



# MILITARY COOPERATION IN MENA

UNCERTAINTY IN THE FACE OF CHANGING THREATS

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MEI Policy Paper 2016-7

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# Military Cooperation in the Middle East

## Uncertainty in the Face of Changing Threats

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Middle East Institute

*Regional Cooperation Series*

# ABBREVIATIONS

A.Q.A.P	AL-QAEDA IN THE ARABIAN PENINSULA
C.R.S.	CONGRESSIONAL RESEARCH SERVICE
G.C.C.	GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL
G.D.P.	GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT
I.M.F.	INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND
ISIS	ISLAMIC STATE IN IRAQ AND SYRIA
J.C.P.O.A.	JOINT COMPREHENSIVE PLAN OF ACTION
MENA	MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA
M.O.I.S.	MINISTRY OF INTELLIGENCE AND SECURITY
NATO	NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION
O.I.C.	ORGANIZATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION
THAAD	TERMINAL HIGH ALTITUDE AREA DEFENSE
U.A.E.	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
U.N.	UNITED NATIONS

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## SUMMARY

It is all too easy to develop ambitious plans for regional security cooperation. In practice, however, almost all real world security cooperation is dependent on the different priorities states give to various threats, the willingness of given regimes to act, the resources they develop and have available, and the level of interoperability between their forces. Actual security cooperation in the MENA region has long been limited, occurred between changing mixes of individual countries rather than on a regional basis, and always lagged behind the rhetoric. Better cooperation on this level could evolve in the face of forces such as Iran's military efforts, a powerful new Islamist extremist threat, or the outcomes to the fighting in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. However, there is little reason to assume, given regional trends, that the prospects for regional cooperation or cooperation between states will improve in the near future, and bilateral relations with external powers, principally the United States, are likely to continue to play a more critical role in the future.

## KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ The most important aspects of real world security cooperation in the MENA region today are driven by different coalitions of states from inside and outside the region fighting on different sides of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen
- ◆ The G.C.C. is the only alliance with a functional security role that is not driven by a given conflict, and it remains a relatively weak structure with important divisions between its members
- ◆ A truly moderate regime in Iran could dramatically change the nature of regional security cooperation, as could the emergence of a new, ISIS-like threat of a takeover in a state or region
- ◆ The United States is the most important single force for security cooperation in the region, although Turkey and Russia are emerging as increasingly important players

## INTRODUCTION

The rhetoric of security cooperation is easy to forge and equally easy to ignore unless there is a common perception of the threat, a willingness to act, and the creation of effective security efforts and forces. Success is dependent on the priorities states give to various threats, the willingness of given regimes to act, the resources they develop and have available, and the level of interoperability between their forces.

In practice, almost all real world security cooperation is based on coalitions of the willing and capable, regardless of whether the cooperation is designed to provide leverage, deter, contain, fight, or reach some form of resolution to a conflict. Cooperation for one set of goals may not mean cooperation for others. For example, opposing the same threat or enemy does not

**“The rhetoric of security cooperation is easy to forge and equally easy to ignore.”**

mean the same interests exist in shaping the outcome of a conflict. The uneasy coalitions and efforts at cooperation on all sides of the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts are good cases in point. Iran and Russia may ultimately differ as much over the outcome of the fighting in Syria as the United States and Iran do in Iraq.

Formal agreements and institutions can help create the conditions that make such cooperation possible and effective, but many effective alliances are shaped in response to specific threats and challenges and have meaning only to the degree that partners are capable of given levels of action.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, for example, has made progress over the years, but that progress has been slow and limited. The U.S. and Saudi-led coalition, which was forged in response to Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait, had to be created quickly to deal with a specific contingency and was shaped by the existing politics and military capabilities of the countries involved. Its key elements proved remarkably effective, while less committed nations like Egypt and Syria moved slowly or not at all.

Ambitious efforts like the Baghdad Pact, Arab League, and United Arab Republic all collapsed under the pressure of events, and even initially successful alliances like that of the Egyptian-Syrian invasion of the Sinai and Golan in 1973 collapsed once Egypt and Syria faced different combat priorities and set different goals.

## THE CURRENT LEVEL OF REAL WORLD SECURITY COOPERATION

Today, the most important aspects of real world security cooperation in the MENA region are driven by different coalitions fighting on different sides of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Syrian war now involves two separate coalitions that are fighting ISIS and each other. One involves the Assad regime, Iran, Russia, and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The other involves some 40 different Syrian Arab rebel forces, Syrian Kurdish forces, a U.S.-led air coalition with European and Arab participants, Turkey, and a diverse mixture of U.S., European, Saudi, U.A.E., and Qatari ground forces and advisors. Cooperation within each coalition is limited at best: there are no clear common strategic goals on either side, and each actor pursues somewhat different goals and tactics.

