

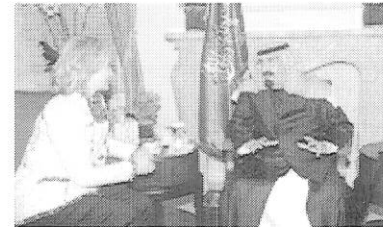


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## Expanded US presence set to bolster GCC defences

Tuesday, November 8 2011

The International Atomic Energy Agency is expected to report this week that Iran is developing a secret nuclear weapons capability. As the United States prepares to leave Iraq, fear of a nuclear Iran with hegemonic ambitions is driving the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) into a closer defence relationship with the US military. Washington is believed to be planning to bolster its presence in the Gulf after the pullout. Saudi Arabia, meanwhile, has already committed itself to a security partnership with the United States over the next 20 years by signing a multi-billion dollar arms deal.



Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah meets with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (REUTERS)

### What next

The GCC will align itself more explicitly with the United States and may join a US-brokered regional security organisation with other Arab states such as Jordan, Morocco and Yemen. Western military basing is likely to increase in the coming decade, with US forces exercising more regularly in the Gulf. The United States is likely to maintain a strong air and missile defence presence, which, together with the GCC's own developing capabilities, will be able to blunt much of the impact of any potential Iranian attack.

### Analysis

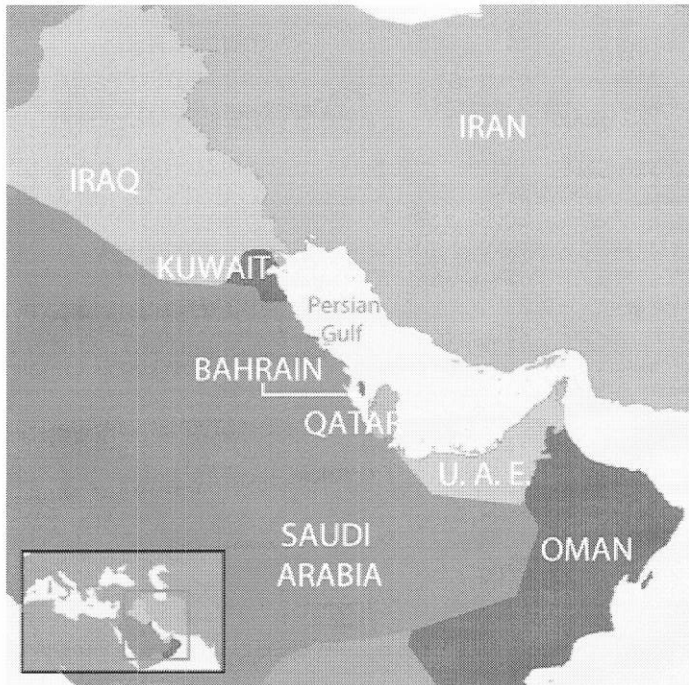
Relations between the Arab Gulf States and Iran have never been close, but slipped towards 'cold war' following the emergence of Iran's nuclear programme in 2003. The release of US diplomatic cables by Wikileaks in 2010 was a significant milestone in the GCC's relations with Iran:

- *Saudi Arabia.* King Abdallah was shown to take the strongest line, apparently calling for a strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. He also expressed willingness to develop Saudi nuclear weapons programme as a counterweight to an Iranian bomb, and to undertake covert action to destabilise the Iranian government (see IRAN/SAUDI ARABIA: Rivalry imperils regional stability - September 22, 2011).
- *United Arab Emirates (UAE).* Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan was reported as saying that Iran was one of the most serious threats to his country.
- *Bahrain.* King Hamad expressed concerns about allowing the nuclear programme to continue and apparently encouraged the United States to take action to terminate it.
- *Other GCC States.* Kuwait, Qatar and Oman were more circumspect. Kuwait and Qatar underlined their fear of Iranian retaliation while Oman expressed its wish to see the standoff resolved peacefully.

