



U.S. Air Force (Aaron Althorn)

Future Gulf War

Arab and American Forces against Iranian Capabilities

By RICHARD L. RUSSELL

Gulf Arabs are increasingly taking measure of Iran's capabilities to wage war. Military power is relative, not absolute, and to gauge Iran's capabilities to wage war and threaten the Persian Gulf, one must compare Iran's power against that of its regional rivals. A rough net assessment of strategies and military forces in the Gulf needs to weigh Iranian conventional military power—both in its regular military and Revolutionary Guard forces—against the conventional militaries of Saudi Arabia, the other Arab Gulf states, and the United States. By this scale, Arab and American forces are heavier than Iranian capabilities. But because they are, Iran is likely to turn to its time-tested unconventional ways of war to exploit Arab Gulf state and American vulnerabilities in future conflicts.

Long on Hardware, Short on Power

At first glance, the Arab Gulf states look well heeled militarily because they have purchased the most modern and capable weaponry. The United States and Europeans have been eager to sell their military wares for top dollar to the Gulf states. The Saudis, Kuwaitis, and Omanis spend up to 10 percent of their gross domestic product on their militaries, which amounts to about \$21 billion, \$4 billion, and \$2.7 billion, respectively.¹ The Arab Gulf state forces since the 1990 Iraq war also have increased in size. A decade ago, for example, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait could only field about 5 divisions and 215 combat air-

craft, but today they can field 8 divisions and 430 combat aircraft.²

The Gulf Arabs have some of the most sophisticated armaments in the world. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), for example, has purchased 80 advanced block 60 F-16s—which are more sophisticated than the block 50 F-16s in the U.S. Air Force—that are optimal for penetrating deeply into Iranian airspace to deliver munitions against ground targets.³ Saudi Arabia in 2006 agreed to buy 72 Eurofighter Typhoon combat aircraft for \$11 billion and to spend \$400 million on upgrading 12 Apache AH-64S attack helicopters, while Kuwait has bought 24

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Apache Longbow helicopters and Bahrain has ordered 9 UH-60M Black Hawk helicopters.⁴ The United States also wants to sell the Saudis and the UAE Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) kits that convert 500- and 2,000-pound gravity bombs into all-weather precision strike weapons guided by satellites. The George W. Bush administration proposed selling the Saudis 900 kits and the Emirates 200 JDAM systems.⁵

There is less than meets the eye to Gulf Arab military power, however. Governments have acquired impressive weapons holdings, but they are too often for show and not for waging modern warfare. As Anthony Cordesman and Khalid Al-Rodhan assess, the emphasis on acquiring the shell of military capability, rather than the reality, is partly the “result of a tendency to treat military forces as royal playgrounds or status symbols, partly a lack of expertise and effective military leader-

tainability, and maneuver capabilities are not keeping pace with arms purchases.⁷ Michael Knights notes that Saudi Arabia’s armed forces in particular suffer from a “massive overemphasis on procurement of high technology and serious underemphasis on manpower issues, personnel selection, training, and maintenance.”⁸

The reasons for the inability of the Arab Gulf states to field effective militaries are wide, deep, numerous, and elude any quick fixes. Kenneth Pollack astutely observes, “Four areas of military effectiveness stand out as consistent and crippling problems for Arab forces: poor tactical leadership, poor information management, poor weapons handling, and poor maintenance. These complications were present in every single Arab army and air force between 1948 and 1991.”⁹

The Gulf Arabs are flush with high-ranking officers and prestige, but short on the

advisors, including technicians and pilots, to provide professionalism as well as vital skills, and to maintain a high level of combat readiness,” and the UAE “is considered the state most dependent on foreign support. About 30 percent of its service personnel are expatriates.”¹⁰ These foreign expatriates are akin to mercenaries who make good money in peacetime but would likely be the first to flee in a major regional military conflict.

Arab militaries in general operate under stringent political constraints that profoundly hamper their effectiveness. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that their first, second, and third missions are to protect the regime from *internal* threats, while the lagging fourth mission is to protect from external threats. The Arab regimes have created redundant security and military organizations to complicate and deter military coups. But this makes for a lack of unity in military command and control during war with an external adversary. Arab forces suffer from heavily centralized decisionmaking authority out of concern of coups, which severely hampers battlefield responses and the ability to respond rapidly

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to changing battlefield conditions. Moreover, they lack intraservice cooperation and suppress tactical independent initiative.¹¹ Arab militaries also have strong propensities to promote leaders and commanders on the basis of family, tribal, and political affiliations rather than on military competence.

