

Security in the Gulf Region: A Geopolitical Perspective



Al Jazeera Centre for Studies
Tel: +974-4930181
Fax: +974-4831346
jcforstudies@aljazeera.net
www.aljazeera.net/studies

Abd al-Jalil al-Marhoun*

July 2010

I. Introduction

Seen through the prism of geopolitics, interactions related to security in the Arabian Gulf are – in principle – closely connected to the reality of more general regional security. This perspective can also be expanded to include the impact on the wider scope of regional and international policies.

There are eight countries that reside on the shores of the Arabian Gulf: the six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, The United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman – and Iraq and Iran. Traditionally, the Gulf was divided into three zones: Iraq in the north, Iran in the west, and the six GCC countries (also known as the inland Gulf countries) in the east.

The eight states of the Gulf region were created in different historical periods. The early 1970s marked the achievement of political independence for all these states. Ever since, a conversation on creating a regional structure in the Gulf has been ongoing. Local interactions within the Gulf region have not, however, been successful in shaping themselves into a cooperative format. Rather, a competitive mode has always been dominant. The region experienced three wars between 1980 and 2003, and currently lives in what could be termed a period of “imminent war”.

The Gulf region has witnessed, in some stages of its development, an unstable form of the balance of power of its local actors. There were times when Iraq served as a balancing power against Iran. Today, however, the regional system lacks the existence of any reliable local strategic system that is capable of resolving or containing conflicts. The absence of such a system is tantamount to the Gulf lacking an infrastructure essential to protecting the region from open warfare. The Gulf region needs to implement a stable security environment that

can successfully superimpose itself upon the existing reality. This article recommends the creation of such a new paradigm for security in the region after examining the existing or developing aspects of security in the Arabian Gulf.

II. Elements of the Existing Security Environment

There are seven central features of the existing security environment in the Arabian Gulf:

- 1- *Absence of balance between regional powers:* This is an absence of the “balance of power”, or what is also known as a “strategic balance”. A relative strategic balance existed in the 1970s and 1980s, but disappeared with the end of the Second Gulf War, when the elimination of Iraq as a military power (which had theretofore been considered a counterbalance to Iran) was effectively achieved.
- 2- *Historical disputes:* There are a number of historical disputes – some still looming – over water, borders, oil-rich areas and oil wells, and even fertile agricultural lands. There are also conflicts specific to sovereignty between Iran and Iraq, on the one hand, and among GCC countries, on the other. Despite the two countries having already delineated their borders, there is an ongoing border dispute between Iraq and Kuwait. Some countries in the region have even built fences around their borders, a matter indicating the emergence of a new set of challenges which the region must face.
- 3- *Undeclared arms race:* There exists an undeclared arms race between Iran and the GCC countries. Iraq has joined this rivalry in the past two years.
- 4- *The US military presence in the region:* The military presence of the US in the Gulf region can be categorised as an advanced military presence, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The objective of such a presence is to stabilise and contain Iran’s influence.
- 5- *Cross-border violence:* This element is currently manifested by groups dubbed as representing “political Islam”. Iraq – primarily – suffers from this phenomenon. In fact, “political Islam” in Iraq has dragged the entire country to the brink of civil war. Other countries in the region, particularly Saudi Arabia and Iran, suffer from the same problem to varying degrees.

- 6- *The absence of a collective security system:* There is no collective umbrella that unites all eight countries of the Arabian Gulf region in tackling their common security problems. This indicates the lack of any mutual understanding or mechanisms that have the capacity to solve, contain, or prevent existing conflicts from escalating towards either further polarisation or armed confrontation.
- 7- *Perpetual feeling of the imminence of war:* The backdrop of this feature is the Iranian nuclear project and the effect it is having in intensifying tensions between Iran and both Israel and the West at large. It can be argued that the region has moved from a state of “no war, no peace” to a state of “looming war”. The adoption of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929 on 9 July 2010 has caused the possibility of a war in the Gulf to surge. It is possible that war will break out within a few months, rather than years. The catalyst igniting such a war could be an exchange of fire during the inspection of an Iranian vessel, pursuant to paragraph 15 of Resolution 1929.

III. The Model of Local Balancer

During the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly from 1975 onwards, the regional security system in the Gulf witnessed what may – rather cautiously – be called a form of local “balancing of power”. Iran was on one side of this equation, facing Iraq on the other. This precarious regional balance was destroyed in 1991 with the crushing of Iraq’s military power during the Second Gulf War, and the consequent neutralisation of Iraq’s strategic weight.