Iraq involves even more diverse forms of security cooperation. ISIS is the primary enemy, but the same U.S.-led air coalition that operates against ISIS and Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (formerly Jabhat al-Nusra) in Syria also flies against ISIS in Iraq. The United States and Iran operate in parallel in supporting Iraqi government and militia ground forces while competing for influence over Iraq. Canada and European countries also provide special forces and other “train and assist” elements. Turkey opposes Syria’s Kurds—which have strong U.S. backing—but cooperates with Iraqi Kurds. Iraqi forces are deeply divided

between central government elements that are largely Shiite and various Kurdish, Shiite, and Sunni militias, with only limited central government coordination. The Arab Gulf states provide

**“Cooperation within each coalition is limited at best: there are no clear common strategic goals on either side.”**

## “The G.C.C. remains a relatively weak structure with important divisions between its members.”

some backing to selected Sunni tribal elements. Once again, there are no

clear common strategic goals, and every side looks toward future competition for power and influence once (and if) ISIS is defeated.

Two key military powers—Israel and Egypt—stand outside the broader structure of regional cooperation, although both cooperate informally with other regional states. Israel’s ties are largely to the United States, its principal source of aid. Egypt is also heavily dependent on U.S. military aid, but is now deeply involved in a struggle to create an authoritarian military regime that can secure its own power against internal resistance and threats.

Regional security cooperation in North Africa is limited at best, although Egypt does play a limited role in aiding Tunisia and seeking to secure its border with Libya. Algeria and Morocco continue to feud over the Western Sahara and Polisario, and North African security cooperation is shaped largely by the role that the United States and Europe play in individually supporting Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt.

There is no effective security cooperation within North Africa. Israel, Egypt, and Jordan cooperate relatively effectively in securing their border areas and in some aspects of counterterrorism, but there is no overt cooperation in broader military terms among the states in the Levant. Instead, cooperation (and non-cooperation) is heavily shaped by the ties Israel, Egypt, and Jordan have to the United States and by the role of state and non-state actors in the Syrian civil war.

In the case of the Gulf, the G.C.C. remains a relatively weak structure with important divisions between its members, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Oman. The G.C.C. talks about security cooperation, but that is largely a façade with little real world cooperation or effective efforts to create interoperability or common intelligence, reconnaissance, training, and support facilities. U.S. bilateral cooperation with individual Gulf states is generally more critical than the loose security cooperation between G.C.C. states, although Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. have increasingly emerged as effective partners in dealing with Iran and the war in Yemen.

U.S. forward deployments and power projection capabilities underpin and dominate security cooperation in dealing with Iran, in building up Arab forces and ensuring Israeli military capability, and in developing real world cooperation in counterterrorism—where most regional states will only share limited intelligence data and cooperate largely in terms of border security.

Britain and France still provide arms and power projection capabilities that can aid North African, Levantine, and Gulf states but suffer from a lack of resources. At the same time, trust in the U.S. willingness to stay, and to remain aligned with Arab powers, is uncertain, and Saudi Arabia has sought to reduce its

**“Trust in the U.S. willingness to stay, and to remain aligned with Arab powers, is uncertain.”**

dependence on the United States. Saudi Arabia has focused on developing a close partnership with the U.A.E. and has sought to create a coalition to support

its war in support of the government of Yemen against the Houthi rebels and pro-Saleh forces. As of mid-2016, this coalition was largely one of Saudi-U.A.E. forces backed by U.S. intelligence, targeting aid, and naval forces.

Saudi Arabia also began in December 2015 an attempt to create a broader Arab coalition of some 35 of the 57 countries in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (O.I.C.) to fight terrorism, but this coalition too has remained more a façade than a reality. Like the G.C.C., however, it is far easier to create the façade of common purpose than actual military cooperation in the field or in building an effective level of deterrence. As the G.C.C. has discovered since its founding, words are cheap and easy. Actual force deployments, participation in combat, interoperability, standardization, common support and logistic structures, and integrated operations and battle management are difficult, expensive, and often impossible to achieve.

Iran is seen as the leading military threat by the Arab Gulf states, Israel, and the United States. It currently cooperates with the Syrian government, Hezbollah, and Russia in the war in Syria and with the Iraqi central government and Shiite militias in Iraq. Its Islamic Revolutionary Guards Forces, Al Quds Force, and intelligence services (M.O.I.S.) have been increasingly effective in expanding

Iranian security influence and “security cooperation.” They play a role in supporting Shiite and Palestinian militant movements in Bahrain, Kuwait, Gaza, and Yemen.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE FUTURE

It is all too easy to develop ambitious plans to change this situation, to try to strengthen the G.C.C. or create broader Arab coalitions, to find ways to avoid reliance on outside powers, or even to suggest security structures that would somehow include Iran and its Arab neighbors. In practice, however, real security cooperation is driven largely by either mutual necessity or the evolution of meaningful political ties. A truly

**“A truly moderate regime in Iran could dramatically change the nature of regional security cooperation.”**

moderate regime in Iran, for example, could dramatically change the nature of regional security cooperation, as could the emergence of a new, ISIS-like threat of a takeover in a state or region. Such developments are always possible. None, however, currently seem predictable or probable.

