

THE GULF MONARCHIES' ARMED FORCES AT THE CROSSROADS

David B. ROBERTS

May 2018

The Institut français des relations internationales (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental and a non-profit organization.

As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience. Using an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

With offices in Paris and Brussels, Ifri stands out as one of the rare French think tanks to have positioned itself at the very heart of European debate.

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

ISBN: 978-2-36567-870-4

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2018

How to quote this document:

David B. Roberts, « The Gulf Monarchies' Armed Forces at the Crossroads », *Focus Stratégique*, No. 80, Ifri, May 2018.

Ifri

27 rue de la Procession 75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE

Tel.: +33 (0)1 40 61 60 00 – Fax : +33 (0)1 40 61 60 60

Email: accueil@ifri.org

Website: ifri.org

Focus stratégique

Resolving today's security problems requires an integrated approach. Analysis must be cross-cutting and consider the regional and global dimensions of problems, their technological and military aspects, as well as their media linkages and broader human consequences. It must also strive to understand the far reaching and complex dynamics of military transformation, international terrorism or post-conflict stabilization. Through the “**Focus stratégique**” series Ifri's Security Studies Center aims to do so, offering new perspectives on the major international security issues in the world today.

Bringing together researchers from the Security Studies Center and outside experts, the “**Focus stratégique**” alternates general works with the more specialized analysis carried out by the team of the Defence Research Unit (LRD or *Laboratoire de Recherche sur la Défense*).

Author

David B. Roberts is an academic at King's College London based at the UK Defence Academy and the former Director of the RUSI Qatar think-tank. He has written extensively about the foreign policy, international relations, security, and defense of the Gulf monarchies. His book, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State*, was published in 2017.

Editorial Board

Chief Editor: Élie Tenenbaum

Editorial assistant: Esther Soulard

Abstract

Traditionally, the armed forces of the Gulf monarchies played an incidental role when it comes to securing the states. The ultimate fighting power of the monarchies was relatively unimportant; rather, the monarchies' security was derived from international relations that were sometimes founded on, and often sustained and fed by, ongoing military sales. But, for some monarchies at least, this is changing. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are now deploying their own forces in hitherto unseen kinetic ways, as in Yemen, indicating that they genuinely seek their own fighting power. In the midst of the Gulf crisis, Qatar has doubled down on defense procurement both to boost its military and to increase its international entanglements. Meanwhile, Oman and Kuwait continue their methodical military procurement, as is Bahrain, in addition to assiduously following Saudi Arabia's regional policies to boost relations with Riyadh.

Résumé

Les armées des monarchies du Golfe n'ont historiquement joué qu'un rôle accessoire dans leur stratégie de sécurité nationale. Leur capacité de combat demeurant, en définitive, très limitée, la sécurité de ces États provenait davantage des politiques internationales fortement entretenues par d'importantes acquisitions d'armement. Cependant, cette dynamique est aujourd'hui en voie d'évolution, tout du moins pour certains de ces États. Le déploiement inédit des forces saoudiennes et émiraties, tel qu'au Yémen, atteste d'une réelle volonté d'utiliser leur propre capacité militaire. Confronté à une crise diplomatique sans précédent, le Qatar s'appuie pour sa part sur sa politique d'acquisition d'armement pour développer ses capacités militaires et renforcer les solidarités internationales en sa faveur. Quant au Koweït et à Oman, ils continuent d'augmenter leurs achats sur étagère, tout comme Bahreïn qui cherche aussi à intensifier ses relations avec Riyad, en s'alignant systématiquement sur ses politiques régionales.

Table of contents

INTRODUCTION	9
SAUDI ARABIA: A TRANSITIONING HEGEMON?	13
The Evolving Saudi Context.....	13
The Lumbering Sparta.....	17
The Challenges Ahead.....	18
THE UAE: A BURGEONING REGIONAL POWER	23
Recent Context	23
The Little Sparta.....	25
The Challenges Ahead.....	28
QATAR: THE DEFIANT EMIRATE	31
Roots of Crisis	31
A Growing Sparta?.....	33
Going forward: Support via Procurement.....	34
KUWAIT, BAHRAIN AND OMAN	37
A Tale of Three Nations.....	37
The three militaries today.....	39
Going forward	41
CONCLUSION	43

Introduction

Something is happening with the military forces of the Arab monarchies in the Gulf. For the first time in their modern history, some states are using their forces as genuine combat troops, at the behest of their leadership, to secure wider political objectives. This would sound absurd in many other countries, where troops are often deployed or otherwise used at the direction of leadership to achieve wider political aims. But, despite spending astronomical amounts of money on procurement over recent decades – at least \$1.5 trillion among the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE – these forces, kitted out with often the latest equipment, have seldom actually been used in the traditional sense in generations.¹

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have undertaken significant military operations in Yemen since 2015 with their own forces as the key part of a wider coalition.² The UAE has further engaged in a myriad of other operations in the counter-ISIS fight, unilaterally in Libya, and supporting NATO forces in Afghanistan.³ Qatar as well as the UAE have joined NATO in operation *Unified Protector* over Libya in 2011.⁴ As for Bahrain and Kuwait, they joined in more minor ways the 2015 Saudi-led Yemeni operations.⁵

Much of this military activity is new. Indeed, the first thing to note is that nothing of this scale, complexity, and level of intervention has been undertaken before by the monarchies and their militaries in generations. The second key point is that some aspects of these deployments have been surprisingly successful. “The wider understanding of the state of the art of Gulf militaries tends to be relentlessly negative about the abilities of these forces, often with good reason.⁶ But key vignettes such as the Emirati

1. *Sipri Extended Military Expenditure Database, Beta Version*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), 2016.

2. D. B. Roberts and E. Hokayem, “Reassessing Gulf Security: The War in Yemen”, *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 58, No. 6, 2016, p. 157-186.

3. P. Bienaimé and A. Rosen, “The Most Powerful Army You've Never Heard Of”, *Business Insider*, November 6, 2014, available at: uk.businessinsider.com.

4. D. B. Roberts, “Behind Qatar's Intervention in Libya”, *Foreign Affairs*, September 28, 2011, available at: foreignaffairs.com.

5. J. Shapiro, “Why Are 10 Countries Attacking Yemen?”, *Brookings*, March 26, 2015, available at: brookings.edu/blog.

6. For key critiques see N. B. DeAtkine, “Western Influence on Arab Militaries: Pounding Square Pegs into Round Holes”, *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 2013; N. B.

amphibious landing in an Aden suburb in 2015 and their wider counter-terrorist campaign throughout 2016 and 2017 evidenced serious levels of campaign planning and an ability to execute operations.⁷ Similarly, the combining of a dozen air forces in Saudi Arabia to launch a sustained military air campaign is, logistically-speaking, impressive.⁸

However, these challenging vignettes need to be compared with the wider strategic results of operations. In the south, the UAE has so far enjoyed relative success. But in the Saudi Arabia-led air campaign and operations around its border in the high north of Yemen, there has been little other than persistent failure. The air campaign has failed to such a degree that it makes the Houthis – a ferocious, war-crime-committing actor in Yemen⁹ – look at times like a victim.¹⁰ This wider subject is, therefore, ripe for discussion to investigate what other assumptions about Gulf politics are not necessarily as salient as they perhaps once were.

Although this paper covers all six of the Arab Gulf monarchies, it tackles the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar individually and the other three (Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain) as a group. This division reflects the realities on the ground: not only are military forces in the former three states deep in flux but the ongoing June 2017 Gulf crisis centers on Qatar and is led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman are dealt with together as these states are pursuing similar kinds of military procurement and training policies. Moreover, these states have similar approaches to their security and defense. Within each country section, there will be a focus on the evolving political and regional milieu of the state(s) in question. Such discussions will be tied into the evolution of the armed forces and the kind of role that they play in politics, and conclusions will be drawn from the available evidence as to the role of the forces.

This paper concludes by highlighting commonalities and differences that emerge from the case studies. When it comes to the role and use of the military, a picture emerges of diverging approaches among the six Gulf monarchies. On the one hand, the UAE and Saudi Arabia are heavily

De Atkine, "Why Arabs Lose Wars", *The Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1999; K. M. Pollack, *Arabs at War: Military Effectiveness, 1948-1991*, University of Nebraska Press, 2004, p. 574; R. L. Russell, "Future Gulf War," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, No. 55, 2009.

7. M. Knights and A. Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 10, 2015, available at: [washingtoninstitute.org](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org).

8. R. Shield, "The Saudi Air War in Yemen: A Case for Coercive Success through Battlefield Denial," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2017, p. 461-489, available at: [tandfonline.com](http://www.tandfonline.com).

9. Telegraph Foreign Staff, "UN Experts Say Yemen Opponents May Have Committed War Crimes", *The Telegraph*, January 31, 2017, available at: [telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk).

investing in their military forces and have demonstrated their ambition to actually use their military forces as tools of policy. On the other hand, Qatar's military procurement agenda is mostly used as a means of diplomatic influence. It is also interesting to note that recently Qatar's defense spending has become inversely proportional to the health of its relations with its Gulf neighbors: the worse the relationship, the more Qatar spends on US, UK, and French military equipment. Kuwait and Oman, and to a lesser degree Bahrain, slowly invest in their military forces with little evident desire to use them in a significant fashion. They too would rather continue the tried-and-tested policy of using significant defense procurement as a means to maintain and deepen vital international alliances with important (usually, if not always) Western states.

Saudi Arabia: A Transitioning Hegemon?

