

# Allies in the Gulf

By Marc V. Schanz, Senior Editor

**T**he Syrian civil war, having already cost more than 100,000 lives, took a dark turn in August, as a suburb of Damascus was hit with a gas attack, killing hundreds of men, women, and children. Forces aligned with President Bashar al-Assad were judged to be the culprits, and a coalition of voices rose up calling for military action to punish the regime.

Condemnations came from Washington, D.C., London, and Paris but also from the Gulf Cooperation Council, the six-member political and economic alliance of Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The GCC called Assad's use of chemical weapons a "flagrant violation of international humanitarian law" and urged the UN Security Council to adopt a "deterrent resolution" to save the Syrian people from future "horrific crimes."

The situation was judged by many to be the precursor of a possible broader conflict—a military strike on the chemical weapons facilities was threatened by President Obama—and put in the spotlight the security capabilities of the US and its partners in the region.

The GCC played a significant role in the run-up to—and execution of—the 2011 air campaign in Libya. It issued similar activist language after Muammar Qaddafi's violent crackdown on dissent during the Arab Spring, and some GCC countries even contributed combat aircraft to that action—with Qatar becoming the first Arab country to fly combat missions over Libya. The group has grown increasingly assertive in regional security affairs in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Several of its members, such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain, have been quiet partners with the US in the war in Afghanistan, serving as key locations for Air Force bases and military supply depots.

As the US pulls back from its war footing in the US Central Command area of responsibility, the strategic picture in the Gulf is changing. The UAE and Qatar have rapidly modernized their militaries, thanks to oil and gas wealth, and are viewed as vital partners to securing American interests in the broader Middle East.

America "will be engaged across the spectrum" in the region in the future, said Marine Corps Maj. Gen. William D. Beydler, CENTCOM's head of strategy, plans, and policy. "In some ways, we will be able to be more engaged than ever before, because after 10 or 12 years of sustained combat operations, we will have the capacity to do so."

In particular, senior US officials are lobbying Qatar, the UAE, and Bahrain about military partnerships. CENTCOM is emphasizing multilateral air and naval exercises and better coordination between the US and its Gulf allies. Modernization of regional partner militaries is also receiving a great deal of attention.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Jeffrey L. Harrigan is CENTCOM's deputy director of operations. He is now one of the key players in the effort to balance the command's Afghanistan combat efforts, the withdrawal of gear from that country, and increasing military engagement around the Gulf.

"We are working hard to quantify what exactly we want to do with a particular nation and also regionally," he said in an interview, "to pull together countries in an environment where we not only do bilateral training but multilateral ... to build real joint and coalition operations." He observed that "across our headquarters, if you look into [Fiscal 2014 and 2015], there is some real opportunity for us to expand those activities."

DOD photo by MSgt. Ben Bloker





## America's allies around the volatile Persian Gulf are low key, but have high importance.

*An F-15E on a mission over the Persian Gulf. The strategic picture in the Gulf is changing, and the Gulf states are vital partners in securing US interests in the Middle East.*

The geography of the Gulf (GCC members refer to it as “the Arabian Gulf”) poses unique military problems. It’s a more compact and dangerous neighborhood than the expansive Pacific Ocean and, in many ways, a tougher problem than the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan.

The Strait of Hormuz—the strategic choke point for the Middle East’s oil and gas trade—is only 24 miles wide at its narrowest point, separating Iran from Oman. About 20 percent of the world’s traded petroleum passes through the strait annually. Any crisis involving a confrontation with Iran’s military would look different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and air defense and airpower would play a critical role.

“The Department of Defense has bought a lot of capabilities to support operations in [CENTCOM] over the last decade,” said Mark Gunzinger, a senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

However, “a lot of those capabilities are not what we need to operate in a contested environment like the Gulf,” he said in an interview.

### Evolving Posture

Gunzinger examined the Persian Gulf’s unique anti-access and area-denial problems in a 2011 study for CSBA. He determined the US and its allies needed to re-examine seriously their operating concepts in light of Iranian military investments in fast, flexible naval and airpower, mining and submarine warfare, and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles. Improved remotely piloted aircraft technology, if paired with even rudimentary weapons, could create “a lot of damage” in certain scenarios, he said.

The Pentagon and CENTCOM appear to be steadily evolving their posture in the area. While the 2012 Defense Strategic Guidance makes clear the Middle East is the other focal point of US strategy and force planning (besides the Pacific), the pullout of American forces from Iraq and now Afghanistan is now creating new military priorities. The US is emphasizing collaboration and engagement with allies, power projection, and deterrence.

This strategic shift “is leading the US to build up its forces in the Gulf and strengthening the military forces of the Arab Gulf states,” wrote Anthony H. Cordesman and Bryan Gold in the May 2013 report “The Gulf Military Balance,” published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The task is tricky, Harrigian said, as CENTCOM must balance the ongoing operation in Afghanistan—and retrograde operations—with “force presence” across the Gulf region, ranging from preparing for possible intervention in Syria to a confrontation with Iran.