Even ISIS has failed to generate effective real world cooperation. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, the U.A.E., and Kuwait have all dealt with Syrian Arab rebel forces in different ways and have differed over how to deal with the Iraqi government and ISIS in Iraq. Intelligence sharing is limited, and counterterrorism efforts are largely national. Efforts to deal with ideological threats are also largely done by individual states with different priorities. The priorities given to other extremist movements like Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (A.Q.A.P.) are equally diverse.

In what may be a very long interim, the key questions for the future revolve around how today’s real world relations will evolve, and much will depend on the level of change in the threats and the patterns of regional conflict. Several key sets of variables are involved—all of which could substantially change the nature of security cooperation in the region by 2030:

- ◆ The evolution of the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen
- ◆ How ISIS, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham, A.Q.A.P., and similar violent Islamist extremist movements evolve over time
- ◆ The level of continued U.S. strategic and military involvement in the region; U.S. bilateral and multilateral cooperation with given states; and U.S. involvement in supporting Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., and Yemen
- ◆ The extent to which Britain, France, Italy, and other European states will play a real world power projection role in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Gulf
- ◆ The role Russia will play in Syria, Iran, and other regional states, both in terms of an actual presence and in terms of technology transfer and arms sales
- ◆ China's role in technology transfers and arms sales and its interest and capability in playing a role in the Indian Ocean, Gulf region, and Red Sea
- ◆ How the civil war in Libya plays out, the future stability of Tunisia, the extent to which tensions between Morocco and Algeria become more serious, and the role Egypt plays in North Africa
- ◆ The extent to which Israeli-Palestinian tensions and conflicts reemerge as a major factor affecting the attitudes and behavior of Arab states
- ◆ Whether and how an end takes place to the civil war in Syria, the conflict with ISIS in both Syria and Iraq, and Iraq's future alignment with Iran and other powers
- ◆ Iran's willingness to accept the terms of the J.C.P.O.A.; its success in gaining strategic influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen; its ability to create modern and highly effective ballistic and cruise missile forces with precision

strike capability with conventional warheads; and its ability to increase its air asymmetric naval missile threat to maritime traffic in and near the Persian Gulf, the Gulf of Oman, and possibly the Red Sea

- ◆ The success of the Saudi-U.A.E. alliance in the war in Yemen, and the extent to which Yemen does or does not remain a threat to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states or becomes tied to Iran

All of these variables interact to some extent, but there is little reason to assume that the outcome is going to be more favorable for broad efforts at regional cooperation than in the past. There seems to be little prospect of these factors resulting in any broad regional architecture. External powers beyond the region are likely to play just as critical a role in the future as in the past, and real world security cooperation will

be driven largely by events and the need to form “coalitions of the willing” to deal with specific threats.

**“External powers beyond the region are likely to play just as critical a role in the future as in the past.”**

The three major exceptions would be: a major U.S. withdrawal from its security commitments in the region; either a shift in Iran to political moderation or an escalation to a major level of conflict between Iran and its Arab neighbors; or the emergence of a violent Islamist extremist threat so broad it forced regional states into new patterns of cooperation to counter it. Once again, such developments are possible, but not probable or predictable.

## REACTING TO CHANGING THREATS AND PATTERNS OF CONFLICT

There are, however, several, ongoing developments in regional security that may lead to new forms of cooperation at a less ambitious level, or which seem likely to force at least local shifts in security cooperation. These range from the impact of Iran’s military efforts on regional balance and cooperation, to changes in the Islamist extremist threat, to the impact of some form of settlement or

outcome to the fighting in Libya, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

## IRAN AND THE ARAB STATES

While the West tends to focus on the threat posed by violent Islamist movements, it is the growing tensions and arms race between Iran and its Arab neighbors that does the most to drive the military build-up in the region. One can argue the extent to which each side drives the tensions on other side and how much Iran is to blame for the rise in tension and force levels.

At the same time, it is important to remember that the United States does

**“Each Arab state sees Iran somewhat differently and takes a different approach to security cooperation”**

see Iran as a rising threat as well and that it is largely the security cooperation between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the U.A.E.—coupled with British and French power projection and support from Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman—that drives the

balance of forces posed to deter or fight Iran, not the Gulf Cooperation Council or regional cooperation per se.

It is equally important to remember that each Arab state sees Iran somewhat differently and takes a different approach to security cooperation. Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. actively plan both to deter Iran and to fight it. Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman all see Iran as a threat, but rely in part on U.S. power projection, and Qatar and Oman are cautious in their relations with Iran.

