoperability also relies on cultural interoperability. This alliance culture is what generates bonds and a feeling of camaraderie among officers from different countries. It shapes the exchanges and allows for disagreements in order to reach a consensus on core issues.

It is not an easy and short process. The warfighting experience is an important driver of that culture. Regional interventions such as the one in Yemen are a first step toward this objective. Because of its scale and duration, an operation like the one of 2015-2016 forces officers to familiarize themselves with the distinct military cultures of allies and to increase their awareness on the subtleties of allied operations.

However, the warfighting experience is not the only instrument to shape a multilateral culture among armed forces: military education and training programs are equally important. The NATO experience provides an interesting lesson in that domain. The

builders of the Atlantic Alliance understood from the outset that building such a multilateral culture would be necessary to ensure the cohesion of its military structure. Creating commands and a headquarters to gather the military leaders was necessary but not sufficient. This is why as early as 1951, General Dwight Eisenhower identified military education as an instrument of building a NATO ethos. In a statement to the North Atlantic Council on April 25, 1951, Eisenhower declared, "it is highly desirable to establish in the near future a NATO Defense College for the training of individuals who will be needed to serve in key capacities in NATO Organizations."<sup>66</sup> This new education entity would not replace national war colleges that were already training their officers, but it would bring about the multinational culture that domestic institutions could not instill. By attending courses at the NATO Defense College—as well as at the NATO School created in 1975—officers from allied countries would meet, share views, disagree on some issues, but eventually learn to work together. In other words, education was not to be seen as a goal but as a means to foster the NATO culture.

Interestingly, military education has been the object of a renewed interest from Gulf leaders. Countries like the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Qatar, or Kuwait recently have created defense colleges whose objective is to prepare a new generation of officers to understand the impact of international affairs on their national security interests. Moreover, the decision in the 2015 GCC summit to build a GCC Defense College to be hosted by the United Arab Emirates reinforces the idea that common education programs could pave the way for a more cohesive military structure. One could rightfully argue that this project is nothing new as GCC chiefs of state had already envisioned a joint

Gulf Military College as early as February 1984.<sup>67</sup> Still, its ongoing development should be encouraged. From a practical point of view, initiatives like a GCC Defense College are much less complex to implement, they are by nature less politically sensitive than a missile defense coordination center or a united military command, but over time, they equally play a major role in the strengthening of the collective defense project.

### **Implications for U.S. Regional Policy**

In recent history, one of the most difficult U.S. challenges has been to find the right balance between reinforcing local initiatives in the Gulf, while reassuring its partners regarding its long-term commitment to the stability of the region. This meant pushing for a more effective regional security architecture without implying the United States was to decrease its engagement in the region. This policy mix of support to multilateral projects and reassurance measures—made at the bilateral level—sometimes has seemed contradictory, but the stability of the Peninsula is likely to depend on this equation.

The United States aims to enhance its regional policy not only via bilateral relations, but also at the multilateral level, in particular following the creation of the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum in 2012. This forum gathers all the political representatives of the GCC and the U.S. Government to exchange on major strategic issues such as counterterrorism, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and the Syrian civil war. The goal of this new initiative is clearly to foster the GCC's own collective dynamic. It also signals the American intention to “multilateralize” its policy toward the region to avoid the past competitive

bilateralism.<sup>68</sup> As of today, the most important areas of cooperation under the framework of this U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum have been missile defense and arms procurement but it may be worth considering expanding this current focus to military education. The GCC could benefit from U.S. know-how in this domain, through a closer cooperation with U.S. professional military education institutions.

Furthermore, we believe that an additional way to solve the equation of U.S.-Gulf relations is to use the role of NATO in a more efficient way in the region. Although NATO is a frequently used analogy for the GCC, the existence of a partnership between the Atlantic Alliance and Gulf countries is sometimes forgotten. In 2004, the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) was launched during the Alliance Summit hosted in the Turkish city. In the final Summit Declaration, the heads of state asserted that, in complementing the existing Mediterranean Dialog, the ICI was:

offered by NATO to interested countries in the region, starting with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to foster mutually beneficial bilateral relationships and thus enhance security and stability,

by focusing:

on practical cooperation where NATO can add value.<sup>69</sup>

The ICI was to become the partnership tool for NATO to engage with the GCC as a whole but Saudi Arabia and Oman, which account for approximately 70 percent of the Gulf countries' defense expenditures, declined to be part of the ICI. Both agreed to participate in some activities but refrained from institutionalizing their relations with NATO.