This experiment in strategic balance was not without its flaws; it led to a disturbance in the local balance of power and the crushing of an already-fragile stability, which resulted in two massive wars in the region within the span of a decade: the Iran-Iraq War of 1980-1988 (regionally known as the First Gulf War), and the Second Gulf War (1990-1991).

It was within this context that a significant security void emerged, especially in the absence of stabilising or mutually-detering factors that were endowed with sufficient capacity to prevent any actor from launching a war, because of the enormous cost of such a decision. This void has had an element of ambiguity, as

it is neither clear exactly what the power balance is, nor is the present state of affairs effective in impacting actors in the Gulf region. This is where the failure of such a system of security lies in its regional context, a context replete with incidents wherein the region had been dragged into wars and suffered their consequent destruction.

Today, there is a fierce arms race in the region. The participants in this race seem to be pursuing a course that will restructure a local balance of power in the region. This arms race is manifesting itself in different ways in the different states. It is highly unlikely that the unfolding scenario will provide the deterrence needed to keep role-players in the region sufficiently at bay from one another, and keep the region from sliding into crises and wars.

IV. Some Manifestations of the Arms Race

The GCC countries have been focused on constantly upgrading their air forces, as evidenced by the fact that their designated military budgets having exceeded the hundred billion dollar mark. According to *The Financial Times*, two GCC members are planning on spending 100 billion dollars within the coming three to four years on defence.

As for Iraq, there is a strong trend towards militarising the population under different guises. The number of military personnel of both the official army and other militias exceeds a million persons, a matter that makes Iraq the world's most militarised country in the world relative to the size of its population.

The central dimension in Iraqi militarisation efforts is its land troops. There is a plan to put land power at the heart of Iraq's military prowess. A report from *The Defense News* magazine said that Baghdad was planning on purchasing 4,000 different armaments in the next few years, including battle tanks made in the US

and Russia. It is hoped that Iraq will overshadow Iran and other GCC countries, and become the major military land power in the region.

Facing both the air force enlargement of the GCC and Iraq's return to expanding its land military might, Iran has been pursuing, in an attempt to become a regional military power, an anti-missile system since 1992. In order to achieve this objective, Tehran has depended on officially documented imports as well as on materials purchased on the black market. As result, Iran today possesses one of the largest missile arsenals, whether measured regionally or internationally.

Such dissimilar approaches to the arms race within the Gulf region have complicated any attempt to rely on a strong local balance of power in order to preserve peace and sustain an already fragile stability. In fact, under such a situation, both regional and international factors cloud the picture, creating a condition wherein mutual deterrence at the local level is largely ineffective. This is where the danger of the current moment resides. Generally speaking, the option of reaching a strong strategic balance does not seem to hold out a great deal of promise within the Gulf's current security system. This is due to the stark disparities in economic and human resources among the countries of the region, disparities which, if left unchecked, would naturally tend to lead to either a false or an unsustainable balance in the region.

V. The Model of Foreign Balancer

Currently, the regional security system of the Gulf is witnessing what can cautiously be called a balance of power that is dependent on a "foreign balancer". Within this model, it is the US military presence in the Gulf that functions as a stabilising power against the power of Iran.

There are many permutations of the US presence in the Gulf, some of which go as far back as 1949. However, the most important development came in 1980, with the proclamation of the “Carter Doctrine”. The “Carter Doctrine” created a new policy of military intervention in the region that allows for the direct use of force in order to defend US interests. Since the Second Gulf War of 1990-91, the US presence in the region has undergone a substantial increase, reaching a peak in 1995 with the re-establishment of the Fifth Fleet of the US Navy, which was reactivated after having lain dormant since World War II.

In an attempt to examine current approaches, one of the central issues that the US is facing at the moment is working on neutralising Iran’s missile capabilities, both regionally and beyond. According to numerous rumours that are currently circulating, the US has begun the process of deploying a new radar surveillance system in one of the GCC countries. This system is capable of tracking missiles within a 2,000 kilometre range, an upgrade which would give US defence systems an additional 60-70 seconds to intercept any missile offensive.