The Arab Gulf states do a poor job using technology software to integrate weapons systems hardware to gain synergistic effects on the modern battlefield. The Saudi air force and air defense force capabilities, for example, are not keeping pace for future conflict because they need a modern command, control, communications, computer, and intelligence battle management system to replace the system that the United States withdrew from Prince Sultan Air Force Base after the Iraq war.¹² Likewise, the UAE air force, typical of Gulf Arab militaries, has a “knights of the air” mindset, and it lacks air control and battle manage-



General Petraeus, commander, U.S. Central Command, with Saudi Arabian Prince Khalid bin Sultan in Riyadh

ship, and partly a result of the fear that effective military forces might lead to a coup.”¹⁶

Gulf Arab conventional forces are impressive for military parades, but would be less formidable in an actual clash of arms. The UAE, for example, is greatly increasing its equipment and weapons holdings with large arms purchases, but the military suffers from too many diverse weapons that are better suited for the garrison than expeditionary missions, and its readiness, manpower, sus-

noncommissioned officers who make modern militaries run. Their education systems do not produce technically oriented men willing or able to do the grunt work on which effective military organizations depend. The Arab Gulf states are forced to rely excessively on foreign militaries, contractors, and expatriates to run their militaries. Persian Gulf expert Simon Henderson notes that “several conservative Arab Gulf states, lacking trained manpower, rely heavily on foreign contract soldiers and

ment systems and has limited training for integrating airpower with ground force operations.¹³ These tendencies are in marked contrast to the Israeli approach to war, which Arabs are fond of rhetorically railing against. As Anthony Cordesman observes, “While most Arab states focus on the ‘glitter factor’ inherent in buying the most advanced weapons systems, Israel has given the proper weight to battle management, sustainability, and systems integration.”¹⁴

The Arab Gulf states, despite living in a dangerous neighborhood, have remarkably little recent battlefield experience. They have largely stayed out of the fray and let others fight in the last three Gulf wars. The Omani army, for example, has not fought in any major conflict for several decades.¹⁵ The Arab Gulf states shied away from providing peace-keeping forces to Iraq after Saddam’s ouster, with the Saudis insisting on all sorts of conditions on participation, especially that their forces not be under American command, while discussions about UAE troops to protect Iraq’s southern oilfields also never came to fruition.¹⁶

The Arab Gulf state military performances in the 1990–1991 war in particular were on balance less than distinguished. The Kuwait military was outgunned and outmanned and easily overwhelmed by invading Iraqi forces in 1990, and its ground and air forces collapsed. The Saudis and Qataris had the largest engagement of all Arab forces during the Gulf War, but their performance was lackluster. The Iraqis launched a major attack against Saudi Arabia prior to the coalition ground invasion of Kuwait and captured the Saudi town of al Khafji with one mechanized division, and the Saudi battalion there fled. The Iraqis had moved their division into attack position at night to avoid detection by American intelligence, the limits of which the Iraqis had learned in receiving American intelligence on Iran during the Iran-Iraq war.¹⁷ Saudi and Qatari forces eventually retook the city, but only after launching two amateurish counterattacks; they had no combat experience and only marginal training, with no plan for communication between Saudi and Qatari forces and no plan for direct artillery or air strikes, which is standard procedure for any professional military.¹⁸ In the reconquest of Kuwait, Arab forces did little more than conduct an administrative procession into Kuwait City after the Americans and British secured it.