The Evolving Saudi Context

Saudi Arabia is the undisputed hegemon of the Arabian Peninsula: larger in size, population, wealth, and influence than its Kuwaiti, Bahraini, Qatari, Emirati, Omani, and Yemeni neighbors. But it has long been in a struggle for wider regional supremacy with Iraq and especially Iran, a state that is in all senses antagonistic to Saudi Arabia. Iran is a revolutionary, Shia, Persian republic. Saudi is a conservative, Sunni, Arab monarchy. Since the 1979 Iranian Revolution that installed the current Islamic theocracy, Saudi Arabia has, intermittently for good reasons or based on exaggerated but keenly felt concerns, feared Iranian influence and sought to counter it. Typically, the Saudi ploy to counter Iran was to enlist the support of allies, notably the United States, or to strive to embolden Sunni partners around the wider region.

Indeed, the US-Saudi relationship has been remarkably solid since the 1940s. The US has long recognized how critical Saudi Arabia could be in terms of a consistent and cheap provider of crude oil. US companies have shepherded the foundation of the Saudi oil industry and turned Aramco, the national oil company, into an oasis of professionalism and productivity in the Saudi economy. The successive US administrations have, with remarkable consistency from President Roosevelt to Donald Trump, underpinned Saudi Arabia's security as a keystone of their own strategic agenda. This has taken the form of selling arms in abundance to Saudi Arabia's various security services, engaging in large-scale training programs, and building huge amounts of military infrastructure in the Kingdom to US specifications.¹¹

Saudi rulers, for their part, have long fed the US relationship, eager to keep Washington engaged with the ongoing stability of the Kingdom. Only recently, however, has the Saudi 'counter Iran' plan included both the

11. There is a small cottage industry of academic books examining the US-Saudi relationship, at least from the American side. Arguably the best are R. Vitalis, *America's Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007; R. Bronson, *Thicker Than Oil: America's Uneasy Partnership with Saudi Arabia*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008.

acquisition of military equipment and the explicit intent that this equipment might or would be used. Previously, weapons purchases tended to be seen more as a ploy to engender consistent and positive relations with strategic partners such as the US, the UK or France for that matter.¹²

Over the last fifty years, the Saudi state has invested more in its military force than most states in the world. Twice at least, it has engaged in what was at the time the world's largest procurement programs. First, starting in the 1980s, the Al Yamamah programs equipped the Royal Saudi Air Force with over one hundred British Typhoon fast-jets¹³. Second, from the late-2010s, a wider and larger procurement program with the US provided Saudi forces with a range of advanced helicopters, aircraft, and missile defense systems. However, despite the large financial outlays, most assessments judge that Saudi forces lack fighting power. This is to say that whenever Saudi forces have been called upon in recent years and decades, they have struggled to achieve set objectives.

But this ploy has worked. Saudi-US relations rebounded quickly and successfully after events that were expected to deeply test their relations like the Israeli Six Day war and the 1973 oil boycott.¹⁴ And when Saddam Hussein's forces threatened the Kingdom in 1990 after having rolled through Kuwait nearly unopposed, Saudi's elite called for international help rather than trust in its own military forces. The Saudi role in Operations Desert Shield and Storm was essentially unimportant. Even after the 9/11 attacks, which was perpetrated by 15 Saudis out of the 19 hijackers, US-Saudi relations continued more or less seamlessly.

The fallout of the 9/11 attacks – the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq – will in all likelihood prove to be the high watermark of US interaction in the Gulf. The Hobbesian vortex that followed the Iraq invasion and destabilized the region led many Gulf States to question the US impact on their security environment. That President Obama ignored pleas for support from long-term allies like President Mubarak in Egypt or even the Al Khalifah in Bahrain deeply worried the monarchies. The US relationship seemed rather pointless, if, when faced with some rioting, their central ally did not assiduously and comprehensively support leaders with whom successive US administrations had had long and close relations. That

12. D. S. Sorenson, "Why the Saudi Arabian Defence Binge?," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No. 1, 2014.

13. R. Matthews, "Saudi Arabia's Defence Offset Programmes: Progress, Policy and Performance," *Defence and Peace Economics*, Vol. 7, No. 3, 1996.

14. J. D. Ciorciari, "Saudi-US Allignment after the Six-Day War," *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2005.

Obama instigated the Iran nuclear deal was further proof that the US and the Gulf monarchies were on divergent and deeply dividing paths.

To be clear, the US is not abandoning the Gulf. Its military bases in Qatar, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain are as large and entrenched as they have ever been. This will not change in the foreseeable future. President Trump has moreover adopted a less lenient approach on Iranian affairs than his predecessor, indicating that some semblance of the Saudi, Emirati, and Israeli hostile world-view towards Iran has found a home at the heart of the Trump Administration. But the US mindset towards the Gulf and the Middle East has changed over the last decade. The US is increasingly engaging in off-shore balancing, leaving the Gulf monarchies to deal with the region themselves, with US support at arm's reach.

Saudi Arabia has heeded the US direction change and, encouraged by the UAE, is now seeking to secure the region by itself. On a variety of fronts, the de facto Saudi ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, sees the region as requiring immediate and profound intervention, thus explaining his shift towards far-reaching policies and unprecedented measures. In fact, Saudi Arabia's military is more active today than at any time since Ibn Saud's Ikhwan forces reconquered historic Al Saud heartlands and founded the third Saudi state at the turn of the 20th century¹⁵. However, Saudi forces have, in recent years, struggled to impose their military will on their enemies in conflict. When in 2010 Saudi sought to counter growing Houthi activities on their shared border with Yemen, operations went wrong.¹⁶ What seemed like a typical mismatch of forces – the high end Saudi military against the low-tech Houthis – that could lead to an easy win ended humiliatingly, with Saudi forces killed and captured forcing the state to sue for an ignominious peace.

More recently in Yemen, Saudi Arabia has, again, been suffering from the classic asymmetric paradox of a technologically advanced armed force struggling to convert its material advantages into strategic benefits against a hardened quasi-guerrilla force operating in its own inhospitable territory. Lessons were not learned. Since the start of the conflict in 2015, Saudi forces have struggled to cope, to secure their whole border, and to hunt

15. *Ikhwan*, literally meaning "brothers" in Arabic, here refers to the name for Ibn Saud's religiously-motivated "white" army. This phrase has no relation to the modern usage of this term which refers to the Muslim Brotherhood.

16. M. Horton, "An Unwinnable War: The Houthis, Saudi Arabia and the Future of Yemen", *Jamestown Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 14, No. 22, November 11, 2016.

down missile launchers that continue to target its cities, one of the central reasons the Saudis provided for launching the entire operation.¹⁷

Consequently, Saudi's reliance on US missile defense systems (Patriot batteries) has been increasingly under focus. Raytheon, the Patriot manufacturer, noted that Saudi forces had intercepted well over one hundred missiles since the start of the conflict.¹⁸ This makes them the most tested and experienced operators of the Patriots in the world. However, some spectacular failures called into question the reliability of the Patriot system and led to Saudi engaging in apparently serious talks with Russia to acquire their S-400 missile defense system.¹⁹

Saudi's military struggles are often compared with their Emirati counterparts that have enjoyed more successes in their campaign. It is true that Emirati forces have some notable successes to their name (*cf. infra*). But these two states are, by and large, operating in different theatres. Moreover, the Emiratis have been savvy enough to engage in a considered public relations campaign giving opportunities for scholars and journalists to better understand UAE operations. The same is not the case with Saudi, where the outreach from its military is nearly non-existent. In private, knowledgeable Saudis who are critical of their own state's performance maintain that there are real pockets of effectiveness in their forces. In particular, Saudi Special Forces teams are becoming highly experienced in the Yemeni conflict and operating to great effect, according to such sources.²⁰ But for scholars there remains no real way to triangulate such assertions.

Mohammed bin Salman is pursuing a range of policies that are both new and challenging to the typical Saudi *modus operandi*. Launching the war in Yemen is a key example. Never before have Saudi leaders taken as a provocative and as an engaging step as to use their forces in such an offensive manner. This unusually adventurous use of military force was undertaken because Mohammed bin Salman feared that the Houthis, the indigenous quasi-Shia Yemeni militia, might come close to consolidating their grip on Yemen as the dominant power. Such an eventuality could not be countenanced, for it could have led to the growth, the Saudis believed, in

17. D. B. Roberts and E. Hokayem, "Reassessing Gulf Security: The War in Yemen", *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 58, No. 6, 2016, p. 157-186.

18. B. Opall-Rome, "Raytheon: Arab-Operated Patriots Intercepted over 100 tactical ballistic missiles since 2015", *Defense News*, November 14, 2017, available at: defensenews.com.

19. J. Gambrell, "Videos Raise Questions Over Saudi Missile Intercept Claims", *Defense News*, March 26, 2018, available at: defensenews.com; "Saudi ambassador to Moscow: S-400 Missile Deal With Saudi Arabia in Final Stages", *Al Arabiya English*, February 20, 2018, available at: english.alarabiya.net.

20. Personal interview with a Saudi Military advisor, December 2, 2016.

a 'Hezbollah' type group (i.e. one supplied with weaponry and support by Iran) on the Arabian Peninsula, right on Saudi's border.

Decades of de facto reliance on the US for security and defense support were not useful in this situation. This security crisis did not resonate sufficiently in Washington DC for a polity tired of Middle East engagements, insensitive to local realities, and ever more introspective. While the US provided significant logistical support for the Saudi and UAE-led operations, it remained skeptical as to the merit of the Yemen campaign. Rather, President Obama judged that this was, in essence, the least that the US could get away with doing in support of a campaign that appeared to be of such critical importance to Saudi Arabia.

