

MARITIME SECURITY OF THE GULF: A LIVING DILEMMA



October 2020

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**FRIEDRICH
EBERT** 
STIFTUNG



SUMMARY

High tensions are simmering in the Arabian Gulf¹, one of the most important strategic locations in the world. These tensions have the potential to lead to a disastrous war and great harm to the world's economy. In early 2020, the region of the Arabian Gulf witnessed one of the most tense moments in its history when U.S. and Iranian warships drew close to open conflict. Downing of a U.S. drone, attacking bypassing ships, targeting oil production facilities by Iranian Forces, and the assassination of an Iranian military commander by the U.S. military were acts that only made the situation more complicated. A future of uncertainty for the region comes with the absence of a security cooperation mechanism and lack of communication. Stakeholders and rival countries must compromise and open the door for mediators to give a chance and hope for a stable Gulf. Historical initiatives to reduce tensions so far have proved insufficient. Can a new and inclusive initiative gather all the actors involved to make a step forward to guarantee a freer and safer Gulf?

INTRODUCTION

During an interview in early 2020, Oman's former Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi argued that the huge number of warships already existing in the Gulf would increase the chances of a mistake (Crisis Group, 2020). He then urged all Gulf allies to remain cautious. His comments were spelled out following the deployment of a mission called the European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH). This mission was not the first of its type. Many stakeholders in Gulf security either had already established or called for surveillance and security cooperation to guarantee free maritime movement in the Gulf. However, recent calls for such deployment come amidst escalation in tension between rivals stationed in the Gulf, namely the United States and Iran.

Since the May 2018 economic sanctions imposed by the Trump Administration on Iran, the region has witnessed an all-time increase in tension that is increasingly vulnerable to open conflict. The tension increased following major incidents and events. In June 2019, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards shot down a U.S. drone, claiming it was collecting intelligence information using the Iranian airspace. During the same month, two oil tankers were bombed and left ablaze in the middle of the Strait of Hormuz, just a few weeks after four tankers were attacked off the coast of the United Arab Emirates. The U.S. blamed Iran for those attacks, an accusation that Iran denied. However, the situation escalated and drew global attention when in September 2019, the Saudi oil facilities of Abqaiq were attacked. The uncertainty of the Gulf situation grew more when the U.S. announced that in Early January 2020, its drone missile attack killed the General of the IRGC'S Quds Force Qassim Soleimani. Later in April 2020, the U.S. Navy accused Iranian forces of harassing its ships in the Gulf which led President Donald Trump to issue a call to soldiers on board of the U.S. warships to "shoot down" any Iranian gunboats attempting to commit the same act again. If the increase of tension in the Gulf continues, a miscalculated move by either party could potentially lead to a disastrous war.

1-While acknowledging that the UN recognizes the term as "Persian Gulf," it is the author's choice to use the term "Arabian Gulf."

THE CHALLENGE

In light of the increased tension in the Gulf, an effective security cooperation to ensure free and safe maritime movement is absent. Many security initiatives have proven insufficient. The mistrust between parties involved in the region is growing, and the competition for more influence by rival countries in the Gulf reduces the chances of security cooperation. All initiatives toward security cooperation have failed thus far, including the initiative of the anti-Soviet alliance (Baghdad Pact) in 1955 between Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, and the UK as well as the post-Gulf war initiative of 1991 between the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt and Syria. Even recent initiatives proposed by the U.S. in 2017 and by Iran in 2019 failed to win the interest of many Gulf countries, due to increased mistrust between the main parties in the Gulf.

Furthermore, the rivalries between Saudi Arabia and Iran along with its proxy war in Yemen is leaving the region more divided. Increased mistrust is growing even between the GCC countries, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar in particular. The U.S.-Iran tension has increased since the Trump administration withdrew from the Nuclear Deal in 2018 and applied its “Maximum Pressure” policy towards Iran.