The Gulf Arabs have comparatively more combat experience in the air than on the ground. Saudi aircraft supported U.S. Airborne Warning and Control System aircraft and patrolled the “Fahd” air defense line during the 1980–1988 Gulf war and destroyed at least

founding in 1986, but to no avail. The GCC countries, meanwhile, buy major weapons systems without coordinating with Arab Gulf states and have little to no interoperability or common doctrine. The coordination and integration problems are so bad that Bahrain’s

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one Iranian aircraft.¹⁹ In the 1991 Gulf War, Saudi aircraft mounted 1,656 offensive sorties into Kuwait and Iraq to include 1,133 strike missions, 523 close air support missions, as well as 118 reconnaissance missions. Bahraini aircraft flew 294 combat missions in 1991, and Qatari Mirage F–1s and armed helicopters supported ground operations in the Khafji battle and in the liberation of Kuwait, while UAE aircraft also mounted operations in Kuwait and Iraq.²⁰ Saudi Arabia could fairly claim a

F–16 combat aircraft cannot readily operate from UAE air bases.²² These realities have been strongly reflected in the steady decline of the GCC, which decided in 2005 to abolish its joint military unit called Dir’ Al-Jazeera (or Peninsula Shield) some 20 years after its creation because of Saudi and Qatari rivalry and because of the force’s lackluster capabilities.²³

On the other side of the scale, Iran’s military is impressive in quantity but underwhelming in quality. Its forces are composed

U.S. Air Force (Tommy Alluce)



Iraqi Security Forces mark withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraqi cities

military achievement in air-to-air battle during the 1990–1991 Gulf War. One Saudi F–15C shot down two Iraqi F–1 aircraft that had been attempting offensive airstrikes in the Gulf.²¹

The Arab Gulf states have shown little to no grit or resolve for joint military action. The United States long pushed the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) for a common integrated air defense since the council’s

of some 545,000 troops.²⁴ In contrast, Saudi Arabia, Iran’s largest regional rival, has some 223,500 active duty troops.²⁵ The small Arab Gulf states have significantly less manpower: Bahrain has 8,200, Kuwait has 15,500, Oman has 42,600, Qatar has 11,800, and the UAE has 51,000 active duty strengths.²⁶ Iraq’s military is still taking shape and is preoccupied with battling internal security threats.

The bulk of Iran's inventories are American-built weapons bought before the 1979 revolution and a mix of Soviet and Chinese weapons that are qualitatively inferior to the modern American and Western weapons systems in the Gulf Arab inventories. Some of the most technologically sophisticated aircraft in Iran's inventory are about 24 Iraqi Mirage F-1 combat aircraft.²⁷ During the 1991 coalition air campaign against Iraq, most of Iraq's pilots fled in their aircraft to Iran rather than face American and British airpower. It is doubtful, however, that the Iranians are maintaining these F-1s in good repair and order. The Iranians have extraordinary difficulty sustaining their military equipment due to a lack of spare parts and trained mechanics.

Tehran's forces had more combat experience in mobile conventional warfare than their Gulf Arab rivals, but that experience is rapidly aging. The Iranians who fought on the frontlines during the Iran-Iraq war from 1980 to 1988 are retired. The majority of the population, moreover, is under 25 years of age and thus has no personal memory of the Iranian Revolution. In fact, the "vast majority of the combat-trained labor power Iran developed

during the Iran-Iraq War left military service by the mid-1990s. Iran now has a largely conscripted force with limited military training and little combat experience."²⁸

What to Expect

A rough weighing of Gulf Arab military capabilities against those of Iran has to take into account a variety of conflict scenarios involving air, naval, and ground forces. The Arab Gulf states likely would do reasonably well against the Iranians in air-to-air combat. Although Gulf Arab ground forces capabilities are more limited than airpower capabilities, the Iranians too suffer from severe ground force projection problems. Iranian ground forces also would be vulnerable to Arab Gulf state air attack.

The tight geographic confines in the Gulf would allow the Iranians to make short dashes with combat aircraft to catch Gulf Arab air defenses and air forces unawares and drop ordnance on major cities and military bases. But the Arab Gulf states would be able to put up their guards to marshal combat air patrols to complicate Iranian follow-on air attacks. Iran's combat aircraft, moreover, are aging, and it would be difficult for the Irani-

ans to keep them operational for a prolonged air campaign against Arab neighbors. On the other hand, the Arab Gulf states with F-15, F-16, and Tornado combat aircraft have more capabilities to strike against Iranian targets than Iran has to strike the Arab Gulf. The Iranians are trying to shore up this disadvantage by getting Russian help to modernize their ground-based air defenses.