Based on its current approach, the US is also planning to deploy two new types of interceptor missiles and to integrate them within the weapon and command system known as the “Aegis Combat System”. This system is already installed on US naval ships that are stationed near the Gulf, as well as those in the Arabian and Mediterranean Seas. In the same vein, the US will depend on the deployment of the newest upgrades of the Patriot low- and mid-range missiles, the PAC-3. It has been decided that at least eight of these systems will be deployed in four GCC countries, two systems in each country. The US has also decided to install an as-yet undetermined number of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-ballistic missile systems in various Gulf countries.

Despite these plans, the US has never proposed to take on the role of a permanent substitute for local security arrangements in the Gulf. Indeed, the US continues to hint that its presence in the region is not permanent, or, at least, that that presence will not continue to be as strong as it is, indicating high economic and political costs looming on the horizon. This is where the seriousness of finding a local security system that is capable of either resolving or containing local conflicts lies; a measurement is needed which can prevent possible conflicts from escalating into open wars.

VI. Is there an alternative to the current Gulf paradigm?

This paper proposes a new security structure in the Gulf, utilising a variant of what is known as “coordinated security”, a model which is predicated upon “restricted boundaries”, in order to complement the complicated political and security reality of the Arabian Gulf region. The aim of this model is merely to achieve what is “possible”, based upon political realities on the ground. It is also situated within a geopolitical framework, extending beyond the eight countries of the Gulf region to incorporate three additional countries which border the Arabian Sea: Yemen, India and Pakistan.

When examining the possible alternatives for security systems in the Gulf region, it must be noted at the outset that it is difficult to resort to an ambitious cooperative model for handling security issues in the region due to the absence of the firm political foundations necessary for implementing any such proposal. The wisdom in seeking out a less ambitious, yet potentially achievable, solution to the current Gulf security situation is based on the reality of the region’s current multiple and severe challenges to stability. It is also grounded in factors which are related to the atmosphere of the larger international situation and system, especially as regards the current conflict between Iran and the West which – in terms of the reality on the ground – imposes limitations on viable opportunities for a collective regional approach towards issues of security.

Despite such a reality, a “Gulf-based alternative”, emanating out of local security structures, is still undoubtedly necessary, even indispensable, if the region is successfully to face future crises.

A regional security system can be defined, very generally, as a set of principles which are agreed upon by and among a number of neighbouring and/or interested countries in an attempt to manage common security issues. Such a system does not necessarily resolve existing conflicts, but rather aims to build and refine relevant understandings and mechanisms for cooperation which will prevent conflicts and disputes from degenerating to the point where they are out of control. This surely calls for a collective cooperative measure in the Gulf which is partly dependent on a coordinated security system, and closely addresses and monitors the political and historical particularities of the region in conjunction with the nature of the challenges that hinder opportunities for cooperation.

Which, among the interested parties, does the Proposed Security Structure intend to include?

Before defining the nature of the proposed coordinated security system in the Arabian Gulf and its possible applications on the ground, it is essential clearly to state that such a system must be integrated within a geopolitical framework which extends beyond the Gulf region. Yemen, India and Pakistan ought to be included. Therefore, members of the proposed coordinated system will include 11 countries: the six GCC countries, the other two Gulf countries (Iraq and Iran), and three countries outside those traditionally labelled as Arabian Gulf countries (Yemen, India, and Pakistan).

Why the addition of countries bordering the Arabian Sea?

This study justifies adding the three previously-mentioned countries, each of which has physical links to the Arabian Sea, to the proposed coordinated

security system as a logical option in terms of the considerations discussed below.

In the case of Yemen, there are political and strategic reasons clearly necessitating the integration of that country into any security arrangements in the Gulf. From a political standpoint, ignoring Yemen will only increase its sense of being left out in the cold, a feeling which can be added to already-existing sentiments that have been on the rise since 1981 when the GCC was established and excluded Yemen. At that time Sana'a was Baghdad's primary ally. From a strategic perspective, the significance of integrating Yemen into any security initiative is underscored by the close connection between the Straits of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, as the latter is the second link in the oil shipping route connecting the Gulf to Europe. Regarding local security concerns, it can be argued that any instability in Yemen will surely spill over and contaminate the GCC. This is a natural outcome of geographical proximity, strong social ties, and the bonds between various regional political and cultural groups.

