



UAE squadron of F-16 fighter jets arrive in Jordan to support strikes against Islamic State. Photo released by Jordan News Agency on 8 February, 2015.

A New Era for Gulf Military Forces *by David B. Roberts*

The militaries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) tend to be dismissed as largely operationally ineffective patronage networks unable to meaningfully defend the six member states. But the emergence of a new set of leaders and metastasizing regional challenges have prompted Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in particular to confound expectations and adopt an assertive, interventionist military-led posture. Though the ultimate efficacy of their new found military strategies is still open to question, that these (and other) states are engaging so aggressively suggests that existing conceptions of the role, efficacy and utility of the GCC military forces need to be reevaluated.

The phrase ‘paradigm shift’ entered the academic and popular lexicon with Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.¹ Kuhn challenges the orthodox approach to scientific discovery which presupposed a linear evolution of scientific thought with one theorist building upon the work of others. Instead of this orderly process, Kuhn argues that progress was made when the established paradigms that framed a “common body of beliefs and assumptions” of a given discipline broke down when existing “methods won’t solve new problems.” Kuhn² used this idiom elastically in his book and subsequently it came to be, according to Kuhn’s New York Times obituary, “the great intellectual cliché of our age.”³

A hoary cliché it may be, but it seems uniquely apt to describe recent shifts in understanding the utility of military forces for the Gulf monarchies and the effectiveness of the militaries in the first place.

The literature examining the efficacy of Arab Gulf militaries is underdeveloped. But what there is tends to be relentlessly damning, ultimately pointing to incompatibilities between the modern cultural and socio-political models of the GCC states and the demands of effectively training and maintaining a modern armed

force.⁴ Aside from issues of efficacy, as opposed to the traditional *raison d'être* of a state's military force being created and trained to defend the nation or used to prosecute wars, other rationales dominate the discussion. The structure and financing of the Gulf militaries has instead been explained as a direct by-product of internal familial politics, a result of the importance of patronage, or as a means to effectively buy (or rent) external protection.⁵

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Low expectations

Such perspectives on the role and utility of the military forces of the Gulf states meant that there has traditionally been little expectation that Gulf elites would seek to actively deploy their forces, the assumption being that they are not really up to the task and that it is not what they are meant for.

There have always been exceptions that have tested this rule, even from the smaller Gulf states. For example, since 1977 Emirati troops have been deployed in one form or another to Lebanon, Somalia, Rwanda, Mozambique, Bosnia and Afghanistan.⁶ Though important at the time, these deployments were small, overtly non-kinetic, and usually coalition-dependent. The larger-scale Saudi Arabian deployment against the Houthis in 2009 was different. This was the first time in its history that the state had so kinetically and unilaterally waged war.⁷ However, the poor showing of the Saudi forces that resulted in no visible victory, over 100 deaths of their own soldiers, and ultimately the sacking of the Minister of Defense concurred with the 'expected' results of such an operation.⁸

The Saudis' Arab Spring deployment to Bahrain was unusually large; the UAE's participation in the bombing campaign against Daesh forces in Iraq and its unilateral bombing of Islamist positions in Libya were also unusually kinetic.⁹ These deployments challenged traditional understandings of the limited utility of Arab Gulf state militaries, but, as per Kuhn's argument, the broader parameters of the debate had not yet changed until the paradigm shifted entirely with the Saudi and UAE-led coalition war in Yemen in 2015.

Never before have the Gulf states deployed so many troops and so much kit without a broader international coalition, nor have they ever put their military force behind such lofty regime-change, guerrilla-war-defeating goals. And never before have they evidenced such a willingness to absorb risk and suffer significant casualties or, indeed, so directly cause such civilian suffering.

Conclusion

It is too early to assess issues of military force efficacy in the ongoing operations in Yemen, though the sheer scale of the operation indicates a not insignificant degree of competency. Ultimately, now that at least two militaries¹⁰ in the Gulf states have been used as kinetic policy tools the utility and role of Gulf military forces needs to be reconciled with existing understandings, which argue that the Gulf militaries are more about patronage, prestige, alliance-building, and rent distribution. For example, the stresses and strains caused by the dilution of the necessarily meritocratic nature of military hierarchies with patrimonial or familial pressures is problematic in peace time, but in war-time such complications become profoundly more impactful and potentially deadly.

In terms of utilizing and deploying military force, key leaders in the GCC have clearly shifted their expectations of the art of the possible. It remains to be seen how this new reality chimes with the training regimes, doctrines, and expectations of the military forces themselves.

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¹ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

² Maxine Hairston, "The Winds of Change: Thomas Kuhn and the Revolution in the Teaching of Writing," *College Composition and Communication* 33, no. 1 (1982), p.76.

³ James Gleick, "The Paradigm Shifts," *The New York Times*, 29 December 1996.

⁴ Kenneth M Pollack, "The Influence of Arab Culture on Arab Military Effectiveness" (PhD diss., MIT, 1996), p.3.

⁵ See Steffen Hertog, "Rentier Militaries in the Gulf States: The Price of Coup-Proofing," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 03 (2011): 400-02; Barry Rubin, "The Military in Contemporary Middle East Politics," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 5, no. 1 (March 2001): 49-50.

⁶ Christopher Davidson, *After the Sheikhs: The Coming Collapse of the Gulf Monarchies* (London: Hurst & Co., 2012), p.86.

⁷ Mai Yamani, "Saudi Arabia Goes to War," *The Guardian*, 23 November 2009.

⁸ Abeer Allam and Jabal al-Dood, "Saudis Tire of Yemen's Failure to Tame Rebels," *Financial Times*, 17 February 2010; Abeer Allam, "Saudi King Sacks Deputy Defence Minister," *Financial Times*, 21 April 2013.

⁹ David Kirkpatrick and Eric Schmitt, "Arab Nations Strike in Libya, Surprising U.S.," *The New York Times*, 25 August 2014.

¹⁰ Qatar and Bahrain also joined the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the operation in Yemen, but the role—both in terms of leading the wider campaign and in terms of forces committed—appears to be significantly greater from the UAE and Saudi Arabia.