Iraq cooperates with Iran without being allied to it. Syria is dependent on Iran, not only for direct support but also because of Iran’s support of Hezbollah. Yemen’s Houthi rebels have some ties to Iran, but Iran does not play a major security role in the civil war. As for the rest of the Arab states, Jordan has made it clear it fears Iran’s regional expansion, Lebanon is forced to accommodate Iran’s support of Hezbollah, Egypt has been cautious in identifying Iran as a threat, and the other North African states do not play a meaningful security role.

U.S., European, and Arab security cooperation in dealing with Iran is driven by four different threats.

## 1. THE NUCLEAR DIMENSION

The nuclear agreement with Iran, and Iran's initial compliance in reducing its stocks of enriched material and centrifuge and reactor programs, has put the nuclear issue on hold. Iran did, however, reach the point of a nuclear threshold state. A number of Gulf states—including Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.—talked about nuclear power programs in response that had the potential for weapons development, and the United States raised the possibility of extended deterrence.

Any Iranian return to a program with serious weapons potential would probably trigger a major debate over Arab efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, extended deterrence, and the Non-Proliferation Treaty. It is unclear whether it would build more Arab security cooperation, how the United States would shape a military response, and how much a revived Iranian nuclear program would affect security cooperation in other areas. It seems clear, however, that a “snapback” to pre-J.C.P.O.A. sanctions would not be enough, and there would at least be a major debate over going nuclear and the prospect of extended deterrence.

**“Most of Iran's air force consists of obsolete combat aircraft like the F-4.”**

## 2. THE CONVENTIONAL BALLISTIC AND CRUISE MISSILE DIMENSION

Iran has not halted its development of conventionally-armed ballistic and cruise missiles or long range artillery rockets. It is developing solid fuel ballistic missiles, creating mobile systems, shelters, and tunnels, and actively seeking to develop precision strike capabilities that would make ballistic and cruise missiles lethal against many military targets, critical infrastructure, and petroleum facilities.

Some of these Iranian efforts are in response to the massive lead that Arab states and the United States have in advanced air strike and combat capability. Iran has not been able to buy more than a small number of export versions of Russian Su-24 and MiG-29 fighters since the fall of the Shah, and most of its air force consists of obsolete combat aircraft like the F-4. In contrast, the United States is deploying stealth strike aircraft like the F-35, Saudi Arabia has advanced F-15s, the U.A.E.

# “The Arab Gulf states have so far been remarkably slow in creating real world integrated sensor and battle management capabilities.”

has advanced F-16s, and both the Saudis and the U.A.E. have long-range precision strike missiles like Storm Shadow. On

the other hand, Iran has equally obsolescent surface-to-air missile defenses, although Russia began deliveries of the far more advanced S300 system in 2015.

These developments have already led the Arab Gulf states to buy more advanced versions of the Patriot missile (which Saudi Arabia has used to intercept Scud missiles launched from Yemen). For example, Qatar and the U.A.E. have made tentative offers to buy theater missile defense systems like the U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD)—a system capable of intercepting endo-atmospheric missiles at long ranges. It has also led the G.C.C. to consider creating a theater missile defense system based on the U.S. Aegis/Standard missile system—although its exo-atmospheric capabilities make it somewhat less suitable than THAAD. The United States has also begun to deploy Aegis missile defense ships into the Gulf.

The end result is likely to be a major shift in at least one aspect of regional defense cooperation. A theater missile defense system is extraordinarily expensive and must be tied to air defense systems that can protect against cruise missiles. Its effectiveness is dependent on access to satellite warning and intercept data that only the United States can provide. It requires integrated warning and battle management, even more than air combat, and would push the Arab Gulf states toward far more integrated defenses than currently exist for both cost and war-fighting reasons.

There is no present way, however, to judge the architecture of any such system, and the Arab Gulf states have so far been remarkably slow in creating real world integrated sensor and battle management capabilities for both air and naval combat, as well as other aspects of tactical intelligence—relying on national capabilities and the United States. There also is no way to judge the level of Iranian response to such missile defenses, Iranian acquisition of countermeasures for its missiles, and the extent to which it could buy more advanced air and missile systems from Russia and China by 2030.

It is also important to note that the Iranian missile program has partly prompted Israel to develop a three-tiered missile and rocket defense system involving the Arrow, endo-atmospheric Arrow-2, and exo-atmospheric Arrow-3 theater missile defense systems, the David's Sling to defend salvos of heavy long-range rockets and short-range ballistic missiles, and the Iron Dome short-range anti-rocket missile defense system. These capabilities are also designed to deal with the steadily growing missile and rocket threat posed by massive Iranian and Syrian rocket missile transfers to Hezbollah in Lebanon, which already include some systems with limited precision strike capability with Syrian 302mm rockets, Iranian half-ton warhead Fatah-110 rockets, and armed drones. Syrian government forces still pose another missile threat that includes Scud B-class ballistic missiles, which can deliver one-ton warheads at ranges of some 300 km (186 miles).