The Lumbering Sparta

The war in Yemen can be loosely divided into three parts, two of which are led by Saudi Arabia. The UAE dominates the operations in the south of the country, but Saudi dominates not only the northern operations along its border, but the wider air and sea coordination, and strike capabilities from Saudi territory. From what little open source information is available, it does not appear that Saudi's border conflict is going well.²¹ Core rationales that spurred Saudi to launch the war included securing the border from Houthi incursions, defanging to some degree the Houthis as an armed group with potential to undermine Saudi security, and, most critically, removing the Houthis ability to shoot ballistic missiles deep into Saudi territory. Saudi forces have, to varying degrees, failed on all counts.

Recognizing the size of the challenge, Saudi Arabia forged an impressive Arab coalition to engage in the Yemeni conflict. The air component of this coalition was particularly noteworthy. It contained aircraft from ten different states, six different air-frames including Sukhoi Su-24M *Fencer-D* from Sudan, and E-3A AWACS and Saab 2000E *Erieye* aircraft to provide control and early warning, and an array of heavy-lift and air-to-air refueling aircraft.²² That Saudi air fields were able to successfully support such a complex, ad hoc, and heterogeneous assortment of aircraft is a logistical triumph. The subsequent deployment of these aircraft is, unfortunately, less impressive. Again, related open source information remains rather vague, but it appears that the Saudi air force led the way with its own craft.²³ Still, according to the *New York Times*, Saudi pilots were not skilled enough to fly low enough to accurately deliver their

21. "Region: GCC's 'Near Abroad'", *Gulf State News*, Newsletter 1030, January 27, 2017.

22. R. Shield, "The Saudi Air War in Yemen: A Case for Coercive Success through Battlefield Denial", *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3, 2018, p. 461-489.

23. *Ibid.*

payloads, in contrast to Emirati pilots.²⁴ This is likely part of the reason as to why the wider air campaign is routinely pilloried in the international press and by non-governmental organizations. Indeed, after running out of obvious military targets early on in the campaign, the switch to a more attritional modus operandi has had disastrous effects on the humanitarian situation in Yemen.²⁵ The coalition's air campaign has become so tarnished that it has even made the Houthis look to some degree like the victims rather than the co-belligerents that they are.

When it comes to the ground campaign, there is an evident paucity of information for analysts to use, an issue compounded by the restrictive entry policy of the Saudi-led coalition into Yemen. It is thus unclear which forces are doing precisely what. Sudanese forces are sporadically reported to be working alongside their Saudi counterparts, along with local Yemeni forces that seem to be taking the lead in the advancing of Saudi coalition forces inland towards, for example, the port of Hodeida on the western coast of Yemen. The progression of the military campaign has been slow and costly. Saudi has lost at least twenty of its M1A1 main battle tanks and has precious little to show for it.²⁶

It is not entirely clear whether the lack of a 'victory' is down to military or political matters. The wider domestic politics in Yemen is in a paralyzed mess, even more so after the death of the former President Abdullah Salah in December 2017. As a man who has, whether in or out of power, dominated political calculations in Yemen for decades, his removal only complicated the already hideously complex political landscape. The Saudis – and everyone else – seem to have no idea how to force or coax Yemen's mosaic of political actors together towards compromise.

The Challenges Ahead

Spring 2018 has seen several interesting and important changes in the Saudi military realm. Increasingly, Saudi demands that its defense suppliers engage as much as possible in domestic production of weaponry. While BAE Systems, the prime contractor for the Al Yamammah deals, has

24. M. Mazzetti and E. Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. In Yemen", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2016, available at: nytimes.com.

25. R. Shield, "The Saudi Air War in Yemen: A Case for Coercive Success through Battlefield Denial", *op. cit.*, p. 461-489.

26. M. Weisgerber, "Saudi Losses in Yemen War Exposed by US Tank Deal", *Defense One*, August 9, 2016, available at: defenseone.com.

been doing this for many years, employing around 6000 people, the majority of which are Saudi nationals, the demands are only increasing.²⁷

There was a significant restructuring of the Saudi defense ministry in early-2018 alongside a round of retirements and promotions at the top of the Saudi military. The core of the reorganization saw a centralization of basic services like IT provision, procurement, and human resources issues under one command. This lessened the duplication of these roles in the separate arms of the armed forces. Moreover, following the practice of the UK, a Joint Forces Headquarters was established and expanded to direct operations. As contemporary conflicts require the combined efforts of all defense tools, it was believed that such a body would ensure smoother coordination between the three key forces (land, sea, air). Otherwise, the Royal Saudi Air Force and the Royal Saudi Air Defense Force have been amalgamated. This is seen as a requirement not least since Saudi skies have been repeatedly penetrated by Houthi ballistic missiles and this kind of threat is believed to resemble the more pressing danger posed by Iran. These changes are not solely driven by the failures of the Yemen campaign; they also mirror longer-term plans under Mohammed bin Salman to reform the Saudi military.

The Emiratis developed their own military capabilities, as will be discussed below in detail, by relying predominantly on three things: a sensible, workable military structure; the pressure to succeed coming from a committed and powerful leader; and the forging of real battle skills in hostile conditions. Saudi Arabia has tried to replicate some of these factors. It remains to be seen how well a mass force can improve. The Emirati experience suggests that there is more chance if a state focuses on a small, niche force (in its case, the Presidential Guard). But, Mohammed bin Salman is certainly the single, driven, and powerful leader who can, potentially at least, forge change. The only issue – but one that could prove impairing – is that his attention is split reforming the entire state from its economy to its social and public mores. Lastly, the experiences of Yemen will, surely, prove to be useful.

Another issue that remains unresolved focuses on the future of the Saudi National Guard (SANG). In November 2017, Miteb bin Abdullah Al Saud was relieved of his duties as SANG head, breaking the multi-decade link between the Abdullah branch of the Al Saud family and the SANG, which left many questions lingering. It remains to be seen how this fourth force, whose purpose evolved out of a tribally-rooted praetorian guard for

27. A. Al Omran and P. Hollinger, "Saudi Arabia Beefs Up Plans for Domestic Defence Industry", *The Financial Times*, March 15, 2018, available at: [ft.com](https://www.ft.com).

key segments of the Al Saud, will be incorporated back into the wider Saudi military apparatus. The SANG played a key role on the Yemeni border, they were also sent to Bahrain to symbolically support its government during the Arab Spring.²⁸ While they have not achieved operational or strategic success, such combat training is critical in the broader development of capability. Given that the force is still expanding, notably thanks to its burgeoning air component, and that it has the world's largest light armored vehicle fleet, the SANG will remain an important force.²⁹

Considering that Saudi Arabia, like its fellow Gulf monarchies, derives its wealth from sea-borne trade, its naval capabilities are curiously underpowered.³⁰ The first Saudi Naval Enhancement Program dates back to the 1980s. While the resulting procurement and capabilities that this program bequeathed led the Saudi navy to nominally be the most powerful in the region, the service was still beset with critiques. Reluctance to put to sea over long periods of time, a lack of thoroughness in training, and a feeling that the navy was the lesser of the services were sentiments that pervaded discussions with regional experts. The ongoing second Saudi Naval Enhancement Program is underway and the scope is huge, with lofty plans to replace "virtually all of its Eastern fleet."³¹ Costing at least \$15 billion, this program includes advanced US Littoral Patrol Ships and will replace Saudi ships reaching the end of their operational lives.³²

While the ships can be bought from the US or other states, the success of this new Enhancement Program rests on the Saudi's ability to revamp the softer sides (i.e. training, prestige) generally associated with the navy.³³ Given the importance of the Saudi's fleet in blockading Yemen, and the fact that it was attacked by the Houthis with an unmanned boat, this likely refocused the minds of Saudi leaders as to the importance of this force.³⁴

The leading service in Saudi Arabia is its air force, which is on paper one of the most capable in the world. The Saudi air force however, resembles the Saudi oil industry: an area that requires such a significant

28. D. Vergun, "Army Builds Sustaining Military Partnership with Saudi Arabia", *Army News Service*, January 11, 2018, available at: army.mil.

29. *Ibid.* Also see J. Judson, "Saudi Arabian National Guard Helicopter Force Takes Shape", *Defense News*, February 23, 2017, available at: defensenews.com.

30. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), "Chapter Seven: Middle East and North African" in *The Military Balance 2018*, London, Routledge, 2018, p. 364.

31. C. Hill, "Saudi Navy Expansion Program", *CIMSEC*, December 9, 2015, available at: cimsec.org.

32. *Ibid.*

33. M. Talev and A. Capaccio, "Saudis to Make \$6 Billion Deal for Lockheed's Littoral Ships", *Bloomberg*, May 19, 2017, available at: bloomberg.com.

34. See S. LaGrone, "Navy: Saudi Frigate Attacked by Unmanned Bomb Boat, Likely Iranian", *USNI News*, February 20, 2017, available at: news.usni.org; International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 364.

foreign role given the intrinsic complexities involved with procuring, training, and flying modern advanced machines that some of the issues that plague less complex and less prestigious areas of the military are not present. The backbone of the Saudi fast air fleet is a range of F-15s, Tornado, and Typhoon craft, supported by C-130 transporters, KC-130 tankers, and several air control and surveillance platforms.