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The Arab Gulf states also have naval forces that could bombard Iranian ports, oil facilities and platforms, and naval assets. The UAE has a longstanding dispute with Iran over the sovereignty of three islands—Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb—near tanker routes to the Strait of Hormuz, which were seized by the Shah of Iran after the British withdrew from the Gulf in the early 1970s. The



U.S. Air Force (Margo Wright)

Royal Saudi air force E-3 at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma

islands were militarily occupied by the Iranians in 1992 when Tehran claimed that they were an “inseparable part of Iran.”²⁹ The UAE navy could try to reassert control of the disputed islands. By the same token, the Arab Gulf states have coastal facilities that would make attractive targets for Iranian attacks. They all have tanker-loading facilities, as well as power and desalination plants along the Gulf coast.³⁰

The Arab Gulf states have more sophisticated and modern ground force equipment than Iran, but the Iranians have the advantage in the number of troops they could field for mobile-conventional warfare. The Iranians in the future could have a border dispute or political crisis with Kuwait and could threaten that country. Kuwait could turn to its GCC fellow members for help, but as previously discussed, the GCC is more political show than military substance. Iranian troops motivated by the spoils of war lying in Kuwait and the Arab Gulf states might have more grit in battle than outnumbered and pampered Gulf state ground forces. Arab Gulf states could leverage airpower to intimidate and deny Iran’s air force from protecting the skies over its ground forces and their avenues of advance into Arab territories.

Gulf Arab political equities would also undermine concerted military action against Iranian ground forces. Kuwait, for example, might be reluctant to host its Arab neighbors, especially Saudi forces, out of fear of never being able to get rid of them after the crisis with Iran. Kuwait might worry that calling in Arab ground forces would precipitate an Iranian attack rather than dissuade it. The Kuwaiti royal family made such a calculation when it decided against putting its armed forces on alert in the face of the buildup of Iraqi forces across the border in July 1990. The Kuwaiti army of some 16,000 troops was not fully mobilized on the eve of Iraq’s invasion in keeping with the royal family’s attempt not to provoke Iraq.³¹ The Kuwaitis disastrously misjudged that a military alert would provoke Saddam rather than deter him.

Weighing U.S. Forces

Iran knows well from past warfare in the Gulf that it has to steer clear of American conventional forces. During the Iran-Iraq war in April 1988, for example, while the U.S. Navy was escorting merchant and tanker ships in the Gulf to protect them from Iranian attacks, the Iranians laid a minefield that struck an American ship and wounded 10 Sailors. The United States

retaliated in Operation *Praying Mantis* and attacked Iranian coastal facilities. The Iranians tried to challenge the American Navy surface ships but quickly lost two frigates and four other vessels.³² The Iranians watched in awe as American and British forces in 2003 dispatched Saddam Hussein’s regime in 3 weeks, a feat that Iran could not achieve in 8 years of war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988.

The Iranians are apt to stick with mine-laying proficiencies in future war to counter-balance American surface ship superiorities. They no doubt have learned from Iraq’s employment of mines against American and coalition forces during the 1990–1991 Gulf War when the Iraqis laid about 1,300 mines, some of which hit the helicopter carrier USS *Tripoli* and the cruiser USS *Princeton*. These experiences showed the Iranians that multi-million-dollar American warships could be threatened and even rendered inoperable by mines costing no more than a few thousand dollars.³³

The Iranians have noticed the vulnerabilities of American warships operating in brown waters to suicide bombs at ports. They have seen how the al Qaeda bombing

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of the USS *Cole* in 2000 cheaply used a boat-delivered suicide bomb to kill 17 Sailors and nearly sink a billion-dollar warship. Iran’s Revolutionary Guard navy and operatives would be keen to replicate such an operational success against American ships anchored or under way in waters around Bahrain, the UAE, Oman, Kuwait, or Saudi Arabia to scare off American port visits and transit operations.

The Iranians could easily adopt suicide bombers to “swarm” naval warfare. As John Arquilla explains:

The basic vision of this new kind of naval warfare consists of a swarm of small drone craft—something even smaller than a boat, perhaps the size of a Jet Ski, but one chock-full of high explosives. Imagine a number of these remote-controlled craft coming at a traditional

*warship—a destroyer, cruiser, or even an aircraft carrier. The larger the number of drones, the greater the chance some will get through, sinking or seriously damaging expensive naval vessels at little cost, and virtually without risk to one’s remote pilots.*³⁴

The Iranians have proven adept at recruiting and training suicide bombers similar to those that Hizballah has thrown against American forces in the past. In future Gulf warfare, the Iranians could recruit and train a suicide bomber cadre for explosive-laden small craft and jet skis.