The risk of driving the region into an open conflict is even greater given the fact that there are no open channels between militaries involved in the Gulf, especially between the U.S. military and the primary Iranian force tasked with operational control in the Arabian Gulf, the IRGC. The current communication infrastructure in the Gulf is insufficient to limit prospects of miscalculation or escalation. Except for safety of operation radio calls, there is currently no communication between the U.S. military and Iran. Many senior U.S. defense officials recognized the danger of lack of open military or even diplomatic channels. According to a recent report published in April 2020 by the International Crisis Group, “some officials called for establishing those channels, and the U.S. Congress required the Trump administration to open the communication, but Trump is yet to act” (Crisis Group, 2020). The U.S. “Maximum Pressure” policy and the Iranian “Maximum Resistance” mode of confronting it is leaving both sides with very few options. The fact that on April 18, 2019 the U.S. designated the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization puts the legality of contact and communication with them under question of the U.S. law system. In reaction to Soleimani’s killing, on January 7, 2020 Iran designated the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) as a foreign terrorist organization, making it even harder for the IRGC personnel to open contact. This spiraling of events has led to the current precarious situation.

PREVIOUS INITIATIVES

Current and existing bodies in the Gulf could play essential roles as mediators. Cooperation bodies like the GCC can serve as a tool to start dialogue to de-escalate the Gulf region, but the division between the members of the GCC is keeping it short of delivering such a step. The U.S. recognizes the need for an all-inclusive joint security cooperation to guarantee the safety of the Gulf and the free movement in the Strait of Hormuz. This led to the initiative of the US Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). This initiative envisioned a Riyadh-based alliance including the US, GCC, Jordan and Egypt to counter Iran and other security threats. One of the main goals of MESA is to increase the defense capabilities of its members, but only allows members to purchase arms from the U.S. This proposi-

tion is not favored by Saudi Arabia and the UAE because of their goal to build their own capabilities to counter threats. The MESA initiative is widely argued to be a tool for the U.S. to counter Iran and to compete against China’s and Russia’s increased economic and military presence. The MESA summit and conferences took place in 2017, 2018 and 2019, but the official establishment of the alliance has been delayed because some members were unwilling to take a step further towards institutionalization.

Following its increased involvement in the region, Russia envisioned itself as the solution for the Gulf’s problems and initiated a security mechanism. In July 2019, Russia announced its Collective Security Concept

for the Gulf. Unlike the U.S., Russia's concept involves more stakeholders like China, the EU, and India. At its core, the concept aims to reduce the threat of war in the region. By the help of track-two diplomacy and organizations like the U.N., Russia proposed to provide a platform for dialogue between regional states. The concept envisions a step-by-step process towards resolving conflicts to develop confidence-building and implementation of a comprehensive security system based on respect of the interests of all regional and other parties involved. The Trump administration did not comment on the proposal. In addition, the proposal would require that "peace-making operations can only be conducted on the basis of relevant resolutions of the UN Security Council or upon request of the legitimate authorities of the attacked state." This automatically gives Russia, China, the UK, and France veto power over US actions (Kutzer and Seeley, 2020).

It was not only major powers like the U.S. and Russia who proposed such initiatives, but also regional powers tried to come up with similar ideas. In September 2019, President Rouhani proposed the creation of a regional platform, the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (HOPE). The platform aims to provide dialogue between the states of the Hormuz Strait Community, which includes Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, Kuwait, Iran, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. This platform was supposed to include discussion of energy security, arms control and confidence building, military communications, a creation of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and a Hormuz Strait Community Non-Aggression Pact. The initiative also proposed the creation of a joint task force to


manage cooperation on issues like conflict resolution and prevention, cybersecurity and human trafficking (Kutzer and Seeley, 2020). Rouhani's initiative did not gain traction among Gulf state members, especially following the threat from Saudi Arabia that if Iran did not stop its acts of aggression in the region then there would be no rooms for talks. In the absence of trust and cooperation between Gulf states and Iran, and between GCC members, it is unlikely that the HOPE initiative will attract interest regionally or internationally.