It seems unlikely that any form of cooperation in missile, rocket, and air defense will take place between the Arab Gulf states and Israel, but Israel might provide missile defense coverage of Jordan. It is also important to remember that Israel has nuclear-armed missiles of its own, Saudi Arabia has upgraded the ballistic missiles it bought from China, and cooperation in defense does not necessarily mean cooperation in launching retaliatory/offensive air or missile strikes.

### 3. IRANIAN ASYMMETRIC NAVAL MISSILE AND AIR CAPABILITIES TO ATTACK TARGETS IN THE PERSIAN GULF, GULF OF OMAN, AND INDIAN OCEAN

The third major threat Iran poses is a mix of naval, land, and sea-based anti-ship missiles, air missiles, and maritime reconnaissance capabilities that it can rapidly disperse throughout the Gulf, has already deployed at or near the Strait of Hormuz, and can use in the Gulf of Oman and Indian Ocean. This force includes large numbers of missile patrol boats, fast suicide boats, naval mines and smart mines that virtually any boat or ship can deploy, submarines, submersibles, and long-range land and

**“It seems unlikely that any form of cooperation in missile, rocket, and air defense will take place between the Arab Gulf states and Israel.”**

air-based anti-ship missiles. It presents a major threat both to combat ships and to all forms of commercial maritime traffic, including tankers. Many of the missiles can also be used to strike land targets with some degree of effectiveness.

In theory, this threat should also push the Arab Gulf states toward security cooperation. In practice, many have been remarkably slow in making their own navies effective on a national basis or in tailoring and modernizing their naval forces to meet the threat, as distinguished from buying prestige ships. Progress in creating effective naval-air joint warfare capabilities has been limited. Readiness and modernization have not been integrated, and security cooperation has depended heavily on the U.S. Navy and Air Force to provide both core mission capabilities and support.

Saudi Arabia began to make some progress in changing this situation in 2015 and began to place orders for new ships that it has needed for years, if it is to modernize its navy. However, it is unclear how well any of the Arab Gulf states will respond over time. It is also unclear how effective they would be in dealing with serious threats like Iranian mine and smart mine efforts or in coordinating joint warfare against Iran's complex mix of asymmetric warfare forces in the

Gulf, if the United States should withdraw its naval forces. This is an obvious area for security cooperation, but this does not mean that such cooperation will take place or could become effective.

**“Iran cannot come close to matching U.S. air-sea capabilities.”**

At the same time, Iran cannot come close to matching U.S. air-sea capabilities,

and one must remember that Britain and France have naval power projection capabilities. Moreover, Iran faces two critical problems. It cannot ‘close the Gulf’ and seriously threaten maritime traffic without blocking its own petroleum exports and maritime imports. Furthermore, any major Iranian effort that threatened the export of some 17 million barrels of oil through the Gulf, and the stability of the world economy, would almost certainly trigger a massive U.S. response in striking Iran and in seeking to destroy its military capabilities as quickly as possible.

#### 4. IRAN'S EXPANDING MILITARY ROLE AND INFLUENCE

The fourth major threat Iran could pose is far harder to predict. Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E., Jordan, and other Arab states have expressed growing concern that the fighting in Syria and Iraq, Iran's support of Hezbollah, and Iran's links to the Houthi and Saleh forces in Yemen give it an increased ability to influence countries outside Iran. They are particularly concerned that Iraq seems to be drifting toward some form of division between an Arab Shiite dominated central government (including the southern oil-producing area and the zone along the Iran border), a marginalized and impoverished Arab Sunni region in the west, and an autonomous Kurdish region in the north. They fear that ethnic and communal tensions will further push the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government toward dependence on Iran. They also, however, see Iranian influence growing in Syria and fear the role Iran could play if it could gain access to Yemen or exploit Sunni-Shiite tensions in other Arab Gulf states like Bahrain.

This prompted Saudi Arabia and other G.C.C. states to improve their security relations with Jordan and to launch what now seems to be a failed and aborted Saudi effort to aid the Lebanese Army to check Hezbollah. It has not, however, led the Arab Gulf states to reach out to Iraq and try to effectively counterbalance Iran. It has resulted in Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E.

**“One critical issue is whether Iraq will emerge from the fight with ISIS as a strong and unified enough state to act independently.”**

supporting the Yemeni government against the Houthis in a war that does not yet seem to have any clear end. It also has led the Arab Gulf states to make poorly coordinated efforts to support Arab rebels in Syria and to become even more hostile to the Assad regime.

The key issue that is now totally unpredictable is how the different wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen will proceed over time, how successful Iran will be in maintaining and expanding its influence in each case, and whether Iran's actions will lead to any new form of Arab security cooperation. One critical issue is whether Iraq will emerge from the fight with ISIS as a strong and unified

enough state to act independently and deter any Iranian efforts to increase the threat it can pose to other Arab Gulf states—particularly Kuwait. At present, Iraq seems more likely to be weak and divided and a source of tension between Iran and other Arab states.