Table 1. Saudi Arabia Force Structure and Main Equipment

	Personnel	Flagship equipment (selection) ³⁵
Army	75,000	<p>900 MBT: 140 AMX-30; 370 M1A2/A2S <i>Abrams</i> ; 390 M60A3 <i>Patton</i></p> <p>224 SP 155mm: 60 AU-F-1; 110 M109A1B/A2 ; 54 PLZ-45</p> <p>35 ATK Helicopters: AH-64 D/E <i>Apache</i></p>
Air Force	36,000	<p>222 FTR/FGA: F-15C/D/S <i>Eagle</i> ; <i>Typhoon</i></p> <p>7 AEW&C: 5 E-3A <i>Sentry</i> ; 2 Saab 2000 <i>Erieye</i></p> <p>15 Tanker/Transport: 6 A330 MRTT; 7 KC-130H <i>Hercules</i>; 2KC-130J <i>Hercules</i></p> <p>7 Tankers: KE-3A</p> <p>108 SAM: MIM-104D/F <i>Patriot</i> PAC-2/PAC-3</p>

35. MBT: main battle tanks; SP: self-propelled; ATK: attack/ground attack; FTR/FGA: fighter training ground attack; AEW&C: Airbone Early Warning & Control; SAM: surface-to-air missile.

Navy	13,500	<p>3 Destroyers: DDGHM <i>Al Riyadh</i> (<i>La Fayette</i> class)</p> <p>4 Frigates: FFGHM <i>Madina</i> (FRA F-2000)</p> <p>5 Amphibious Landing Craft: 3 LCM 6 (cap. 80) ; LCU x2 <i>Al Qiaq</i> (US LCU 1610) (cap. 120)</p>
National Guard	100,000 (73,000 active)	<p>132 SP 155mm: CAESAR</p> <p>41 Helicopters: AH-64E <i>Apache</i> ; UH-60 <i>Blackhawk</i> ; AH-6 <i>Little Bird</i></p>
Coast Guards	4,500	<p>8 Amphibious Landing Craft: 5 UCAC <i>Griffon</i> 8000; 3x other</p>

Source: *The Military Balance 2018*.

Mohammed bin Salman is effecting more change on the state as a whole, at a quicker rate than anyone in Saudi Arabia's recent history. The war in Yemen is only one facet of his influence using force as a means to pursue a foreign policy goal on an unprecedented scale. The vast procurement programs underway has echoes of similar binges in the recent past. But, given that Mohammed bin Salman is quite evidently such a transformative leader, the fact that he wants to genuinely deploy Saudi forces, and the reality that the UAE has, to some degree, shown the way in terms of developing Gulf forces to achieve operational outcomes, there is a genuine sense that 'this time' the procurement might be different. To be sure, Mohammed bin Salman faces enormous challenges to transition Saudi Arabia's military forces into a regionally capable force. But he evidently has the desire and the kind of personality to break through taboos and effect real change. We are yet to see whether this approach will lead to expected results.

In terms of Saudi's US alliance, although the US will remain a critical partner, it will likely prefer to stand in the background in the future. Barring a serious conflagration with Iran, US administrations seem to take more of a back seat in the Gulf, increasingly leaving the region to their local allies. US bases will remain in the region for the foreseeable future, but the tenor of the relationship seems to be changing. The US is becoming facilitator-in-chief and less the state actively leading on regional matters.

The UAE: A Burgeoning Regional Power

Despite being vastly smaller than Saudi Arabia, the UAE has joined the Kingdom pound-for-pound in the operations in Yemen. Since the early-1990s, UAE has been preparing its military forces for active combat. This dedicated and long-term approach meant that, when the need arose to deploy forces to Yemen, the UAE had not only the equipment (which all Gulf monarchies have, to greater or lesser degrees), but the desire and the capability to use its forces in hostile environments. Following some surprising Emirati successes early on in the campaign – especially when compared to Saudi Arabia’s struggles – many wonder what lessons Saudi Arabia’s Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud could learn from his Emirati counterpart, Mohammed Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, to improve his state’s military.

Recent Context

The Emirati armed forces are the most active among Gulf militaries. This has not come about by accident. Rather, the growth, sensible procurement, and, atypically for the region, effective training regimens that allow Emirati leadership to deploy forces are the results of careful planning nearly thirty years in the making. At the root of the aforementioned policies, as well as contemporary Emirati regional and international policies, is a unique and fervently-held Emirati world-view underpinned by a sensitive threat perception threshold.³⁶ Led by the state’s de facto leader, the Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the Abu Dhabi elite establishment that dominates the key political decisions in the UAE has long been deeply concerned about two issues: a wide-ranging threat from Iran and the profound dangers posed by internationalized political Islam. These twin concerns are now an intrinsic part of the Abu Dhabi strategic culture and are the key reason as to why, today, Emirati forces are considered pound-for-pound the most potent Arab Gulf military. In light of these concerns, and a burgeoning fear that a war-weary US may not actively want to intervene to assuage security issues in the Gulf, Abu

36. D. B. Roberts, “Mosque and State: The United Arab Emirates’ Secular Foreign Policy”, *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2016, available at: foreignaffairs.com.

Dhabi's leadership has long decided that it needs the capacity to intervene essentially because no one else is willing to do it in its stead.

Only hours before the UAE obtained independence from the United Kingdom in 1971, Iran seized three islands – the Greater and Lesser Tunbs and Abu Musa – from the proto-UAE federal states of Ras Al Khaimah and Sharjah. Lacking international support, the UAE was left impotent in the face of this attack marking its admission to the dangerous and anarchic world of independence. Though Dubai, as a port city focused on trade, adopted a conciliatory and pragmatic orientation towards Iran relatively quickly, Abu Dhabi, the capital of the Emirates, appears to have neither forgotten nor forgiven.³⁷

Abu Dhabi's leadership has long harbored concerns about supporters of political Islam. Though Al Islah, a local Muslim Brotherhood group, was set up in several Emirates, it was never officially based in Abu Dhabi. Gradually, relations between elites in Abu Dhabi and Al Islah deteriorated throughout the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In essence, Abu Dhabi's leaders were concerned about the informal power that Al Islah was garnering. Its members held ministerial positions and were also present in large numbers in various ministries including in the military. After the group consistently refused to voluntarily wind down its organization and take a step back in Emirati society, suspicions in Abu Dhabi's elite hardened.³⁸

Sporadically, tangential links were drawn between various terrorist acts and Al Islah, including the 1995 attacks in Egypt. Further, two 9/11 attackers were identified as coming from the northern Emirates, where Al Islah's hold is greatest. Nevertheless, Al Islah protested ignorance and innocence, claiming it did not condone such attacks, nor did it aspire to any kind of political position. But the Arab Spring was, as far as Abu Dhabi authorities were concerned, positive proof that the likes of Al Islah simply bided their time waiting for an opportunity to arise. Low-level agitation in Al Islah in the UAE at the beginning of the Arab Spring – meetings, petitions, etc. – confirmed Abu Dhabi's long-held fears that it was a group that did secretly want power.³⁹

Fueling the UAE's emergence is not just the Abu Dhabi-rooted perception that these threats exist and are multiplying, but that there is no

37. On the differences between Abu Dhabi and Dubai see C. Davidson, "The Emirates of Abu Dhabi and Dubai: Contrasting Roles in the International System", *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2007.

38. C. Freer, *Rentier Islamism: Muslim Brotherhood Affiliates in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2018, p. 96-105.

39. On this wider issue see D. B. Roberts, "Qatar and the UAE: Exploring Divergent Responses to the Arab Spring", *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 71, No. 4, 2017 ; C. Freer, *Rentier Islamism: Muslim Brotherhood Affiliates in Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates*, *op. cit.*

one else willing and able to counter them. Since the mid-1980s when the US first tepidly entered the Tanker War between Iran and Iraq, escorting and occasionally reflagging Gulf oil tankers, the US has dominated the Gulf security sphere. It has provided implicit and explicit protections for the Gulf monarchies. This was never clearer than in 1990 and 1991 with Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, when the US led the defense of Saudi Arabia and the routing of Saddam Hussein's forces.

The US entrenched its position on the Arabian Peninsula as the 1990s wore on, expanding its base footprint in all GCC states. The exigencies of regional wars in Afghanistan and Iraq meant that the GCC states became, for a time, even more critical as logistical nodes for operations in the 2000s. However, these wars marked the high-point of this cooperation and, in fact, the beginning of the end of close US-GCC alliance. With the dismal and brutal failure of the Iraq campaign, the US not only destabilized the region, but, as in Vietnam, disinclined the US public to back American involvement in foreign entanglements. Consequently, subsequent US administrations consistently sought to “off shore balance” providing the Gulf States with support to take care of their own security concerns.

This stepping back of the US meant that, when leaders in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh felt that there were critical threats emerging less than war from Iranian low-level interference or with the Houthis or with Al Islah, the US was evidently not going to play a role. This was exacerbated by the perception that the US abandoned allies of many decades including Hosni Mubarak in Egypt and the Al Khalifah in Bahrain at the beginning of the Arab Spring; that the US was shifting its focus away from the Gulf with the US “pivot to Asia”; and, worst of all, that the US was selling out the Gulf monarchies by engaging with Iran via the JCPOA.