These recent proposals signal the willingness for dialogue and de-escalation efforts. However, most proposals were initiated with self-interests in mind and treated by other parties with caution and suspicion. The US-led MESA proposal invested heavily in limiting arms use and purchase and was not very favored by some GCC members as they plan to diversify their arms trade deals. U.S. domestic politics and the forge of new isolationist politicians who called for more U.S. disengagement from the region is leaving U.S. allies in serious doubt. The main issue with the MESA proposal is that it was not fully inclusive as it leaves Iran out of the picture. The lack of trust between states involved was the main reason why Russia's Collective Security Concept and Iran's HOPE proposals did not gain enough support so far. This may change if it becomes clear that the U.S. is seriously thinking of disengaging from the Gulf. Disengagement of the U.S. could push the GCC states, and mainly Saudi Arabia, to be more willing to participate in security initiatives or even to initiate some themselves.

THE WAY FORWARD

The initiatives proposed recently, while not enough, are nevertheless lessons to learn from. Most of the initiatives lack political backing from internationally recognized organizations. In such a contracted environment, no security cooperation mechanism can work without being backed politically by a United Nations (UN) organization. In order to ensure maritime security, external stakeholders like Oman and some European Union (EU) members can be mediators and should support the creation of a security system with the goal of reducing tension. States like Oman or Kuwait and EU members can urge the UN for a creation of a surveillance body ensuring free and safe movement in the Gulf.

Furthermore, to ease the tensions and ensure a way forward, the Gulf states should begin resolving their internal issues first. Since Kuwait is not involved in the Qatar Crisis (the boycott of Qatar by the "Quartet": Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain), and since Kuwait will be vulnerable if conflict erupts, it is in the position to create a platform to exchange messages and work on easing the disputes between Qatar and the Quartet. Kuwait can force this under the umbrella of the GCC. The current COVID-19 crisis provides a good opportunity for such talks.



Given Kuwait's unique relations with all parties involved, it can play a positive role. First, Qatar should stop its vocal support of the Muslim Brotherhood Organizations, which is recognized by the Quartet as a terrorist organization, and reduce its negative media coverage of the Quartet's internal politics. This can be possible if the Quartet guarantees to lift the boycott or at least shows intentions to lift it. If the GCC members succeed in resolving their own disputes, an opportunity to go a step further and de-escalate between the GCC countries and Iran is more likely.

Assuming the Gulf rift has been resolved, the UN should send a welcoming signal for moving ahead. The EU has the capability and can take the lead on moving the talks a level up. This round of talks should involve the GCC, the U.S., and Iran under an UN umbrella mediated by the EU. Talks can include reducing Iranian aggression in the region and easing economic pressure from the U.S. The GCC countries can help with the creation of an agency operated by the UN to guarantee the safety and freedom of movement in the strait of Hormuz.

In the meantime, the EMASoH mission should work as an advantage, as it has already been deployed and can serve as a monitor there. The EU can also play their role to strengthen the EMASoH. A coordination between EMASoH and the GCC states in sharing and improving traffic will be vital. Since most of the ships must pass through the Omani waters at one point, the EU could contribute to maritime security by providing Oman with ships and technology to surveil its waters more effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The EU member states in the UN Security Council should file a draft resolution to call for the creation of an independent surveillance mechanism to ensure free and safe maritime traffic in the Gulf.
- Kuwait and / or Oman should act as a mediator to solve the GCC rift, establishing channels of communication between Qatar, the UAE, and KSA aimed at ending the boycott and normalizing diplomatic relations.
- The EU should host talks between the U.S., Iran, and the GCC to reduce tensions in the region. The talks should be supported by the U.N. In an initial phase, the talks could be held on track II Level in order to build the necessary trust between the participants.
- In the meantime, the EU should strengthen the role of EMASoH, coordinate with GCC members, and provide support to Oman and Kuwait in their efforts to mediate between GCC members.

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