

## TOWARD A NATO OF THE GULF? THE CHALLENGES OF COLLECTIVE DEFENSE WITHIN THE GCC

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Since the Arab revolutions started in early 2011, the Gulf countries have raised the level of their strategic ambitions. In various cases, countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) flexed their diplomatic muscles—Qatar and Saudi Arabia being at the forefront on the Syrian file—and demonstrated military resolve—via the interventions in Bahrain (2011), Libya (2011), and Yemen (2015). With traditional Arab powers like Egypt coping with post-revolution internal troubles, Gulf kingdoms now seemed to be the major players in the arena of the Arab League. This shift in Arab geopolitics led observers to refer to this era as the so-called Gulf moment.

As a result, the new assertiveness from Gulf countries in the international arena stirred a discussion on the prospects for stronger military cooperation at the level of the GCC itself. For a long time, collective defense was a distant prospect in the Peninsula. The modest size of local armed forces, the traditional reliance on the three major Western powers (the United States, the United Kingdom, and France) and occasional disagreements among Gulf countries concerning their strategic priorities all concurred to postpone progress in the field of joint military cooperation.

For the last 3 decades, GCC Summits each year would commit the stakeholders to building a stronger regional defense organization, but it usually remained in the background as economic initiatives were deemed more effective and less politically sensitive. The difficulties experienced by the GCC were nothing exceptional as they are a reminder of the long struggle within the European Union to build a strong military component.

Our research question finds its origins in the latest developments in Gulf security and the way these events could lead the GCC to become a new actor of collective defense. In December 2012, the 35th GCC Summit in Doha, Qatar, evidenced this trend with

the announced creation of a joint naval force and a common counterterrorist organization. This followed earlier rumors that a joint Gulf command would also be established. Furthermore, amid the latest Saudi-led operation in Yemen against Houthi rebels in March 2015, the idea of an “Arab NATO” (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) resurfaced in policy circles. This idea of a multinational Arab force mostly gained traction in the Gulf, a region which remains to this day the most integrated within the Arab World (compared to the quasi-absence of cooperation in the Maghreb and the Middle East).

However, the road towards an Arab, or to be more accurate, a Gulf, NATO is full of political and operational uncertainties. The 2017 political crisis between Qatar and three of the GCC members (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain) reminds us of the need for a cautious evaluation of the prospects of collective security in the Gulf. But rather than detailing the numerous caveats that still exist concerning the Gulf regional security system, the author of this monograph puts the alliance politics aside and looks at the security environment and the operational requirements for the GCC. In other words, the author discusses the practical steps required to turn the Council into an effective collective defense organization. By no means does this approach dismiss the politics behind the making of the GCC—only the resolution of local disputes can bring about the needed momentum for regional cooperation—but the political dimension too frequently prevents observers to discuss the concrete feasibility of the project.

Our reference to measure the achievements in the Gulf will be NATO, as the organization remains today the most integrated military structure for regional security. NATO is by no means a perfect organization, it experiences many shortcomings: regular strategic disagreements among its 28 members; a command structure still heavily based on a Cold War model;

and an imbalance between American and European capabilities. Nevertheless, these limitations are also the very reason why the NATO analogy is worth testing. Even though the Atlantic Alliance is not an ideal institution, it provides a realistic assessment on the making of a collective defense system.

Moreover, the purpose of this monograph is not to recommend a mere transposition of a NATO model into the Gulf context. Not only would this idea deny fundamental cultural differences, but there are many objective parameters that limit the values of the analogy: the number of country members and the size of the territories covered by the organization; the nature of threats and challenges facing the actors; the general political sensitivity among neighbors regarding regional cooperation; and, finally, the level of readiness of national armed forces. Despite these forewarnings, some aspects of NATO structure can be worth exploring for the GCC, including: the making of its joint command, its training and education programs, and the Alliance's experience in building a strong multilateral culture among its members' armed forces.

Against that backdrop, the monograph starts by looking at the GCC as a regional organization. It details its origins, underlines the role played by the security environment in shaping the GCC agenda, and assesses its main achievements so far in the military field. The second part provides a detailed account of the contemporary security challenges that call for enhanced military cooperation: the increasing demands for GCC expeditionary capabilities in light of regional crises such as Yemen; the maritime security in the Gulf in the context of Iranian assertiveness on the sea; and the ballistic arms race led by the same Iran. Following this appraisal of the contemporary security environment, the document looks at some of the most

significant projects within the GCC to enhance its military cooperation: the building of a joint command; the emphasis on joint naval activities; and the making of a regional missile defense coordination structure. It also identifies some of the long-term needs for the national armed forces to fulfill these objectives: the need to strengthen education and training programs in the Peninsula and to foster a multilateral culture among Gulf militaries. Finally, it reflects on the relations with Western allies in that perspective. In particular, it explains how initiatives such as the U.S.-Gulf Strategic Forum and NATO's Istanbul Cooperative Initiative could prove instrumental to support GCC's collective defense project.

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