The Little Sparta

Several areas of the Emirati military are widely judged to be particularly impressive by their Gulf peers, by the international forces who work with them, and by wider diplomatic communities aware of these matters. Leading the way is the UAE Air Force. Kitted out with advanced F-16s Block 60, Emirati pilots are near-universally perceived as being the best in the region. They are, alongside Australian counterparts, the only non-NATO nation allowed to fly close air support for US troops in Afghanistan; an unimpeachable testament to their skill.⁴⁰ In operations in Yemen too, Emirati pilots have, according to a variety of sources from across the

40. R. Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States Has a Quiet, Potent Ally Nicknamed 'Little Sparta'", *The Washington Post*, November 9, 2014, available at: [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com).

monarchies, evidenced far more skill than their counterparts in the coalition. The *New York Times* summed up this notion, noting how Emirati pilots flew much lower than Saudis allowing them to be more accurate with their targeting.⁴¹

Elsewhere in Yemen, UAE ground operations were led by the Emirati Presidential Guard. An elite unit of some 12,000 men, it was stood up in the past decade alone and emerged from the Abu Dhabi desire to forge an effective force that could be deployed. Rather than seeking to transform the whole armed force, the elite reasoned that honing a more selective group would be more likely to succeed. Joining ISAF forces in Afghanistan for over a decade, Presidential Guard forces were trained and, to a degree, battle-tested.⁴² The UAE amphibious landing in an Aden suburb of Crater in August 2015 was the start of Emirati operation in the south of Yemen. Initially, the UAE asked the US for assistance transporting men and equipment to Aden. US authorities refused, reasoning that the UAE ought not get 'out of its depth' in such a way.⁴³ Emirati authorities thus acquired their own amphibious ship for \$30m, the HSV-2 SWIFT hybrid catamaran from Australian company Incat.⁴⁴ After Emirati special operators worked with local forces to secure a landing zone, they conducted the operation themselves, ultimately landing the majority of their Leclerc tanks, replete with close air support from attack helicopters, to backup operations. These wider Emirati operations were successful and the Houthis were quite swiftly pushed back north, liberating Aden and its environs, before the UAE launched counter-insurgency operations to the east.

These vignettes are noticeable by their absolute rarity in the Gulf landscape. Never before have Gulf forces deployed in this kind of dangerous, expeditionary, and kinetic manner. Moreover, the wider international community of scholars and analysts was shocked at the level of Emirati success. There are mitigating factors. The Houthis are widely perceived as interlopers and foreigners in the south of Yemen, so the UAE was certainly not going against the grain by expelling the Houthis. Nevertheless, the scale of the UAE initial successes in Yemen is impressive.

41. M. Mazzetti and E. Schmitt, "Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen", *The New York Times*, March 13, 2016, available at: nytimes.com.

42. D. P. Brown and A. I. Ahram, "Jordan and the United Arab Emirates: Arab Partners in Afghanistan," in G. A. Mattox and S. M. Grenier (eds), *Coalition Challenges in Afghanistan*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2015, p. 209.

43. M. Knights and A. Mello, "The Saudi-UAE War Effort in Yemen (Part 1): Operation Golden Arrow in Aden," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, August 10, 2015, available at: washingtoninstitute.org.

44. D. Beniuk, "Australia Rejects Incat Naval Vessel", *Sunday Tasmanian*, August 8, 2015, available at: themercury.com.au.

It remains to be seen how successful the UAE will be in the long-term with its counter-terrorism and insurgency operations in the east of the country.

The problem with improvising at such speed is that procurement decisions are made too quickly. For instance, while HSV-2 SWIFT was fast and performed well, the catamaran was vulnerable to missiles because of its thin hull. On October 1st, 2016, it was struck by Houthi forces at night transiting the Bab Al Mandeb and gutted by fire.⁴⁵ A more significant tragedy occurred in September 2015 when forty-five Emiratis were killed in a missile attack, presumably by Houthis, on a base in Marib, Yemen. Given the size of the country, this loss is astoundingly large and reverberations were felt around the UAE. In response, the government refused to back down. Operations continued and November 30th was set as a special day for commemorating the sacrifices of UAE soldiers over the years, indicating, to a certain degree, the state's willingness to accept and normalize combat fatalities.⁴⁶ The introduction of conscription in 2015 further reinforces the normalization of warfare within UAE society.

The UAE runs the Gulf's most advanced local defense equipment manufacturing industries. It has been an unrealized desire for decades for several Gulf states to forge a successful indigenous defense industry. Given that these states spend huge amounts on their militaries, not only do governments want to try to recycle such spending into the local economy, but the lure of creating high-technology jobs, and potentially of forging a new sales revenue source, is deeply enticing. In the UAE, with the 2014 establishment of the Emirates Defense Industries Company (EDIC) and subsequent reforms, the necessary basics fell into place and the industry was launched. Though still in its relative infancy, the UAE is an arms supplier to near and far states (Kuwait and Russia).⁴⁷ Exports are likely to ramp up in the near term, and a key part of the procurement process, for the UAE and Saudi in particular, will focus on both technology transfer as much as on traditional offset contracting.⁴⁸

45. The National Staff, "UAE Civilian ship hit by Houthis in 'terror act'", *The National*, October 2, 2016, available at: thenational.ae.

46. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 409.

47. Z. Stanley-Lockman, "The UAE's Defense Horizons", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 2, 2017, available at: carnegieendowment.org.

48. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 361-362.

Table 2. UAE Force Structure and Main Equipment

UAE	Personnel	Flagship equipment (selection) ⁴⁹
Army	44,000	421 MBT: 45 AMX-30; 340 <i>Leclerc</i> ; 36 OF-40 Mk2 (<i>Lion</i>) 181 SP 155mm guns: 78 G-6; 85 M109A3; 18 Mk F3
Air Force	4,500	137 FGA: 78 F-16E/F Block 60 <i>Fighting Falcon/Desert Eagle</i> ; 59 <i>Mirage 2000-9DAD/9EAD</i> 2 AEW&C Saab 340 <i>Erieye</i> SAM: MIM-104F <i>Patriot PAC-3</i>
Navy	2,500	1 Frigate – FFGH <i>Abu Dhabi</i> with 2 twin launchers MM40 <i>Exocet</i> Block 3, 176mm gun 7 Landing craft: 4 LCP Fast Supply Vessel (multipurpose); 5 LCU (capacity 40-56 troops)
Presidential Guard	12,000	50 MBT: <i>Leclerc</i>

Source: *The Military Balance 2018*.

The Challenges Ahead

There is little reason to expect Emirati ambitions to dim in the near future. The base infrastructure that the Emiratis are installing around the Horn of Africa (notably in Eritrea) and Yemen to support their campaign is extensive and will endure.⁵⁰ These kinds of bases facilitate Emirati wider ambitions. The state sees itself as at the forefront of the Gulf's security architecture. In an era where America's commitment to Gulf security is

49. MBT: main battle tanks; SP: self-propelled; FGA: fighter ground attack; AEW&C: Airborne Early Warning & Control; SAM: surface-to-air missile; FFGH: fire-fighting frigate with SAM.

50. "The Ambitious United Arab Emirates - the Gulf's "Little Sparta", *The Economist*, April 6 2017, available at: economist.com.

tepid at best, the UAE is saddling up and filling the gap. In this sense, the Trump Administration is of one mind with the Obama Administration: they share a same reluctance to get too deeply involved.

The only real difference is that Trump cares even less what the Gulf monarchies get up to in their own region; witness the US willing impotence in the face of the excesses of the War in Yemen or the Qatar crisis. It remains to be seen what the Trump Administration does with the Iran nuclear deal. Certainly, there is mounting pressure from hawkish Republican circles and influential Gulf allies on President Trump to renege on the deal. With the removal of Rex Tillerson from the State Department, the abrogation of the Iran nuclear deal moves even closer, though in the turbulent politics of the Trump era anything remains possible.⁵¹

Either way, the UAE is preparing itself to confront an ever more aggressive Iran. Their counter-Houthi operations in Yemen result from precisely this kind of logic. The UAE now possesses arguably the Arab world's most tested and most experienced armed force in its Presidential Guard. This will remain the tip of the Emirati spear, backed up by a NATO-level capable fast-jet fleet that has even added (and tested in Yemen) drone capabilities to its repertoire in recent years.

Bases in the Horn of Africa are there to provide for operations in Yemen and, in the future, to give the UAE a foothold to protect one of the world's key maritime choke points, the Bab Al Mandeb strait, the gateway to the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. Not only has this area been plagued by piracy in the recent past, but the Gulf States have long been concerned about Iran's influence expanding in the region. In order to develop its role as a regional power and deny Iran opportunities to make diplomatic inroads in the area, the UAE has much work to do to shore up existing local political alliances in Somalia as well as to pursue a proactive role in Eritrea.⁵²

Operations in Yemen are likely to still last many years, particularly the on-going counter-insurgency campaign. During this time, the armored component of the UAE's deployment may well diminish as the south of the Yemeni state is increasingly free from Houthi threat. More generally, the UAE appears to be agnostic on the importance of retaining Yemen as a single, unitary state – as opposed to Saudi Arabia, whose leadership appears set on retaining Yemen's unity.

51. P. Wintour, "Fears grow for future of Iran nuclear deal in wake of Tillerson's removal", *The Guardian*, March 13, 2018, available at: [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com).

While the UAE has shown a surprising ability to deploy and conduct relatively large-scale operations by itself, as exemplified by its air campaign, US support remains the behind-the-scenes all-important grease that facilitated operations, providing thousands of hours of air-to-air refueling and other logistical support. Nevertheless, save for the differing approach to Iran under the Trump administration, the US's mentality has not changed. In fact, it appears the US is enforcing a similar foreign policy to the Nixon Doctrine of the 1970s, whereby the US President took a 'hands-off' approach to regional security and delegated the upholding of its 'twin pillar' policy to its regional policemen, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Only times have changed: now the UAE is one of the key regional policemen operating to, as far as its leadership is concerned, secure the region from evident Iranian menaces.