As for India and Pakistan, the reason for integrating them into the proposed coalition security structure of the Arabian Gulf is related to the geopolitical connection between the Gulf and South Asia, a connection which is increasingly sensitive and serious in nature. South Asia neighbours the Arabian Gulf region, collectively forming the northern boundary of the Indian Ocean. Both areas are also connected by a set of water passages and naval routes. South Asia forms an important link between the Gulf area and both East Asia and Australia, as well as the US' major western port cities. Scores of oil vessels and other cargo carriers that ship various commodities and raw materials pass by South Asia in their travels. In addition, any disturbance to the security of the open waters adjacent to India or Pakistan will tend naturally to exacerbate any small issues which may exist and lead to an upswing in naval security across much of the

huge area encompassing the Straits of Hormuz and Malaga, rippling its way as far east as the Indonesian Island of Sumatra.

On a different note, security concerns among the countries of the Gulf region and their counterparts in South Asia have a great deal of overlap due to the presence of a huge demographic bloc of immigrants from South Asia in the Gulf. There are a great many persons living and working in the Arabian Gulf countries who are from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Demographic statistics indicate that these few million working expatriates actually outnumber the native citizenry in some Gulf countries.

If we resort to strategic measurements, there exists a particular security aspect which confronts the Arabian Gulf region with tremendous challenges. The issue that dominates the equation, and is not to be overlooked, is the nuclear stand-off in South Asia between India and Pakistan. Such an atmosphere not only casts its shadow on the Gulf, but also has the effect of forcing any future formation of a new security structure to take into consideration the status of the nuclear situation there.

In addition, a reference to the internal violence in Pakistan must be made due to the fact that such internal strife presents a threat to some Gulf countries, without regard to the type and form of security system adopted for the Arabian Gulf region. This is due to the linkages between some of the armed groups involved. More precisely, it is because there is a danger of the spread of such disturbances, especially those which are predicated upon vertical social divisions which span multiple countries.

What are the characteristics of the Proposed Security Structure?

The coordinated security model is broad enough to accommodate a range of options. To be effective, such a system ought, at a bare minimum, to be capable

of coordinating individual policies in order to deal with common dangers and threats. It should address such phenomena as organised crime and border security, as well as long-standing and ongoing conflicts which have the potential to spiral out of control and become armed confrontations. This is what defines the minimum level of the proposed security system. This security system can be established through the following four-stage plan:

Stage one: During this stage, an examination of the disputes, crises and dangers that are most threatening to regional security takes place, followed by the adoption of criteria to gauge the seriousness of each potential scenario.

Stage two: This stage involves the shaping and fleshing out of the options available for a collective vision in dealing with common dangers, whether political or military in nature. Examples of such dangers are organised crime, smuggling, and border security. Dealing with such challenges can be accomplished by means which are unilateral, bilateral or multilateral.

Stage three: A shift to discussing issues of naval security, strategic marine passages, and creating and implementing appropriate strategies to deal with such issues. Again, the solutions may be reached via means which are unilateral, bilateral or multilateral in nature.

Stage four: The focus here is on shaping recommendations to resolve or freeze historical conflicts, in addition to advancing collective vision regarding how to tackle them. In case this fails, special committees ought then to be formed in order to follow up on these issues with a mandate to investigate new perspectives, bring differing views closer, and propose political and legal solutions capable of moving the situation in a positive direction. Either during this step of the process or from the very beginning, all parties should ensure

principles of good neighbourliness and commitment to international law, and should assiduously avoid resorting to the use of force or provocation.

The philosophy of the previously described coordinated security system at its minimal level is not relevant to the defence and security options adopted by the parties to that system at their individual national levels. This philosophy, likewise, is not tied to the types and quality of alternative or external alliances utilised or available to the countries in question. Similarly, it does not aim at the establishment of regional security structures or organisations.

This proposal of the need to form an analytical perspective regarding the issues at hand and the subsequent suggestion that, of necessity, a regional security system for the countries of the Arabian Gulf ought to be formed in order to restore a balance of power is the least that can be done, in view of the circumstances of the region. Such a measure is vital and indispensable to cast off the looming nightmare of armed conflicts and political skirmishes that compromise regional peace.

This minimum level of cooperation is the alternative to the existing void, which otherwise will inevitably be filled with tensions and disputes. “Power,” it is often said, “loves a vacuum.” This is among the bits of wisdom upon which all regional security understandings and approaches are based.

** Abd al-Jalil al-Marhoun is a researcher from the Gulf who specialises in defence and strategic issues*
