



An Arab Army – coming at last?

by Florence Gaub

The 35th Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Doha this week set an important milestone: the decision to create both a joint naval force and a common counter-terrorist body. This is surprising because military alliances mean little in the Arab world: in spite of several attempts to foster greater cooperation, defence remains a national affair – although 71% of Arabs, according to opinion polls, support the establishment of a joint force alongside national militaries.

Now, not one but two extensive proposals for military cooperation have been floated over the last twelve months in the region: one which would see the creation of a joint command in the Gulf, and another which would form a military alliance encompassing certain Gulf states, Jordan, Egypt, and Morocco.

To date, these ideas have been met with cautious optimism, as the list of failed attempts at Arab collective security is almost as long as the list of violent conflicts in the region. But if either of these proposals succeeds, it would have arguably positive – and certainly transformational – repercussions for regional stability. Has the time for joint Arab militaries come at last?

So far, so little

Joint defence is not a new idea in the region; Arab states signed a treaty recognising ‘an attack on one

as an attack on all’ as early as 1950, which also allowed them to use ‘all steps available, including the use of armed force, to repel the aggression and restore security and peace’. The Gulf states signed a similar agreement in 2000, but expanded the solidarity clause so that any ‘danger threatening any of them means a threat to all of them’. But in practice, Arab states have not followed through with collective defence (as Kuwait and later Iraq discovered), and collective security remains a pipe dream.

In part, this is because the region is notoriously unstable and rife with intra- and inter-state war and mutual distrust. And due largely to the jealous guarding of sovereignty, the militaries of the region cooperate very little. Although Arab states have gone to war together against Israel (in 1948, 1967 and 1973), experimented briefly with joint deployments under an Arab League mandate (1961 in Kuwait and 1976 in Lebanon), and were part of American-led missions, joint manoeuvres and exercises have long been the exception rather than the rule. Arab leaders have, so far, sought to isolate their armed forces rather than push for greater interaction. Moreover, neither the League of Arab States nor the GCC were conceived as security organisations and, therefore, initially lacked both the mandate and the institutional capacity to further defence cooperation.

The only successful attempt at joint defence was the GCC’s Peninsula Shield Force; created in 1982 and numbering only 5,000 men, it failed in 1990



to deter or repel Iraq's attack on Kuwait. Although the Gulf states subsequently agreed on the need to reinforce their military posture, they reached different strategic conclusions: some deduced that there was only limited value in a regional security system, and preferred to rely on external aid (American, French and British), while others (especially Oman and Saudi Arabia) argued that more, not less, regional cooperation was the answer.

Since then, some tactical progress has been made in the Gulf: the Peninsula Shield has been turned into a mechanised infantry division with support units, and has grown in size to number some 40,000 men (who are, however, posted in their home countries). In addition, both a joint defence council and a military committee have been created. In 2006, Saudi Arabia suggested to dissolve the force and instead form a centralised command like the one proposed today, flanked by decentralised national forces earmarked for the GCC. Although the idea was initially welcomed, it has since stalled. Controversially, 2,000 Shield troops were deployed to Bahrain in 2011 to quell the violent demonstrations in the country. While this initially enhanced the force's value in the eyes of many Gulf leaders, it ultimately led to the decision to replace it altogether with a more muscular security architecture.

A new dawn

2014 has breathed new life into joint military approaches to common challenges. Although the Gulf states have progressively altered their defence posture through increased arms purchases and joint military manoeuvres over the last decade (not just through the Peninsula Shield Force but also bilateral exercises), it was the last year which drastically changed the game.

The threat of Islamic State (ISIL) and a potentially nuclear-capable Iran, as well as protracted instability in Yemen, Iraq and Libya, led to the conclusion that military cooperation is no longer an option but a necessity. The idea of creating a joint Gulf command has been discussed extensively over the course of this year, although, so far, only the naval component has been formally announced. In contrast to the Peninsula force, these troops would be integrated and include operational commands (land, air and maritime), a joint intelligence system and integrated missile defence. GCC missions could be planned and executed together rather than in the current *ad hoc* fashion.

Any future command headquarters is rumoured to be based in Saudi Arabia, alongside an air command,

and will coordinate with the recently created naval command in Bahrain. It is supposed to eventually number several hundred thousand men, with Riyadh alone fielding 100,000 troops. Although joint military command structures are not a prerequisite to form a military alliance, they facilitate multiparty operations, build trust, increase interoperability and project military power – all challenges the GCC states need to overcome if they wish to make the most of their military capabilities.

A separate plan has been also discussed which would link several of the Gulf states, Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco – not as an integrated force but as a looser military alliance. In this scenario, the latter three would provide manpower, whereas the GCC countries would contribute more in terms of equipment. Egypt has already begun to conduct military exercises with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE); an aerial attack flown on Libya earlier this year was said to be a joint Egyptian-Emirati endeavour, although both states deny it. And other signs of progressive militarisation are visible: both Qatar and the UAE introduced conscription only months ago, Egypt conducted its biggest military exercise in decades in October, and defence spending has risen in several states. The UAE now matches France and the UK in terms of fighter jets, and several Gulf states have participated in the aerial campaign against ISIL.

Military decisions, political implications

Should Arab states manage to overcome their distrust and join together in military terms, there is the strong possibility of a sea change in the region. Instead of relying on outsiders, Arab forces would be in a position to tackle security challenges themselves. Joint operations could act as confidence-building measures amongst states notoriously suspicious of each other, and security and stability across the Arab world could create the necessary backdrop for urgent economic integration.

There is a potential downside to an Arab alliance, however: depending on which states are excluded, it could create an antagonism akin to the one between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. It could also trigger the formation of counter-alliances and further militarise an already volatile region. As always with military groupings, the key dimension is not only which states are in, but which states are out.

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