Earlier this year, Harrigian said, CENTCOM staff took a fresh look at the laydown of US forces in the area of responsibility, trying to assess enduring needs, the scenarios requiring response forces to mobilize quickly, and pitting those needs against assets available—especially when sequestration is likely to continue affecting readiness.

The amount of forces CENTCOM previously had at its disposal—and had to have because of Afghanistan and Iraq—is “coming down,” Harrigian said. “That’s reality and we are trying to focus on the right mixture of what we need now and in the future.”

Speed, flexibility, and responsiveness are critical in an environment like the Gulf, and all these attributes correspond with air and maritime integration; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and air interdiction capabilities.

“We’ve had several exercises, particularly in the Gulf, where we are focused on leveraging ISR, building surveillance pictures, and linking that” to air and naval weapons, Harrigian said. These ideas, in many ways, are related to the AirSea Battle concept.



USAF photo by SSGT. Angella Lawrence

**A1C Timothy Michaud and A1C Brandon Denton provide security for a C-17 during the Bahrain International Air Show in 2010. Bahrain has been a quiet partner to the US during the war in Afghanistan.**

“While it may read well on paper,” he pointed out, “you’ve got to practice that. Especially in the Gulf, reaction time is a significant factor.”

Harrigian, in his previous assignment, assisted with the 2012 implementation of Exercise Eager Lion in Jordan. It featured several Gulf States and Arab allies and both aerial exercises and ground integration with Special Forces.

“A big part of this is to be there, in the region, to build trust and confidence that we have the ability to respond quickly. You have to be able to look them in the eye,” Harrigian said, “and not just send an email.”

Multilateral exercises in the CENTCOM area have blossomed. In June, the largest-yet Eager Lion took place in Jordan, and in May CENTCOM helped organize the International Mine Countermeasures Exercise 2013 (IMCEX), an event staged out of Bahrain by CENTCOM’s naval component, with more than 40 nations participating.

In late April, Exercise Eagle Resolve was staged in Qatar. More than 2,000 US troops participated in the field training event, alongside military forces from the GCC. A simple seminar when it was first established in 1999, the most recent iteration featured scenarios that could apply to any number of CENTCOM operating plans in the Gulf and its periphery, including hostage situations, naval and theater ballistic missile defense, critical infrastructure protection, and counterterrorism activities.

This is not just a US initiative. The Gulf States themselves seek a greater say in regional matters. In 2011, for the first time, the GCC announced it would broaden its reach beyond the Gulf and would offer membership to Jordan and Morocco, two monarchies closely aligned with the group. Morocco, for example, sent observers to this year’s Eager Lion exercise.

“The GCC states see the future of their relationship with the US based on more reciprocity than before,” said Theodore W. Karasik, the research and consultancy director for the Dubai-based Institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis.



NASA photo

**Oman (left) and Iran (right) are separated by the Gulf's Strait of Hormuz—only 24 miles wide at its narrowest point. The strait is the strategic chokepoint of the region's oil and gas trade.**

Karasik, who regularly advises Gulf governments and militaries of Qatar and other GCC states, said communication about the security relationships between the Gulf States and the US has improved measurably from a decade ago. At the same time, their security is closely tied with a continuing and visible US military presence.

“Today, they are frightened of the prospect of the concept of the [Pacific pivot] and what that will mean for a reduction of presence in the region. From their perspective, the region is red hot right now,” he said. “Iranians are on the ground in Syria, and that is making the GCC more nervous. ... From their perspective, they are convinced they are surrounded by hostile intent.”

As a result, there's been increasing collaboration among the GCC countries, and trilateral and multilateral exercises “have grown in the last few years,” Karasik observed.

Based on contacts with officials in the GCC, Karasik said the Gulf States believe threats have grown more complicated. Iranian military influence has spurred them to push past intra-

Arab rivalries and build up a regional security architecture—in the process, modernizing their militaries, particularly in the air and air defense sectors.

Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar have proved reliable partners in supporting air operations, serving as hosts for visiting long-range aircraft, including airlifters and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets.

In the UAE, whose own military fields some of the most modernized forces in the region, US Air Force assets regularly rotate in and out of country—particularly through the Gulf Air Warfare Center at Al Dhafra Air Base, which serves as a regional training center for US, GCC, and allied air forces.

Al Dhafra is a frequent stop for USAF's most capable fighter, the F-22. Since last spring, the fighter's synthetic aperture radar, long-range sensors, and strike capabilities have allowed pilots to practice and train in a variety of scenarios and provide armed ISR overwatch on activities in the Strait of Hormuz.

**Capt. Matthew Howard guides an F-22 to the runway for takeoff at Al Dhafra AB, United Arab Emirates, during 2009 training. Al Dhafra serves as a regional training center for US, Gulf Cooperation Council states, and allied air forces.**



USAF photo by TSgt. Charles Larkin Sr.

In August, Pacific Air Forces-owned F-22s returned from a deployment to Al Dhafra, where they practiced armed over-watch sorties and coordination with US assets in the region, particularly maritime security drills.