Qatar: The Defiant Emirate

Although Qatar shares many commonalities with the other Gulf monarchies, from the late-1980s onwards, a defiantly independent streak in the state's foreign policy emerged. While this sporadically healed and ruptured over the years, by far the serious issue occurred with the Gulf crisis of June 2017. It resulted in a constraining embargo and a diplomatic crisis that is far from over. As far as its armed forces are concerned, Qatar is also apart from Saudi Arabia and the UAE as it has not necessarily sought to take the operational turn of the former. But, particularly since a minor Gulf crisis in 2014, Qatar has redoubled its military procurement efforts to embed itself with as many strategic partnerships with the main great powers involved in the region as it can.

Roots of Crisis

Like several of its fellow Gulf monarchies, Qatar obtained independence from the United Kingdom in 1971 although its foreign relations only truly changed in the late 1980s. By then Hamad bin Khalifah Al Thani, the Crown Prince, was rising to power and increasingly overseeing state policy. Under his de facto rule and then his de jure rule from 1995 until 2013, Qatar emerged as an interventionist state across the wider Middle East and North Africa region. With the dawning of the Arab Spring from 2010, it seems Qatar increasingly sought to support Islamists in their struggles for power. This was not a slavish policy to support Islamists as it is sometimes claimed, but more a quixotic result of circumstance, happenstance, naivety, and some loose preference.⁵³

Under Hamad, the Qatari military was all but ignored as a tool of state policy. Aside from the procurement of a small fleet of French *Mirage 2000* there was conspicuously little procurement or focus on the military for the next two decades. Hamad preferred to rely on US relations, rooted in the critical Al Udeid air base, and Qatar's soft power to secure the state. Only when Crown Prince Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, Hamad's son, took over the Qatari military portfolio in the 2000s did the Qatari military gain more

53. On the emergence of Qatar and the various elements of its policies see D. B. Roberts, *Qatar: Securing the Global Ambitions of a City State*, London, Hurst & Co., 2017.

prominence. With procuring of US heavy lift aircraft (C-17 and C-130J Super Hercules transporters), Tamim reanimated the military. While Hamad preferred to focus on other levers of soft power, Tamim took a more traditional hard power approach by building Qatar's military portfolio.⁵⁴ The two leaders' approaches combined in 2011 when Qatar and the UAE joined the NATO Operation Unified Protector that sought to protect civilians in Libya, but de facto provided cover for the overthrow of the Libyan dictator. Aside from a few non-kinetic peace operations in the 1990s and 2000s and a minor role in a battle in Kuwait in 1991 (Khafji), the Qatari military has been unoccupied, making the Libyan intervention all the more remarkable.

Tamim oversaw a slow but sure growth in the Qatari forces. However, with worsening relations with Qatar's three closest neighbors, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE, in 2014 and, to a far more serious degree in 2017, Qatar's procurement policies changed. Everyone knew relations were tense, but quite how bad they were surprised many. Although there are various issues at the root of the Qatar crisis, its essence lies in the Saudi and Emirati belief that Qatar does not have their best interests at heart. These states think that Qatar has acted recklessly for years if not decades, snugly cocooned in the security it derives from the world's strongest social bargain and the presence of a huge US air base mere kilometers from the Emir's bed. Arguably, this very security led Qatari leaders into a situation whereby they did not fully consider the consequences of their actions; of precisely how much their neighbors or other regional states would deeply resent and be concerned about the stoking of Islamist forces around the region or the myriad other complaints lodged against Qatar.⁵⁵

A key part of Qatar's reaction to the crisis was a torrent of procurement which took place across the services as it sought to secure itself against the increasing belligerence of its neighbors. To some extent, Qatar wanted to endow itself with immediate deterrence capability. This is best highlighted by the acquisition of the Chinese SY-400 short range ballistic missile system, which was paraded at National Day celebrations in December 2017.⁵⁶ Otherwise, Qatar was doubling down on previous policies that sought to make it an indispensable state to as many important countries as possible and to make the likes of the US, the UK, France, and Italy as dependent as possible for investment on the continued stability

54. On their approaches to Qatari security see D. B. Roberts, "Securing the Qatari State", *The Arab Gulf States Institute Washington*, Issue Paper 7, June 2017, available at: agsiw.org.

55. On the crisis see D. B. Roberts, "A Dustup in the Gulf: The Meaning of the Intramonarchy Spat", *Foreign Affairs*, June 13, 2017, available at: foreignaffairs.com.

56. A. Panda, "Qatar Parades New Chinese Short-Range Ballistic Missile System", *The Diplomat*, December 19, 2017, available at: thediplomat.com.

and security of the current Qatari government. This kind of rationale makes more sense when considering the gargantuan procurement (at least \$15 billion in the last year alone) Qatar is currently undertaking. This is primarily because given that Qatar has a population of around 300,000 and a military of under 12,000 men, it is near impossible to conceive of how it could actually train up a force sufficient to man the inventory of kit that is on order.

A Growing Sparta?

Qatar's air force is the center piece of its military. The state now has a fleet of strategic transport aircraft second only in size in the GCC to the UAE. Qatar's fast jets remain updated but essentially antiquated 1990s era *Mirage 2000s*. This is set to change. Qatar has on order 36 French *Rafale*, 24 British *Typhoon*, and 36 American F-15QA (for "Qatar Advanced") due for delivery over the next decade. While these three planes will give Qatar a real capability mix, any military advantage is outmatched by the reality that they will be more expensive and more difficult to equip, train, maintain, interoperate, and deploy. Overall, the advantages of such a convoluted procurement are almost exclusively in the political realm and tied to the perceived benefits Qatar derives from enjoying such close cooperation with the US, the UK, and France, three permanent members of the UN Security Council. Ancillary benefits of these deals increase Qatar's visibility to key decision makers in these states, increase the interoperability between Qatari military forces and the forces of these states, notably with the standing up of a new *Typhoon* squadron in the UK (No. 12) where Qatar and RAF officers will work side by side.⁵⁷ Qatari officers are likely to be further stretched too thin with the ongoing acquisition of US-made AH-64 Apache attack helicopters.

Land and naval forces in Qatar play more of a secondary role. The Army procured up to 62 German-made *Leopard* main battle tanks in 2015 to replace French AMX-30, giving Qatar a potent platform, though it remains to be seen how effective the state can be with this complex kit. Qatar further reflects the curious Gulf aversion to developing international class naval forces displayed across the Gulf, despite its wealth, even more so than other Gulf States, being highly dependent on sea borne trade. Yet, mirroring similarly grand procurement elsewhere, Qatar is revamping its

57. J. Peck, "Multi-billion Deal With Qatar Sees New East Midlands RAF Squadron Set Up", *Leicester Mercury*, January 2, 2018, available at: leicestermercury.co.uk.

navy with a range of large procurements and training contracts being handed out.⁵⁸

Qatar deployed some forces to Yemen to join its Gulf neighbors in the ongoing 2015 conflict. This was, however, foremost a signal for Qatar to attempt to align itself with emerging Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) actions in Yemen. Their withdrawal from Yemen amid the deep acrimony of the Gulf crisis of 2017 left no obvious operational holes in the wider coalition efforts in Yemen.

Table 3. Qatari Force Structure and Main Equipment

	Personnel	Flagship equipment ⁵⁹
Army	12,000 (incl. 3,500 Emiri Guard)	73 MBT: 30 AMX-30; 43 <i>Leopard 2A7</i> 52 SP 155mm: 28 Mk F3; 24 PzH 2000
Air Force	1,500	12 FGA: <i>Mirage 2000D/ED</i> SAM: MIM-104E <i>Patriot PAC-2</i> 18 TPT: 8 C-17A <i>Globemaster III</i> ; 4 C-130J-30 <i>Hercules</i> ; 6 Personnel transport
Navy	1,800 (2,500 incl. Coast Guard)	1 Amphibious Landing craft: LCT <i>Rabha</i> (cap. 3 MBT/110 troops) 11 Patrol crafts/ships (with guided missiles)
Internal Security Force	Up to 5,000	/

Source: *The Military Balance 2018*.

Going forward: Support via Procurement

It is interesting to consider the role of the Qatari military in the future. Quite evidently, if it is going to man its forces, it will need to rely on a large and ever-growing number of foreigners. Already there are many foreigners

58. "Qatar Seals 5-Billion-Euro Navy Vessels Deal with Italy", *Reuters*, August 2, 2017, available at: [reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com).

59. MBT: main battle tanks; SP: self-propelled; FGA: fighter ground attack; SAM: surface-to-air missile; TPT: transport.

in the Qatari forces. Accurate numbers are difficult to obtain, but informal estimates suggest that of the 12,000 assumed to comprise the Qatari military, a clear majority non-Qatari, with men coming from Jordan, Yemen, and Pakistan among other states. This number can only increase. Qatar introduced military training for young nationals in 2014, and anecdotal evidence suggests that this resulted in a short uptick of recruits for the military.

Yet, the numbers herein are not sufficient to match the requirements and there are no indications as to how the Qatari military will meet its force requirement gap. When asked about this issue, the Minister of State for Defense simply joked that every Qatari could do the job of two foreigners. In reality, this is a thorny and expensive issue. Pilots able to fly NATO standard jets are not in abundance and will not come cheap. Also, it must not be forgotten that *Typhoon* comes with a range of ITAR (International Traffic in Arms Regulations) restrictions as to which nationalities can fly or even work on the planes given the propriety US technology on the airframes.