Another shortcoming relates to the traditional inclination toward bilateralism in the Peninsula: the ICI partners approached NATO's initiative the same way they approached their multiple national security arrangements and guarantees with Western powers. In both cases, the GCC countries sought close bilateral relations to pursue their own distinctive diplomatic goals. Furthermore, ICI partners sometimes are of two minds about their relations with NATO. Several officials from GCC countries met in the region and expressed their "ignorance about NATO's real objectives with the ICI," describing it as "a partnership without a cause." Abdulaziz Sager, Chairman of the Gulf Research Centre, was already underlining this tendency in 2006:

the initiative being put forward within the framework of NATO has been perceived in negative terms as being no more than a mechanism by which the West can continue to control the region. With the reputation of the United States in the Gulf deteriorating rapidly, NATO was perceived as a wolf in sheep's clothing or as a new package for Western policies of the past.<sup>70</sup>

Recognizing these pitfalls is a necessary process if one wants to improve NATO-Gulf relations. Given the current momentum for collective defense in the Peninsula, the NATO partnership more than ever is an asset to leverage. The Alliance's experience in the field of multinational military education and training could help the GCC build its own. The NATO School in Oberammergau, Germany, and the NATO Defense College in Rome, Italy, play primary roles to that purpose, but there are many other initiatives opened to partners such as the Defense Education Enhancement Program and ad-hoc training teams deployed by the

Allied Command for Transformation.<sup>71</sup> Focusing on military education and training is a realistic objective, given the vast disparities among the armed forces of partner countries in terms of expenditures, force structure, and military readiness. The value of NATO as a defense education and training provider is evidenced by the enduring interest of Middle East partners for the various activities (exercises and courses) offered by NATO structures.

NATO could also play a significant role in support of the GCC defense initiatives to share lessons learned in the establishment of a united command. The ICI could also be turned into a platform to cover common operational challenges such as maritime security and missile defense, which are very likely to shape the strategic agenda of both regional actors. In that perspective, the United States should consult with its transatlantic allies to reconsider the format of their partnership toward the Gulf. Such a new relation would decrease the U.S. burden and enhance the multilateral framework, while both reassuring local allies of Western solidarity and providing them support for their projects in the field of collective defense. Announced in early 2017, the building of the first NATO-ICI Regional Centre in the Emirate of Kuwait could pave the way for this new step in the development of the Gulf-NATO partnership. This new entity could grow as a unique forum in the region to discuss all security issues mentioned earlier at the multilateral level.<sup>72</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The issue of collective defense in the Gulf has evolved significantly over the recent years. As explained, there are numerous indicators that the

long-awaited regional security architecture for the Peninsula might emerge in the not so distant future. Of course, in light of the lessons of past initiatives and contemporary disputes, one should remain cautious when looking at these developments. Because of the evolving security challenges facing the Gulf partners, there is an urgent need to build a reliable framework to address these issues.

For the U.S. Government, the stability of the Gulf remains a major national security interest, and the key in the ongoing process will be to find a right posture vis-à-vis the GCC evolution. U.S. forces are unlikely to leave the area in the near future, but their role could evolve progressively from a fighting force to a supporting force for Gulf partners. Over the long term, this implies that the United States also would accept decreasing its own ability to shape regional dynamics. Although this generates a fair amount of criticisms in Washington, this is already the case regarding U.S. support to the coalition in Yemen and the sometimes-conflicted views between the United States and Saudi Arabia on the objectives of the campaign.

This new environment for defense diplomacy in the Gulf means a more complex environment to grasp. While the United States should monitor closely the evolution of GCC military initiatives, it should consult with NATO and include the Alliance in its Strategic Cooperation Forum in the region. Through this process, exchanges with the United Kingdom and France, two close European allies with significant presence in the Gulf, will also enable the U.S. Government to support the collective defense efforts in the region without sidelining any of the stakeholders. Eventually, this transition would lead to a new division of labor between Western and local forces, and therefore, it

is extremely important for all the parties involved to ensure the stability of the region all along this process.

## ENDNOTES

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The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognized by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area. Any such armed attack and all measures taken as a result thereof shall immediately be reported to the Security Council. Such measures shall be terminated when the Security Council has taken the measures necessary to restore and maintain international peace and security.

For a recent analysis of the strategic implications of NATO's article 5, see Bruno Tertrais, "Article 5 of the Washington Treaty: Its Origins, Meaning and Future," Research Paper, No. 130, Rome, Italy: NATO Defense College, April 2016.

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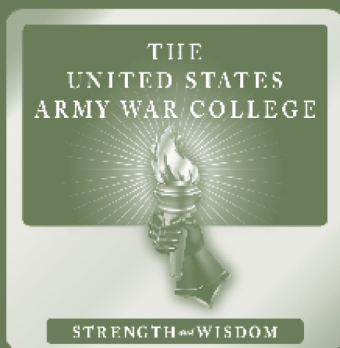
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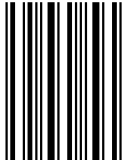


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