

The US Military Posture in the Gulf: Future Possibilities

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Since former President Jimmy Carter announced the establishment of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in the Middle East in 1980 – which later became Central Command (CENTCOM) in 1983, the United States has maintained a vigorous military posture in some countries of the Arab world. That and other ad hoc deployments in adjacent locales along the Mediterranean Sea-Indian Ocean expanse helped assure and protect American interests in that resource-rich area of the world. Today, a string of military bases and defense agreements and understandings continue to be important pillars undergirding American relations with the Arab world as the region experiences civil wars, terrorist threats, and institutional weaknesses.

As the Trump Administration seeks to devise its approach toward the Arab Middle East, it faces important considerations that will shape its decisions. The American military already deploys regular and special operations forces in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), floats a large number of naval vessels in the region and the wider strategic theater, supplies most advanced weapons to its allies and partners, and is on the lookout for Iranian challenges on land and at sea. But the chaos engulfing the administration's foreign policy and the paucity of knowledgeable and experienced personnel in the different agencies dealing with the Middle East threaten to negatively impact the American role in the security of the region.

With opportunity costs rising as instability in some Arab countries increases and aspiring powers seek to establish a firm presence in the Middle East, this Washington confusion cannot continue. To help in this regard, the United States would be wise to maintain its partnership with the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and to strengthen those areas in the relationship that are essential for its overall military posture in the region. It would also do well to plan with the GCC around a wide-ranging agenda to arrest instability and design a strategy for direct cooperation on fighting ISIL, resolving the Yemen crisis, and dealing with the Iranian challenge.

The American Military Status Quo with the GCC

The United States has operational bases and defense agreements with GCC states that undergird a long and strong relationship with the council. It maintains weapons deliveries to GCC militaries, offers training and logistics help, shares intelligence, and conducts joint military land and naval exercises and operations, among other facets of the relationship. After a relationship between the Obama Administration and the GCC which was less than optimal, the United States can now bolster what should be a robust presence that ensures its strategic interests, provides for regional stability, allays the concerns of allies and partners, and checks Iran's active and aggressive foreign policy.

As home to CENTCOM's naval arm, Bahrain hosts the United States' Fifth Fleet and some 8,000 military personnel. The kingdom is also a "major non-NATO ally" (MNNA), a designation that allows it to purchase certain kinds of arms and receive excess defense articles. The United States signed a Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with Bahrain in 1991 which gives it access to air bases and allows it to pre-position strategic materiel and equipment on Bahraini soil.

In Iraq, the United States is engaged in a battle against ISIL that involves the deployment of some 6,000 troops and their bases, equipment, and services. The United States also has a DCA with Kuwait since 1991 that allows for joint military exercises, training, arms sales, and the pre-positioning of strategic materiel. There also is a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the two countries that exempts American personnel from Kuwaiti law. Kuwait further hosts 13,500 US military personnel at four land bases and a naval facility and enjoys the MNNA status since 2004. The emirate has also served as the best land route for American forces into Iraq since the invasion of 2003.

While relying on a strong relationship with France for its weapons acquisitions until the late 1980s, Qatar, after the 1991 Gulf war to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, began to improve its military ties with the United States. In 1992 it, too, signed a DCA with the United States and now hosts about 10,000 troops at al-Udeid military base, which also serves as the forward headquarters of CENTCOM. The

United Arab Emirates also has a DCA with the United States, signed in 1994, but not a SOFA. It hosts about 5,000 American troops in a number of land bases and has a naval facility in Dubai that is capable of receiving an aircraft carrier.

As for Oman, which for historical reasons relied on the United Kingdom for military protection and weapons acquisitions, over the last few decades the United States has been able to improve military relations with the sultanate. In 1980, Washington signed a "facilities access agreement" with Muscat that allows the use of Omani facilities for military operations, such as those in Afghanistan since 2001 and in Iraq since 2003. Finally, while Saudi Arabia ended any overt American military presence on its soil after the Gulf war of 1990-1991, it reportedly hosts American drones used in attacks against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) bases in Yemen.

