

January 26, 2012



Cooperation with Gulf allies essential

By Danny E. Sebright, president of the U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council

A noticeable increase in tension between Iran and its neighbors demands closer defense and security cooperation between the United States and its key Arab partners in the region. While the U.S. and its Gulf allies rightly continue to focus on diplomacy to hinder Iran's nuclear ambitions, there is more that can be done between our defense establishments to achieve deterrence, and to be better prepared for any outcome.

For their part, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain have invested varying degrees of resources to establish themselves as vital economic hubs, servicing the region and the global economy. Further, each country has a community of American workers and the presence of U.S. military bases and personnel. In addition to the free flow of energy through the Strait of Hormuz, each country's economy increasingly depends on the unabated movement of international trade through their sea and air ports.

Moreover, the success and sustainability of each country's economy relies heavily on a relatively untested security infrastructure. Consequently, if Iran decides to forego diplomacy, or if there is a miscalculation that leads to an unintended conflict, much of the recent economic growth in the region would collapse overnight.

I draw this conclusion from my own experience serving as a diplomat in the U.S. Embassy in Tel Aviv during the first Gulf War. There, I saw first-hand what 39 rudimentary Iraqi scud missiles did to paralyze Israeli society and its economy. None of these missiles were accurate, none of them hit any important strategic targets, but all served to bring Israel to a stand-still. Iran's capability today far surpasses that of Iraq in 1990. Moreover, Iran's military planners have the experience of the missile war of the cities during the Iran-Iraq War to build upon in the event conflict does arise.

The chilling reality today is that Iran does not have to hit any important military or strategic targets to be successful. In fact, any aggressive action taken by Iran against the U.S. and Arab countries, whether overt or covert, would cause disastrous and immediate economic ramifications in the Gulf. Namely, there would be a mass exodus of expatriates; foreign investment would flee the region over night; and commerce and trade would slow down severely. As a result, the long-term economic plans being implemented in each country would falter and remain in question for years.

What to do?

If my experience in Tel Aviv during the war taught me one thing, it was that the U.S. and its Gulf allies should increase efforts to coordinate, train, and strategize with each other to achieve interoperability between military personnel, systems, and equipment. Taking into

account recent pressure on America's defense budget, the U.S. should focus on providing swift military training and support to its Gulf allies. By doing so, Arabian forces will be better prepared to defend themselves and act as effective force multipliers for U.S. forces operating in the region. Working with the U.S. and other NATO allies, the Gulf countries can become an effective first line of defense against threats to regional security.

Furthermore, the U.S. is in a position to provide officers from key Gulf allies with the latest military tactics, doctrine, and procedures. The U.S. can better achieve this objective by providing more training opportunities for Gulf forces at American facilities, and by spearheading regular joint military exercises. An important element to the success of these efforts will be the integration of military and communications technology. Although receiving the most up-to-date American military equipment is important; knowing how to use, service, and maintain it, and ensure that it is interoperable with U.S. and other allied forces is most critical.

Gulf nations – namely the U.A.E. and Qatar – have demonstrated a willingness to support the US and its allies. Both of those countries supported coalition efforts in Libya last year, and U.A.E. combat forces are helping stabilize Afghanistan. However, their troops' efforts are hamstrung by U.S. policy that makes it more difficult to successfully complete their missions. For example, in supporting coalition efforts in Libya last year, forces from the U.A.E. and Qatar learned that their personnel and equipment could not communicate with NATO troops or command authorities. Further, the U.A.E.'s ongoing experience in Afghanistan has revealed many tactical shortcomings in coordination with U.S. and NATO forces. Valuable lessons learned from these engagements need to be implemented quickly. Stepping up the level of military cooperation and coordination is crucial to the future of regional security and the free flow of energy and commerce through the Gulf.

These efforts must be supported at the highest levels. Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Martin Dempsey, and CENTCOM Commander General James Mattis should visit the region together soon. They should facilitate the discussion of how America can work closer with its Gulf allies to achieve mutual defense and security objectives. They should listen, offer assistance, and be prepared to step up America's game in the Gulf.

Danny Sebright is president of the U.S.-U.A.E. Business Council and a counselor at The Cohen Group. He worked on defense and security matters related to the Middle East under six U.S. Secretaries of Defense.