## COUNTERTERRORISM AND COUNTERINSURGENCY

Iran is the key force driving states toward some form of regional cooperation, but all regional states also face some form of threat from violent Islamist extremists and sectarian, ethnic, and tribal divisions. In some cases, this takes the form of actual terrorism by extremists. In others, it takes the form of ethnic and sectarian dissent that may or may not legitimately be labeled as terrorist, and state terrorism or repression may be the response.

A.Q.A.P. is an example of a real terrorist movement, while Shiite dissent in Bahrain is often labeled as terrorist to justify repression. Egypt has moved from labeling the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist movement to repression

**“At present, Iraq seems more likely to be weak and divided and a source of tension.”**

at a broader level with increasingly unclear motives, despite Brotherhood actions at times not going beyond legitimate political dissent. Israeli-Palestinian

tensions have reached the point where extremist movements like Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad do carry out terrorist attacks, but much of the violence is a reflection of the steadily deteriorating relations between Israelis and Palestinians, including violence at a more personal level.

Four regional countries have reached the point where the threat is not terrorism but insurgency or civil war. The fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq involves terrorism but is primarily a fight against an insurgency, complicated by civil war and explosive struggles between Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Kurd. Libya became both a regional and tribal civil war and a fight against an ISIS enclave. Yemen has been a counterterrorism struggle against A.Q.A.P. and a complex civil war between the Houthi rebels, supporters of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, and a central government that was driven out of the capital and much of the country.

Each element of these struggles and tensions has involved different approaches to counterterrorism and counterinsurgency as well as different mixes of internal action and outside alliances. None have involved coherent regional cooperation or clear engagement of regional and outside activity. It is equally unlikely that any future mixes of terrorism, insurgency, and repression are likely to be any more consistent or coherent in terms of either regional cooperation or the role of outside states.

There are more coherent forms of cooperation in classic counterterrorism and in dealing with relatively low levels of terrorist activity. U.N. and State Department reporting shows that most countries formally adhere to the U.N. resolutions and other international efforts to cooperate in counterterrorism, and a number of states do cooperate in sharing information on known terrorists in a form that supports control of cross-border movements and financial transactions.<sup>1</sup>

The actual level of enforcement and cooperation differs radically by country; some states support and make use of extremist movements and internal factions, and the level of actual counterterrorism capability varies sharply from country

to country. In a number of countries, cooperation with outside powers like the United States, Britain, and France is more real than cooperation with neighbors. There are

**“Most countries formally adhere to the U.N. resolutions and other international efforts to cooperate in counterterrorism.”**

also no standard methods for training and organizing counterterrorism forces and intelligence efforts, dealing with terrorists and suspects once arrested, and countering ideological extremism and calls for violence.

The various unclassified reports on the subject do indicate that slow progress is being made in cooperation but largely on the basis of specific countries and not by region. It is possible that this situation may change if far more serious threats emerge over time from the successor to ISIS or its existing rivals, but it is equally possible that countries will continue to pursue their own efforts and methods separately. The issues involved are simply too sensitive for countries

to cooperate or share sensitive and embarrassing data. Trust is often highly personal or built between specific organizations rather than between countries as a whole.

## ISRAELI-EGYPTIAN-JORDANIAN COOPERATION

Almost all of the actual cooperation between states in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is centered on Syria, Iraq, and the Gulf. There is no meaningful security cooperation between Morocco, Algeria, Libya, and Tunisia. For all the rhetoric about Egyptian cooperation with the Gulf, Egypt focuses on its own security. The Arab-Israeli conflict may have narrowed down to formal states of war between Israel and Lebanon and Syria, but the Arab League peace proposal has made virtually no progress and shows little sign of future success.

The long history of violence from the Iranian Revolution to the Iran-Iraq War, the invasion of Kuwait, the Gulf War, the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the upheavals in 2011, the civil war in Syria, the rise of ISIS and fighting in Iraq and Syria has, however, to some extent, eased tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Similarly, the level of cooperation between Israel, Egypt, and Jordan that grew out of their respective peace settlements has been reinforced by the fact that Egypt now faces a threat in the Sinai as Israel does in Gaza and Jordan needs security on its border with Israel to the same extent that Israel needs security on its border with Gaza.

Intelligence and counterterrorism cooperation has improved in both cases, as has the level of dialogue between Israel and several Gulf states over Iran, Lebanon, and other security issues that are not directly related to the Palestinians. This does not, however, mean that Arab states will ignore the Palestinian issue or see Israel as an ally; nor does it mean that tensions between Israel and the Palestinians are not increasing or that there exists an “enemy of my enemy is my friend” understanding. While this is often said to be an Arab saying, it actually seems to date back to an ancient Sanskrit book on war called *The Arthashastra*,

**“This does not mean that Arab states will ignore the Palestinian issue or see Israel as an ally.”**

and history has shown that alliances of convenience can easily revert to the

formulation that “the enemy of my enemy is my enemy.”