The United States is also the largest supplier of advanced weapons to the GCC states. Data from the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) indicate that between 2009 and 2016, the Gulf nations have alone received about \$198 billion worth of arms sales from the United States. Since then, additional requests worth \$2.8 billion were submitted by the agency for approval by the Department of State. American arms include modern advanced aircraft, armor, naval vessels, artillery, drone technology, defensive missile systems, ammunition, and small arms.

US troop deployments and military relations with the GCC countries, together with similar arrangements in Djibouti, Comoros, the Indian Ocean, Afghanistan, and Central Asian states, give the American military posture a firm footing across a vast region. Its traditional mission, from keeping peace on the high seas to fighting ISIL and piracy to conducting anti-terror operations against al-Qaeda and the Taliban, is arguably the central element of the US role in the Middle East—one that will likely continue into the foreseeable future unless the Trump Administration decides to retrench to its “America First” ideology and abandon its global leadership role.

Areas of Direct US-GCC Cooperation

As the Trump Administration attempts to address its foreign policy weaknesses and chaotic conduct of multilateral relations, special care is warranted to elicit the assistance of strategic partners, like the GCC countries, on issues essential for American interests in the wider Middle East region. By the same token, the GCC countries themselves are called upon to offer solutions for the administration to help it provide the surety Arab partners seek from the United States, which has been committed to their wellbeing and interests while looking out for its own. Indeed, mutual benefits would be at stake if either the administration or its Gulf partners were derelict in cooperating on several important issues, a cooperation last affirmed during the visit of Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to Washington.

First, the battle against ISIL is perhaps most urgent according to the timetable set by the Trump Administration and agreed to by the GCC governments. To its credit, the US Department of Defense has committed a significant number of troops to the front in Iraq and Syria. An additional 275 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne Division were just dispatched to help in the battle of Mosul in Iraq and another 1,000 troops will be sent to Syria soon for the liberation of Raqqa. Arab fighters from the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance have recently been airlifted by the US military to areas adjacent to the so-called caliphate’s capital to challenge ISIL’s forces. Concomitantly, Saudi Arabia announced that it is ready to send troops to Syria to help in fighting ISIL alongside American forces. This is in addition to Saudi participation in air operations against ISIL positions in northern Syria. All GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) participated in the March 22 meeting in Washington of the international coalition to fight ISIL.

Where the United States and Saudi Arabia and other GCC states can also cooperate is in the task of rehabilitating and reconstructing areas liberated from ISIL. American involvement in coordinating such efforts is pivotal for this goal. Political realities hindering GCC-Iraq relations may be overcome if the Trump Administration were able to convince the Iraqi government to allow for Arab participation in Mosul’s rehabilitation. Similarly, a potential participation by Saudi troops in the battle for

Raqqa can serve the common objective of liberating it and the dual purpose of defeating ISIL and preventing the city's occupation by militias allied with the Syrian regime and Iran, such as Hezbollah. Additionally, the United States can use its good offices and relations with the Syrian Kurds to cool Kurdish demands to include Raqqa in an autonomous Kurdish region, which so far has met with Arab, Syrian, and Turkish rejections. However, what all of this requires is the Trump Administration's putting its own house in order and sharpening its diplomatic instruments in what is most assuredly a complicated environment and set of circumstances not to the allies' liking.

A second area of cooperation between the United States and Saudi Arabia and the GCC is in ending the crisis in Yemen. As a cauldron of civil war and outside intervention, Yemen represents a common challenge and an opportunity simultaneously for political and military coordination and cooperation. The Obama Administration understood the Yemeni crisis as the threat it was to Saudi Arabia, other GCC states, and to Red Sea stability and provided what it could to the GCC's military effort to restore legitimate authority to Sanaa. But the humanitarian crisis in Yemen and political pressures on the administration in Washington led to questioning the conduct of the Saudi-led effort followed by the suspension of some weapons deliveries to the Gulf allies, a suspension that was lifted by President Donald Trump after his inauguration.

Unfortunately, however, the same conditions in Yemen still obtain, including the challenge to legitimate authority, Iranian material support to the Zaidi Houthi insurgency, the threat to GCC security, and the suffering of Yemeni civilians. And yet, the difficulty of arriving at a political solution for the crisis, despite every party's insistence on it, does not necessarily mean it is not possible, given that the alternative—a continuing military confrontation—is unpalatable. The war between the Yemeni factions themselves has been off and on since at least 2004 while the Saudi-led intervention began two years ago—and neither has ended Yemen's conflicts.