The Iranians would complement mining and small boat operations with submarine warfare. The Russians have equipped Iran’s navy with diesel submarines to make up for its formidable shortcomings in surface ships against American naval forces. Moscow sold Tehran three *Kilo*-class submarines, which are quiet, small, and ideal for operating in shallow Gulf waters with weapons loads of a mix of 18 homing and wire-guided torpedoes or 24 mines.³⁵ And the Iranians are diversifying their submarine and irregular warfare capabilities and have purchased at least three one-man submarines designed for covert demolition and infiltration operations. They have also obtained midget submarines from North Korea.³⁶ Moreover, the Iranians claim to be producing their own submarines. Tehran announced in November 2007 that it had launched its second indigenously built *Ghadir*-class submarine, which it claimed could fire missiles and torpedoes simultaneously.³⁷

Saturation fire of Iranian cruise missiles, especially in the narrow Strait of Hormuz, is another looming danger. The Iranians have cruise missiles from China and could buy more from Russia. The United States would have its hands full attempting to destroy Iran’s missile bases judging, in part, from its experience trying to counter Iraqi cruise missiles. In fact, the United States did not destroy a single land-based Iraqi antiship missile launcher during the Gulf War, and the Iranians now have many launch sites, storage areas, caves, shelters, and small hardened facilities for their cruise missiles, which are difficult to detect and attack.³⁸ Iran could launch swarms of cruise missiles to try to overwhelm the defenses of a targeted American warship.

Iran’s Style of Warfare

These Iranian capabilities leveraged against American vulnerabilities would be

acute problems for American naval forces in a future Gulf war. The U.S. military in 2002 conducted a war game that simulated large numbers of small and fast Iranian vessels attacking American ships in the Gulf with machineguns and rockets. In the simulation, the U.S. Navy lost 16 warships, to include an aircraft carrier, cruisers, and amphibious vessels in battles that lasted 5 to 10 minutes.³⁹ The lessons from this game have not gained much intellectual traction in a Pentagon and combatant command fully engaged in today's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and against al Qaeda.

The Iranians more recently have given American forces a taste of their style of unconventional warfare. Five Iranian Revolutionary Guard patrol boats in January 2008 charged a three-ship U.S. Navy convoy in the Strait of Hormuz, maneuvering around and between a destroyer, cruiser, and frigate during a half-hour challenge. One Iranian boat came within 200 yards of an American ship and almost drew fire.⁴⁰ The United States needs to guard against such Iranian harassment operations as a deception ploy. The Revolutionary Guard might calculate that periodic challenge operations against warships will make the Americans grow accustomed to them and lower their guard, making the vessels more vulnerable to real attacks. The Iranians might decide that catching a large American warship unawares with a surprise attack would reap huge strategic rewards.

Despite the huge military expenditures and sophisticated Western armaments in their inventories, the Arab Gulf states are ill prepared to defend themselves in low-end (insurgency and militia sponsorship) and high-end (ballistic missile, perhaps with nuclear warheads) scenarios against Iran. These inventories, moreover, are not likely to overcome Gulf Arab shortcomings for defending against asymmetric Iranian attacks. The United States, for its part, is moving to strengthen Gulf Arab military capabilities in conventional warfare while neglecting their capabilities to counter Iran's most likely and more capable forms of force.

At the end of the day, the Arab Gulf states will have to decide whether to balance or to bandwagon Iranian power in the Gulf. Put another way, nation-states may either align against a stronger state or join it.⁴¹ If the Arab Gulf states grow uncertain of the U.S. commitment to their security, they could bandwagon and appease Iran—and in so

doing distance themselves from the United States and give Tehran freer rein in the Gulf. If they are more confident of American security backing, they would balance against Iran and increasingly turn to the United States for security protection because their militaries are inadequate to the task of countering Iran along the full spectrum of warfare. Washington needs to encourage the Arab Gulf states to balance, but in doing so, it should focus less on building up their conventional military capabilities and pay more attention to the Iranian threats stemming from unconventional warfare. **JFQ**

NOTES

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