If Israeli-Palestinian tensions turn into

real conflict, and the present series of low-level incidents of violence turn into another intifada, Arab and Muslim states could find it very difficult to ignore such a conflict. The same could be true of a new round of fighting in Gaza or between Israel and Hezbollah. Iran and Sunni Islamists would be almost certain to use such conflicts to try to discredit moderate Arab regimes, and the ongoing struggle for the future of Islam would create further challenges if Arab Muslims were seen as becoming “martyrs” by Israel.

**“In several states—Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—the situation is now much worse than it was in 2011.”**

## OTHER REGIONAL VARIABLES

It is tempting to predict that security cooperation will continue to struggle given the wars in Syria and Iraq, the rivalry between the G.C.C. and Iran, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, making no real progress in North Africa, and only slow and partial gains in dealing with terrorism and violent extremism. It is important to note, however, that other regional variables are involved:

- ◆ World Bank and I.M.F. assessments indicate that little progress has been made in dealing with any of the problems in governance, corruption, economic development, the distribution of wealth, and employment flagged by the U.N. Arab Development reports as early as 2002 and that exploded into political upheavals in 2011<sup>2</sup>
- ◆ In several states—Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen—the situation is now much worse than it was in 2011. Moreover, massive 40-60 percent cuts in petroleum export revenues since 2014, cuts in tourism revenues, and sectarian and ethnic instability present new challenges in most other states.
- ◆ U.N. and U.S. Census Bureau data show that population pressure remains a critical issue, with population increases of five to six times between 1950 and 2015, on a path towards another 50 percent increase by 2050<sup>3</sup>

# “Many regional states pursue security policies that are so repressive that they alienate significant portions of the population.”

countries—often creating high levels of real world unemployment or a critical lack of career opportunities for 20 percent or more of the youth in given MENA countries<sup>4</sup>

- ◆ A major bulge in the number of men and women entering the labor force has created major direct and disguised unemployment problems for young men and women in most countries
- ◆ Most countries face serious sectarian, ethnic, and tribal divisions, compounded by hyper-urbanization and growing tensions between Sunnis, Shiites, and other sects, that exacerbate the problems created by religious extremism
- ◆ Security expenditures in most MENA states are a strikingly higher percent of the G.D.P. than those in other regions and place a further burden on the economy
- ◆ U.S. State Department and other human rights reports warn that many regional states pursue security policies that are so repressive that they alienate significant portions of the population<sup>5</sup>
- ◆ No major ongoing civil conflict has a clear outcome ending in stability and development

The majority of existing governments may well be able to ride these pressures out and make significant progress by 2030, but assuming that current conditions continue ignores some extraordinarily important trends.

## COOPERATION FROM OUTSIDE THE REGION

There is one final aspect of regional security cooperation that also deserves close attention. As previously described, security cooperation is certainly affected by the politics, military forces, and perceived threats within various parts of the MENA region, but at the same time, security cooperation is often dominated by outside nations and the role they play in individual states.

## THE U.S. ROLE IN THE REGION

The U.S. military presence in the Mediterranean and the Gulf, U.S. ties to NATO and the power projection forces of Britain, France, and Italy, U.S. rapid deployment capabilities and advisory missions all combine to make the United States the most important single force for security cooperation in the region. Iran and other regional states confront the reality that the regional military balance is only one factor they must consider.

U.S. ability to reinforce allied countries or act unilaterally makes a decisive difference, and the importance of the United States is made clear by its near monopoly on advanced battle management, intelligence, and targeting systems. It is also reinforced by the role its military and contractors play in supporting many regional states in maintaining advanced weapons and providing the support necessary to sustain them in combat. In practice, the United States plays a critical role in security cooperation in Morocco, Egypt, Israel, Syria, Iraq, and the G.C.C.

Regional states can certainly do more to develop their own battle management, intelligence, targeting systems, and capability to maintain and sustain their forces. However, they cannot provide anything similar to the level of technology and practical combat experience possessed by the United States or afford to develop advanced capabilities in areas like satellite intelligence and targeting capability. This is also true of nations like Britain and France that must cope with serious limits on military spending and are also dependent on U.S. systems for advanced technology in battle management.

This makes the present security structure in the region—particularly in the Gulf—critically dependent on the level of U.S. military commitments and support. Real world regional security cooperation cannot provide a substitute for the foreseeable future, and dependence on the United States may grow as regional states move into new and more technically complex areas like missile defense. This does, however, depend on both continued U.S. strategic commitments and U.S. willingness to act. More

**“U.S. ability to reinforce allied countries or act unilaterally makes a decisive difference.”**

specifically, it is dependent on U.S. military assistance and aid to critical states like Egypt, Israel, and Jordan, and on the flow of U.S. arms sales and support to the Arab Gulf states.