The political solution will require some painful concessions from everyone as well as adroit maneuvering, but it may always be beset by the possibility of renewed fighting. United Nations Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmad was able to reach some tentative agreements but was stymied by the extremist demands of Yemeni parties. A renewed emphasis on the 2011 Gulf Initiative, which was to end the transition from authoritarian rule, would buttress a good solution to restore legitimate authority, preserve Yemen's unity and integrity, strengthen state institutions, and resolve elite competition. This solution may also require an element of military coercion involving a US and GCC naval blockade of al-Hodeida port on the Red Sea, through which Iran has supplied weapons and missiles to the Houthi rebels. Control of the port would also help alleviate the humanitarian crisis in the country.

On the other hand, the American, Saudi Arabian, and GCC militaries must be ready to coordinate efforts and cooperate on preventing the Houthi threat to Red Sea navigation and keeping up the fight against AQAP in Yemen. Last fall, US naval forces destroyed Yemeni coastal missile installations used by the Houthis against American naval vessels. Saudi Arabian and UAE vessels were also attacked. US drones have also been active over Yemen and have conducted scores of airstrikes on the organization's positions. With GCC air forces engaged over Yemen and GCC navies participating in monitoring Red Sea waters, there will be increased possibilities for cooperation on ending the humanitarian crisis, stopping the flow of illegal arms shipments to the challengers of legitimate authority, and keeping up the pressure on AQAP.

Finally, US-GCC cooperation must also address the Iranian challenge in the Arabian Gulf and in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. But in light of the renewed efforts by GCC states to study the possibilities of dialogue with the Islamic Republic, and in service of the GCC's interest in keeping the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula conflict-free, cooperation may require a GCC cautious approach whose central element is de-escalating the Trump Administration's hostile rhetoric toward Tehran. The GCC states are cognizant that they will likely be the first victims of any conflagration with Iran, which might retaliate against their peoples and interests in the Gulf in response to a potential American attack.

It is thus incumbent upon the GCC states to advise the Trump Administration to scale back on threatening Iran militarily but to insist on checking it diplomatically. This complicated approach will require essential elements. First, and as has been their demand since the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran in 2015, GCC states would do well to emphasize Iranian compliance with the pact's provisions and encourage American efforts in that regard. Second, with American diplomacy suffering from inadequate staffing and expertise, GCC states can organize quiet back-channel overtures to Iranian moderates who represent the best hope for a friendly Iranian foreign policy toward the GCC. Third, GCC militaries would be wise to avoid getting involved in American responses to Iranian provocations of US naval vessels in Gulf waters. Fourth, the GCC would do well to emphasize neighborly relations with Iran but remain vigilant about Iranian hardliners' attempts to destabilize the Arabian Peninsula.

General Principles Going Forward

The American military presence in the Arabian Gulf and the surrounding region has provided an element of surety to Arab Gulf allies and partners and its continuation is both welcome and expected. But as the United States and the GCC embark on new relations under the Trump Administration, there are two general principles both sides would do well to safeguard.

First, US military deployments in the Gulf are basically a part of American global strategic calculations and they continue as a token of the GCC states' conviction that America's leadership role around the globe is the best guarantee for peace, stability, and prosperity in the Gulf. In essence, this would be a declaration of continued general alignment with the western liberal order, emphasizing open economic relations and an adherence to international norms and institutions.

Second, as the only cohesive political entente in the Arab world and possessor of the economic and military instruments to lead it, the GCC has

the ability to hedge relations with the United States by formulating ad hoc agreements with other partners, such as China, Japan, India, and Russia. Such a hedging reflects what are reasonable desires not to commit one's resources and fate to a sole strategic partner, although that partnership remains the central element of the GCC's strategic alignment. The hedging also provides the GCC a measure of freedom to conduct an active, and proactive, foreign policy to assure long-term interests in a world steadily approaching political, military, and economic multipolarity. They, however, must be ready for the instability and unpredictability that a world of changing power centers may bring.

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