In many ways, none of this matters. Qatar has not procured 96 modern fast jets just to put them to the air. Their importance lies in the international relations that will come along with their procurement, rather than the scale of military force that Qatar can now put out. Qatar's leadership is now resolutely focused on states near and far: close by, they are deeply concerned about further escalation from the Quartet (the Gulf three plus Egypt) that blockaded Qatar in June 2017. Given that Qatar was entirely blindsided in 2014 with the withdrawal of the Troika's Ambassadors from Doha and again in 2017 with the wider boycott, Qatar's leadership is now perennially on alert and, in essence, not trusting of the Troika. It is difficult to see how relations among the Gulf allies could in the near term be restored: trust is profoundly broken on all sides. Hence, Qatar's overt focus on its international allies and the importance of investing heavily in their economies and engaging in assiduous elite-level outreach to policy and governmental communities.

Among these newly enhanced defense procurement-boosted international relations, it is important to note the burgeoning role of Turkey. In 2014, Qatar and Turkey signed a wide-ranging military agreement that set the stage for the construction of a Turkish military "base" in Qatar. In reality, it came to resemble more of a training centre run by the Turkish military. Yet, the combined effect of the 2017 Gulf crisis and the Qataris' growing feeling of insecurity surrounded by deeply antagonistic states, meant that this military installation took on ever more importance and became ever bigger. According to some reports it can

accommodate up to 5000 troops, while extant plans state that around 3000 Turkish troops will base themselves in Qatar.⁶⁰

In this courting of international allies, Qatar can be expected to avoid any overtly controversial foreign entanglements. The days of Doha's unilateral foreign policy gambits are over. Any serious military engagement with Iran will likely be avoided as this would only further enrage their already angry neighbors. Equally, Qatar's elite will seek to take as many opportunities as possible to make Qatar invaluable to Western allies. Indeed, it was no coincidence that January 2018 saw Qatar use its C-17 heavy lift aircraft to support US and NATO forces in Afghanistan, as specifically noted by the US Secretary of Defense.⁶¹ More of this kind of support is to be expected as Qatar seeks to make itself as visibly useful as possible to the widest possible array of western nations.

60. "Turkey Sends More Troops to Qatar", *Al Jazeera*, December 27, 2017, available at: aljazeera.com.

61. T. Moon Cronk, "Mattis, Tillerson Co-Host First U.S.-Qatar Strategic Dialogue", *US Department of Defense*, January 31, 2018, available at: defense.gov.

Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman

It might seem unfair to discuss Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman together, for there certainly are differences between the states and their approaches. Notably, Oman constitutes a peculiar actor that, because of cultural and historical differences, has long enjoyed a reputation as aloof to the trends elsewhere among the monarchies. Nevertheless, the unifying concern is that the militaries of these three states play a relatively minor role in protecting the states. Rather, these states – and particularly Kuwait and Bahrain – have long sought to secure themselves under the suzerainty of other states, while Oman has used its quietist international profile to make sure it avoids international conflict.

A Tale of Three Nations

Gulf history has a cyclical quality to it. While today it is Doha, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai that are the modern, cosmopolitan, thrusting cities of the Gulf, back in the 1960s and 1970s, it was Kuwait City and Manama that played this kind of leading role. Their oil-fueled economies were firing away, while their mercantile histories meant that in wider commerce they were decades ahead of Doha and Abu Dhabi. Kuwait matched this economic dynamism in its foreign relations. It was aware of the regional challenges. Forces from deep within the Saudi peninsula long terrorized Kuwait's more sedentary towns in the 18th and 19th centuries. Meanwhile, Iraq loomed to the north, massing forces at the border on Kuwait independence in 1961, forcing British forces to return swiftly to deter an invasion.

Kuwait's answer to its intrinsic insecurity in a region pockmarked with conflict and larger powers was not to develop its own armed forces but instead to rely on 'dinar diplomacy', hoping that by engaging in consistent and extravagant foreign relations, it would engender other states to come to its defense and even secure the state when required.⁶² Similarly, as an assiduous supporter of the Palestinian cause, Kuwait hoped that some form of Arab brotherly solidarity would, perhaps in more subtle ways, reinforce the state's international position.

62. A-R. Assiri, "Kuwait's Dinar Diplomacy: The Role of Donor-Mediator", *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 1991; A-R. Assiri, *Kuwait's Foreign Policy: City-State in World Politics*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1990.

These approaches failed spectacularly with the 1990 Iraq invasion and the decimation of the state. Subsequent to Kuwait's liberation, the state simply sought to bury itself in US security guarantees, which included the stationing of large numbers of US troops on Kuwaiti territory as the central way to secure its security.

Bahrain's 20th and 21st century experience is not as dramatic. It too was perennially penetrated by foreign forces in its formative years. As an intrinsically small state unable to meaningfully stand up to large regional states like Iran or Saudi Arabia, it long relied on international relations. Originally, the UK secured Bahrain until independence in 1971. Then onwards, Bahrain adopted a relatively quietist international posture, essentially looking to avoid potential conflicts. This can be contrasted with Kuwait's policy to secure itself in the international limelight. Bahrain also made sure that the British naval base became a US naval base in 1971 and that, though the US presence was not comparable to its scale today, it was nevertheless an example of a key foreign state being invested in Bahrain's security. The formation of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 became another cooperative mechanism through which Bahrain sought to solidify its security. However, as its hydrocarbon resources dwindled over the years, and as the state became ever more reliant on economic support from Saudi Arabia, Bahrain moved into the Saudi sphere.⁶³ Though this arguably provides to this day some kind of rhetorical security blanket, it means that Bahrain's foreign policy is inextricably linked to Saudi Arabia's. Whether the Bahrain leadership wishes to differ on key issues is a moot point.

This relationship was particularly important during the Arab Spring riots in Bahrain. With regimes falling across North Africa, protests grew in Manama. Originally, the protests focused on socioeconomic grievances, but soon the Bahraini authorities became convinced that they were co-opted or otherwise overtaken by sectarian issues, and treated the protests accordingly. This is to say that the authorities cracked-down on the protests and local Shia political actors. Looking to support their ally, Saudi Arabia led a nominally-GCC security operation and trundled its National Guard armor into Manama in 2011. Though the Saudi forces in reality did not do anything, they acted as a rhetorical sign that the Saudi monarchy (with limited help from the Emiratis and other GCC states) was not going to let the Al Khalifah monarchy in Bahrain fall.

This is in contrast to Oman, a state that has long enjoyed its own international perspective. Looking out to the Arabian Sea, with a colonial

63. S. Mabon, "The Battle for Bahrain: Iranian-Saudi Rivalry," *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2012.

past of its own with territories in Pakistan and Tanzania, Oman is the least similar of all the GCC states. Aside from this different perspective, Oman also enjoys an unusual religious mix with the majority of Oman's Muslims adhering to the Ibadi school. Equally important is Sultan Qaboos, the man who made the modern Omani state. He shaped a state with a unique identity that consistently engaged in low-key diplomacy and mediation on regional issues.⁶⁴ This kind of diplomacy was a key part forging the 2015 Iran nuclear deal. Typically refusing to join in with wider GCC condemnation of Iran, Sultan Qaboos Oman also retained a far more active UK role in the midst of its defense force until late in the 20th century.

The three militaries today

Attention on the military in Kuwait is slowly increasing. Conscription and military training for young Kuwaitis returned in 2017.⁶⁵ Long expected procurement for a new generation of fast-jets was agreed with the US (for F/A-18E/F) and with Italy the lead nation for Typhoon in 2016. Although the exact breakdown of the Kuwaiti intervention in Yemen remains unclear, it did contribute fast-jets to the Saudi and UAE-led operations. Further, reflecting the way that Kuwait sees itself, it remains a critical basing point for US forces. Most recently, Kuwait hosted an extra 2,500 US troops as a forward staging post for potential operations against ISIS in Iraq.⁶⁶

Bahrain is somewhat more interventionist than Kuwait. It conducted air strikes with Gulf allies against ISIS targets in 2014 and contributed fifteen fast jets to the Yemen air campaign as well as an undisclosed, but believed to be small, number of its special forces to the land war against the Houthis. Though no single component was decisive to the wider conflict, the overall role of Bahrain, given its size, is relatively significant and reflects the importance that the state places on supporting Saudi Arabia in particular with its regional initiatives. Indeed, like Kuwait, Bahrain secures its state on a multilateral basis. Approximately 1500 Saudi forces remain in Bahrain since their deployment to show support in the midst of the 2011 Arab Spring riots in Bahrain. The US 5th fleet is forever expanding its footprint in Manama for approximately 5000 US forces. The UK also has four forward deployed minesweepers, support ships, and is making its own

64. A. Baabood, "Oman's independent foreign policy", in K. S. Almezaini, J.-M. Rickli (ed.), *The Small Gulf States: Foreign and Security Policies before and after the Arab Spring*, London, Routledge, 2016.

65. Z. Barany, "Why Have Three Gulf States Introduced the Draft? Bucking the Trend on Conscription in Arabia", *RUSI Journal: The Gulf Region, Military Personnel, Middle East and North Africa*, Vol. 162, No. 6, January 17, 2018.

66. C. Panzino and A. deGrandpre, "The U.S. Is Sending 2,500 Troops to Kuwait, Ready to Step Up the Fight in Syria and Iraq", *Army Times*, March 9, 2017, available at: armytimes.com.

presence 'permanent' under the old name of HMS *Juffair*.⁶⁷ This move, however, is more political rhetoric than a change in the reality: the size of the UK commitment is not expected to grow significantly.