## ARMS SALES AND SECURITY COOPERATION

The overall flow of arms transfers involves broader and equally critical issues for security cooperation. As states like Iran have learned the hard way, smaller and moderately developed states cannot compete in producing modern arms. The technology and manufacturing systems are too costly and complex, the resulting production runs too limited, and the unit costs too high. Real world business models make it brutally clear that not only are these systems high risk

**“Smaller and moderately developed states cannot compete in producing modern arms.”**

and high cost, but they provide few jobs, require massive investment and imports of technology, and have little benefit in terms of creating a technical and manufacturing base that can help development in the civil sector.

This is not a minor aspect of security cooperation, given the cost of existing arms transfers and orders. For example, estimates by the International Institute of Strategic Studies indicate that the G.C.C. as a whole had military expenditures more than seven times those of Iran in 2015, and these are typical of spending levels over the last decade.<sup>6</sup> Many of these expenditures went to arms transfers, and a study by the Congressional Research Service (C.R.S.) using declassified U.S. intelligence estimates indicated that the G.C.C. states ordered nearly 200 times more arms during 2007-2014 than Iran did and took actual delivery on 74 times more arms. This advantage also rose with time. The Arab Gulf states ordered a total of \$135.9 billion in new orders and took \$44.2 billion worth of deliveries during 2007-2014—largely from the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Iran has made limited progress in manufacturing its own arms, and the C.R.S. report does not cover the cost of Iran’s nuclear and some missile efforts. However, the C.R.S. study shows that Iran only imported \$700 million worth of arms in 2007-2010, and imported less than \$50 million worth in 2011-2014, for

a total of little more than \$750 million in 2007-2014. It took delivery on only \$500 million worth of arms in 2007-2010 and \$100 million in 2011-2014, for a total of \$600 million.

The data in the C.R.S. study do not include the arms transfers affecting competition between Iran/Russia and the U.S./Arab states in shaping the civil war in Syria. They do, however, affect the equally serious competition for influence over Iraq—another major petroleum exporter. Although Iraq is subject to considerable Iranian influence, it has also had massive military support from the United States and should be seen as a separate case from the Iran-Arab Gulf arms race. Iraq bought \$5.6 billion worth of arms in 2007-2010 and a massive \$21.7 billion million in 2011-2014. It took delivery on \$2.6 billion worth of arms imports in 2007-2010, but this total rose to \$6.1 billion in 2011-2014.

These figures only tell part of the story. As a rough rule of thumb, it costs much more to support, modify, and service a weapons systems during its life cycle

than it does to buy it, and these costs rise in direct proportion to its use in combat. They require further imports and often either support contracts with foreign firms or expensive specialized support facilities for a given weapons system. If the G.C.C. or any other regional body had more success in standardization and creating common integrated facilities, some of these costs would be lower. However, it would now take at least a decade to make major progress in such efforts, given the existing mix of different weapons systems and orders for new systems.

**“Russia has already shown how decisive even limited military intervention can be in Syria.”**

## THE FUTURE ROLE OF OTHER OUTSIDE POWERS: RUSSIA, CHINA, AND TURKEY

One key issue for the future will be the role that other outside powers play in both providing military support and arms sales—factors that, again, illustrate the limits to regional security cooperation. Russia has already shown how decisive even limited military intervention can be in Syria. It also has shown how critical Russian arms sales can be through its sale of the S300 air defense missile to Iran.

Russia may well see that playing a growing role in the MENA region is a way

of putting pressure on NATO and reasserting its status and power on a global level. It would be almost certain to react if the United States leaves a growing power vacuum in the region by reducing its forces and commitments or by an unwillingness to act. China is not yet ready for major power projection efforts in the Gulf or MENA region and is only beginning to acquire the ability to make advanced arms transfers. It is, however, developing port facilities in Pakistan, has acquired some port facilities in Djibouti, and might become more active in the region much sooner if it sees cuts in the U.S. role, or any potential threats to its sources of petroleum.

Turkey has also shown that powers on the borders of the MENA region can play an important role, and there seems to be little prospect that it will not continue to seek its own goals in Syria and in dealing with the different factions of Kurds on its borders.

## LIVING WITH COMPLEXITY AND UNCERTAINTY

There is an old joke about the Middle East that “a pessimist is an optimist with experience.” If one looks for regional security cooperation as a *deus ex machina* in solving the region’s security problems, both experience and the near- to mid-

**“Iran is likely to be deterred if the United States continues to play its current regional role.”**

term conditions shaping the future provide every reason to be cautious and doubtful. However, the broader structure and efforts of given regional powers like

Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. in shaping their forces and the overall pattern of cooperation between key regional states and the United States offer a far more promising situation.

Iran is likely to be deterred if the United States continues to play its current regional role, as European states provide their current levels of limited support. International action has reduced the nuclear threat, and ISIS is scarcely winning. A combination of peace efforts and military developments have also limited the scope of any probable form of renewed Arab-Israeli conflict. The MENA region may not be moving toward stability, but there is no clear reason to assume that major new forms of conflict or instability will take place. As the scorpion said to the frog, “this is the nature of the Middle East.”

## ENDNOTES

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