### Impact

- The larger US presence will reassure Gulf leaders of Washington's commitment to the region.
- Closer defence ties with the United States will cause a further deterioration in GCC relations with Iran.
- GCC economic zones would be the most likely targets in any conflict with Iran.
- Protecting shipping lanes will remain problematic.

Wikileaks revealed support among some Gulf states for strong action against Iran



#### Worsening ties

The Wikileaks cables demonstrated that Gulf Arab leaders believe that Iranian ambitions extend beyond the 'Shia crescent' of countries from Iran to Lebanon, but also incorporate the Palestinian territories and suspected Iranian proxies in Egypt, sub-Saharan Africa and Yemen.

Relations between the GCC and Iran have worsened in recent months. Saudi Arabia is convinced that Iran is actively stirring sectarian tensions in Bahrain. This calculation contributed to Saudi Arabia and the UAE's decision to deploy forces to Manama to underpin the monarchy (see BAHRAIN: Crackdown imposes costs for regime, business - March 17, 2011).

Antipathy between Iran and the GCC has also been deepened by US allegations that Iran sought to assassinate the Saudi Arabian ambassador to Washington (see IRAN/SAUDI ARABIA: Iranian 'plot' stokes tensions - October 12, 2011).

#### Defence systems

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The GCC will find it harder to distance itself from any US military operation on Iran

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The military leaders of the GCC -- Saudi Arabia and the UAE -- have been preparing to make large arms purchases from the United States since 2007. King Abdallah agreed to accelerate an unprecedented 60 billion dollar request for arms even before the latest escalation in tensions. The UAE has pursued a raft of multi-billion dollar arms purchases from the United States since 2008, including 7 billion dollars worth of US-provided Theater High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) systems -- the first time any foreign country will have procured such an advanced missile defence system.

US arms sales and consultancy to the GCC focus on two key areas:

### Air and missile defence

The GCC already feels confident that it can intercept Iranian combat aircraft: the next step is to reduce the damage from potential cruise and ballistic missile attacks. The United States provides early warning systems and maintains an outer screen of missile interceptors on naval vessels in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Kuwait have accelerated their plans to field their own ship-based outer layer of defence and to procure long-range land-based interceptors such as THAAD, as well as to modernise and reinforce short-range land-based interceptors such as the Patriot missile system.

### Critical infrastructure protection

To protect their critical energy and desalination infrastructure, each of the GCC states is embarking on US-backed programmes to identify vulnerabilities to military attack or sabotage, and to harden key locations. Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have each developed well-funded critical infrastructure agencies that have successfully incorporated international experts and best practice.

### Security cooperation

For over two decades the GCC has made little progress on collective defence. The regional bloc has instead relied on bilateral relations with external security guarantors such as the US-led Cooperative Defence Initiative and the Gulf Security Dialogue. However, their militaries have become increasingly involved in multilateral security operations in recent years:

- *NATO 'Istanbul Cooperation Initiative'*. The initiative extends security cooperation assistance to Middle Eastern states, including the GCC militaries.
- *Afghanistan and Libya*. Bahrain and the UAE contributed significant assets in Afghanistan, while the UAE and Qatar provided combat aircraft in Libya.
- *Maritime patrolling*. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have played prominent roles in multinational counter-piracy and counter-smuggling maritime operations in the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea. The UAE led exercises in the Gulf in 2010 as part of an international proliferation security agreement.

### Saudi leadership

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Increased involvement in international operations is improving the GCC's defence capabilities

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One factor holding back GCC defence integration has been Saudi Arabia's unwillingness to sanction collective security arrangements that might weaken the GCC as a Saudi-led defence treaty. This factor appears to be receding, with Riyadh appearing confident that it remains the bloc's military leader.

US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta held an unprecedented meeting with GCC military officials at the UN in September. The meeting aimed to put the GCC at the heart of Washington's regional security strategy. The United States also wished to send a message to Tehran that the drawdown of forces in Iraq did not signal a reduction in its military commitment to the area.

*Word Count (approx): 1126*