Despite its small size, the military enjoys a prominent place in Bahrain and has long been conspicuously well funded.⁶⁸ Given it is a state of only 600,000 people, Bahrain has neglected to forge a large armed force. Its forces remain limited to defending the elite in Bahrain alone eschewing desires to create a large heavy lift force to send its forces to far-flung corners of the Middle East.⁶⁹ Bahrain's navy is similarly modest and reflects this mission. Without its own oil or gas shipping network to defend, and as host to one of the core US navy fleets, investment has been sensibly modest in this service.

Oman's military has a unique history whereby the UK played an outsized role. British officers were in charge of sections of the Omani military into the 1990s and forged a reputation for Omani forces as conspicuously professional. However, the state as a whole and its military forces in particular remain something of a black hole of academic research: nothing much is written on Omani matters. As such, it is difficult to ascertain how much the Omani military has developed in recent years. What is clear is that Oman's investment in its military is stymied by a struggling economy. With economic growth falling to only 1.8% in 2016, dwindling hydrocarbon reserves, and still high expectations for jobs and subsidies from citizens, the state is facing profound fiscal challenges. Accordingly, the defense budget shrank by 7.9% in 2016.⁷⁰ Despite this downward shift, the state is in the process of replacing key bits of kit. New F-16s have arrived and *Typhoons* are on order, while six new naval vessels also arrived in recent years to reanimate Oman's aging navy. The wider Omani military still enjoys a relatively strong reputation as a comparatively well-trained force, stemming not least from its own insurgency battles in the 20th century.⁷¹ But, more recently, these forces have seldom been tested. Oman contributed nothing kinetic to the ongoing operations in Yemen or against ISIS.

67. J. Hackett, "Dispute in the Gulf; Potential Defence Implications", *Military Balance Blog*, July 17, 2017, available at: iiss.org.

68. Z. Barany, "Bahrain Defence Force: The Monarchy's Second-to-Last Line of Defence," *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, December 9, 2016, p. 12.

69. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

70. International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2018*, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

71. C.H. Allen and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution, 1970-1996*, London, Routledge, 2014, p. 65-99.

Going forward

These three states have made their military, security, and defense orientation quite clear for decades now. Kuwait remains, nearly thirty years on, scarred by the Iraqi invasion and will endeavor to secure itself amid US security guarantees for as long as it can. Its focus on its own military forces remains a secondary thought to this central mechanism for securing the state, though extensive modernization, particularly in the air force and with the wider conscription, indicates that some in government do seek to emphasize a modicum of effort to give Kuwait's military a sharper edge. While a change of leadership may alter the priorities to a degree (Emir Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah is 88 years-old), the Kuwaiti Parliament, a powerful and intransigent legislative body, slows down every political decision made in the country. Accordingly, it is difficult to see Kuwait changing its orientation in the foreseeable future.

Bahraini forces remain small, but relatively well trained. State leaders realize that they lack capabilities and capacities to act unilaterally. Instead, Bahraini security is inherently and enduringly multi-lateralized as the state seeks to make its ongoing stability of prime importance to as many important states as possible. Though long a fading power, Britain was induced by Bahrain to make permanent its base on the island, to join the existing US behemoth base, giving these two nuclear powers an important stake in the ongoing stability of Bahrain. Furthermore, hedging for the longer term and driven by short-term necessity of economic support, Bahrain has profoundly aligned its foreign policy to that of Saudi Arabia. No state can escape its geography, and supporting to a surprising degree Saudi priorities in Yemen with all three Bahraini services, is a good way to deepen this alignment and secure support. Supporting Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Qatar in the 2017 crisis closes this key relationship, and, given that Bahrain has a long, bitter, and acrimonious history with Qatar, this policy was intuitively easy to follow.

Oman under Sultan Qaboos has not acquiesced to the same degree as Bahrain to Saudi hegemony of the Peninsula. The Sultanate would have likely received further financial support if it had supported Saudi regional goals, or had merely less often sought to seek an amelioration of relations with Iran, a policy that frequently irritates those in power in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. The near future for Oman will rest on the interplay of two clashing logics. Sultan Qaboos has in recent years been gravely ill and he is now 77 years-old. His successor has a difficult portfolio of issues to contend with. Oman will, even under the more optimistic economic scenarios, need extensive investment and financial support for its transition away from

hydrocarbons. This will provide a keen rationale and pressure for the next Omani leader to come to terms with regional GCC allies. Still, the legacy of the Sultan and his quiet, quasi-neutral approach to international relations has indelibly made a mark on contemporary Oman, becoming a part of its national character. No future leader could jettison this posture without deeply undermining his role as the putative guardian of modern Oman. These clashing priorities mean that the state will likely continue on its current trajectory for the foreseeable future seeking international security relations and assurances with the likes of the US and the UK. The Omani military, replete with its more modern acquisitions of recent years, will retain a niche but potent capability.

Conclusion

The GCC states are more similar to each other in myriad ways than they are different, but this does not stop real difficulties emerging between them. Indeed, the monarchies are each taking three separate and separating paths. First, led by Saudi Arabia and the UAE and closely followed to at least a rhetorical degree by Bahrain, this group is actively taking up the mantle of Gulf Security. This group does not feel that the US, the traditional guarantor of regional security for decades now, is actually interested in the job anymore. While the US may not quit the Gulf region in the near future, its role in aggressively defending the Gulf States, notably against Iran's many proxy forces, is minimal. While President Trump may scrap the Iran nuclear deal, he looks as unlikely as his predecessors to intervene kinetically to shore up regional security barring a large-scale Iran confrontation. In fact, during Mohamed bin Salman's visit to the Oval Office in March 2018, Trump listed at great length the tens of billions of dollars of military equipment the Saudis were buying from the US – painfully revealing his perception of the Gulf monarchies as little more than cash machines.⁷²

Taking security into their own hands, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are saddling up their forces to safeguard regional security. Their procurement, training, defense military reorganizations, and deployments reflect this reality: on all fronts these states are expanding their capabilities to aggressively defend themselves. Thus, while for decades, procurement in the Gulf has been more about paying little more than protection money to states like the US, these monarchies increasingly care about the actual end product (i.e. the ultimate fighting capabilities) of the forces. Indeed, as the aspirations of these leaders grow, and as they seek to deploy their forces on a larger scale around the wider Gulf region and beyond, leaders are demanding genuine kinetic abilities.

This is a key step change. Considering the mass of high-end military equipment that these states have procured in recent years, if this kind of transition to an active war fighting force can be seen outwith the UAE, the MENA region will witness the birth of a powerful grouping of states. The

72. StateDept, March 2018, "@POTUS Trump welcomes Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman of the Kingdom of #SaudiArabia to the @WhiteHouse" [Tweet].

intrinsic weaknesses within these states in terms of motivating and training troops to a high enough degree will be difficult to overcome. Still, the political will is evidently apparent in Abu Dhabi and, perhaps, Riyadh. And the region with an increasingly unencumbered Iran looks set only to increase in complexity and concern. Though operations in Yemen will have reminded leaders that such military operations are fiendishly difficult, the odds are that the next decade will see far more military operations than the last from these states.

Qatar is a state in a category of its own. The leaderships in Abu Dhabi, Riyadh, and Manama loathe the key aspects of Qatar's foreign policy orientation and *modus operandi*. Elites from these three states feel that they attempted to reason with Qatar over a period of years, to no avail. The result is a Qatar that is isolated like never before. Moreover, the depth of the intra-elite antagonism means that it is difficult to see how a rapprochement could take place in the near term. Consequently, Qatar has significantly ramped up its military-led diplomacy, using it as a lever to encourage key states such as the US, the UK, and France to engage ever more. In essence, they will come to act as proxies for Qatar, calming this situation and otherwise implicitly providing for its security. So far, this kind of calculation from Qatar – putting its eggs in the basket of military-rooted diplomacy – has worked. Of course, the other side of Qatar's massive procurement binge is the fact that the state will, nominally at least, obtain some significant military capabilities. But for these capabilities to act as a deterrent, they need to be credible – which at the moment they are not. For example, there are no real signs that Qatar could field the majority of its new aircraft when they arrive: the numbers of pilots and engineers simply are not there, while the hideously complex logistics of maintaining and running three different platforms remains a problem that Qatar is yet to engage with.

The last category of states in the Gulf contains Kuwait, Oman, and in its own way Bahrain. Kuwait and Oman firstly seek to assure themselves internationally by being relatively inoffensive and striving not to antagonize regional allies and adversaries. Oman takes this further than Kuwait and has developed quasi-neutrality into a genuine aspect of its national character. This is backed up by a small but historically well-trained military force. Kuwait has learned to its grave cost that one cannot rely on international relations alone and has instead sought to deeply entangle states like the US in its ongoing security and stability. Neither of these strategic ploys is likely to change. The national politics of Kuwait is deeply resistant to change, while the national character of Oman will similarly hold any future leader to maintain the enduring nature of the

state, no matter the economic pressures to align with other regional states like Saudi Arabia or the UAE.

Bahrain follows this second kind of *modus operandi* in seeking, above all else, to integrate itself into the orbit of “protector” states. The difference between Kuwait and Bahrain is that the latter is pressured by the exigencies of requiring financial support to seek alliances with Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as well as a backstop implicit alliance with the US. Accordingly, Bahrain needs to assure this local aspect of its overarching security strategy, and it feels that to do this it needs to mirror the increasingly assertive policies of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. This policy too, like Oman and Kuwait’s, looks unlikely to change in the near future.



ifri

institut français
des relations
internationales