

# GCC Security Amid Regional Crises

## Overview

*by David Des Roches, Theme Editor*

The Gulf is in a dead heat with the Korean peninsula for the title of most likely flashpoint in the world. No other region has the same volatile mixture of ethnic and religious enmity, under-developed political systems, modern weaponry, high levels of natural resources, and active great power interests. Every security analysis subject area—irregular warfare, weapons of mass destruction, weapons sales, military professionalization, military intervention, asymmetric warfare, missile defense—is present in the Gulf.

The study of security issues in the Gulf is thus rewarding to students and professionals alike. The field is constantly evolving as the Arab nations of the Gulf continue to top the list of arms importers and Iran continues to develop new weapons such as missiles, naval mines and possibly—probably—nuclear weapons.

The last year alone has seen major security developments in the Gulf. The most prominent was the Iranian nuclear deal and the continued geopolitical confrontation between Iran and her neighbors. The Iranian nuclear deal remains nascent at the time of writing, with all sides hoping for more than they are likely to get. Tehran hopes for an immediate lifting of all sanctions, irrespective of other Iranian transgressions such as the continuing development of missiles; calling for and supporting regime change in neighboring states such as Bahrain; deploying officers and backing militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq; and regularly menacing commercial shipping in the Gulf.

The West, on the other hand, hopes that the Iranian nuclear deal will lead to a cessation of the Iranian nuclear program, an increase in democratic participation in Iran, better international behavior by the Iranian regime, and an opening of the large Iranian market to Western firms.

The Arab states of the Gulf, who were not parties to this agreement, fear their interests are being compromised. They worry that Western governments are either woefully ignorant of the true nature of the Iranian regime, or downright treacherous in their desire to swap Arab chess pieces for Persian ones.

Predicting the outcome of Iran's nuclear deal with the P5+1 is perilous. Each concerned party—Iran, the West and the GCC states—will realize benefits and drawbacks. The West will probably see a reduction in Iranian nuclear capability. But it will not likely see Iran evolve from a state dedicated to exporting its revolution. Iran will experience considerable economic benefits but will still remain sanctioned for Revolutionary Guard activity, terrorism, and WMD development. The Arab states of the Gulf will reap the benefits of enhanced Western interests in keeping them secure—most notably in the export of military equipment such as long-range stand-off missiles, which had been denied in the past—but view every Western under-reaction to Iranian violations as betrayal. They also view any Iranian-Western détente as an erosion of their own 'protected' status with the West and their geopolitical influence in Europe and the United States.

A peripheral but vital aspect of the Arab-Iranian confrontation is the war in Yemen. The Houthi overthrow of the Yemeni government, enabled by former president Ali Abdullah Saleh's treachery, was a local issue. However, the GCC states (excepting Oman) have regarded it as another Iranian threat. This view is probably mistaken—the Iranians did not create this situation, but they are certainly exploiting it.

The Saudi-led coalition in Yemen—which includes significant Emirati and Bahraini elements as well as forces from all the other GCC nations (save Oman) plus Moroccans, Sudanese, Eritreans and others—has impressed observers accustomed to viewing the Arab monarchies as weapons collectors who don't build true defense capacity. The Saudi-led force has displayed impressive operational capability in deploying and conducting military operations simultaneously on three fronts (Aden, Marib and the Saudi-Yemeni border). Two of these operational fronts require significant lift capacity together with deployable and sustainable logistical capability which many had thought was beyond the reach of the GCC states.

The air campaign is notably more effective and discriminate than in the last Saudi-Houthi war in 2009. While the Saudi Air Forces have reached back to the United States and Britain for resupply of precision guided munitions, they have not run through their stocks with the rapidity and ineffectiveness seen in 2009. The support that the United States provides to the Saudis may be critical—it is not improbable that the vital American logistical and intelligence support to the Saudis would not be provided without the desire to buy Saudi agreement (or at least begrudging acquiescence) to the Iranian nuclear deal.

Unfortunately (and in common with recent American and British military actions in the region), this impressive GCC operational acumen has not translated to political success in Yemen. The Houthis and Ali Abdullah Saleh remain in control of Sanaa and much of the country north of Taiz; the erstwhile Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi could accurately be described as the Mayor of Aden if only he were to spend more time in Aden than in exile. Indeed, it appears the Saudi-led alliance's military action, particularly the blockade of rebel-controlled areas, may have backfired and caused a conflict between Saudis and Houthis to metastasize into one between Saudis and Yemenis.

The Gulf remains the largest arms importing region in the world. Iran seems to finally have collected its long-delayed Russian S-300 Air Defense system, while the ongoing Saudi F-15 upgrade remains the largest US Foreign Military Sales case in history. Britain continues to build on the controversial Al-Yamamah arms deal with Saudi Arabia by selling Typhoon and Hawk jets. France has found its first overseas customer for Rafale jets in Qatar (reports of a UAE buy are probably planted to extract American technology release).

In spite of the recent decline in oil prices, the export of Gulf oil is still vital for the smooth running of the global economy. Manufacturing and exporting nations, such as China, Japan, and increasingly India all have a stake in the security of the Gulf. It would be surprising if this economic interest does not someday translate into a security presence.

There is a paradox in Western—particularly American—thinking on this matter. Many Western analysts routinely scoff at Chinese “free-riders” who benefit from the American naval presence keeping Gulf sea lanes open. These same scoffers would probably have an aneurysm if the Chinese “free-riders” were to step up and deploy an aircraft carrier off the Strait of Hormuz.

The articles in this magazine are by distinguished scholars, practitioners, and policymakers of security in the Gulf. They represent a broad range of opinions and perspectives. One of the most entertaining aspects of Gulf studies is that time will likely prove everyone both right and wrong in their analyses and predictions. It is my most sincere hope that you find this issue as illuminating as I did.

*David Des Roches is Associate Professor at the Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University in Washington DC. His opinions are his own and do not reflect the views of any agency or branch of the United States Government.*