The F-22s that visit the Gulf region are a different capability from the fourth generation fighters and close air support assets that rotated in and out of Iraq from 2003 to 2010. US officials have made no secret about their purpose: assurance and deterrence. F-22s and other air defense and naval assets are often positioned in the region to “deter Iranian aggression and respond to other contingencies,” Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel said in remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in May.

Iranian and US aircraft have had several near-incidents in the airspace over the Gulf in the last year. Last November, Iranian Su-25 fighters opened fire on unmanned aircraft during a sortie near the coast of Iran—but the aircraft returned unharmed. On March 12, an Iranian F-4 Phantom closed in on a USAF MQ-1 Predator and its fighter escort as it conducted a routine ISR sortie over international waters in the Gulf. The closest the F-4 got to the MQ-1 was 16 miles, according to DOD officials who issued a brief statement on the incident in March.

In his speech at the Air Force Association’s Air & Space Conference this September, Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh III gave new details about the incident—confirming F-22s were conducting air escort sorties for Predator and Reaper flights in the region. Welsh described how Lt. Col. Kevin Sutterfield, a USAF Reservist and Raptor pilot with the 477th Fighter Group, flew under the Iranian F-4 and checked out his weapons load—without them knowing he was there. “[He] then pulled up on their left wing and then called them and said, ‘You really ought to go home.’” Welsh said. The F-4 broke off pursuit of the Predator.

Meanwhile, Southwest Asia’s 379th Air Expeditionary Wing at Al Udeid AB, Qatar, is the largest expeditionary wing in USAF, with assets ranging from KC-135s to the E-8 JSTARS and B-1Bs supporting operations in Afghanistan.

***A maintainer from the UAE communicates via hand signals with a UAE F-16 pilot after a 2011 Red Flag mission in Nevada. The UAE is purchasing 25 more of the most modern F-16s available.***



***A Saudi crew chief waits to marshal a Saudi Royal Air Force F-15 before a training mission during Red Flag 2012 at Nellis AFB, Nev. Saudi Arabia is both a US ally and a member of the GCC.***

Welsh visited airmen at expeditionary wings in the Gulf in January and February as well.

### **No Stability Renaissance**

Hagel’s first trip to the Middle East brought him to Abu Dhabi in April, where he held meetings with Gen. Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan—crown prince of Abu Dhabi and deputy supreme commander of the UAE armed forces—as well as UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan. In addition to talks about Iran’s nuclear program and the conflict in Syria, Hagel and senior officials discussed furthering defense and security ties, to include activities such as ballistic missile defense coordination.

During that visit, the UAE confirmed it would purchase an additional 25 F-16 Block 60 aircraft—the most modern version of the fighter—and standoff weapons to increase the ability of the UAE Air Force to perform joint operations.

While no formal announcement was released by the Defense Security Cooperation Agency at the time, several reports indicate the weapons to be AGM-154 JSOW or AGM-158 JASSM standoff cruise missiles.

The modernization push in the Gulf comes as much of the world is cutting defense spending. Last year, GCC governments spent some \$74 billion on arms modernization, up nine percent from the previous year. According to Forecast International, an aerospace industry analysis firm, that figure is on track to reach \$86 billion by 2017. Despite long-standing grievances with foreign military sales licenses, the US is attempting to lower the barriers for sales of advanced defense materiel to GCC countries. In just the last year, Qatar, Kuwait, and the UAE have all invested in communications, radar, and support infrastructure for Patriot

USAF photo by SSGt. Benjamin Wilson



USAF photo by SrA Brett Clashman

infrastructure for Patriot missile systems—a response to Iran’s growing missile capabilities.

As US forces in CENTCOM step off a combat footing, Harrigian and other CENTCOM and AFCENT officials say there’s increasing emphasis on building a more stable and enduring military footprint in and around the Gulf, to include efforts at tour normalization.

At the 379th AEW, long a focal point for operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, family services are expanding. The wing is increasing accompanied tours for airmen at the base, aiming to have between 20 and 25 families on base by the beginning of Fiscal 2014—and ultimately up to 60 of them permanently assigned.

The Middle East, however, is not about to have a renaissance of stability anytime soon. Beydler points out that the political and social effects of the Arab Spring are still playing out—dramatically

***Troops board a CV-22 Osprey during Exercise Eagle Resolve 2013, a multilateral training mission including GCC member nations, in Doha, Qatar.***

in Syria and Egypt—and this has implications for US efforts to build regional stability.

Egypt’s volatility is certainly a contributing factor behind the US effort to build Iraq into a regional actor. While post-Saddam Iraq is no longer a threat to the GCC, the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq, housed in the US Embassy in Baghdad, is helping the country gain both internal and external security and military capabilities, absent a US military presence.

“We want to give [the Iraqis] situations where we can facilitate training and opportunities that broaden the aperture, so we can support their internal infrastructure, but also integrate them into the larger GCC and other activities across the region,” Harrigian said.

Iraq is slated to begin receiving deliveries of F-16 aircraft in 2014, for example, and in August the US Defense Security Cooperation Agency announced the country had requested the sale of a new integrated air defense system—comprising Hawk missile batteries, radars, fire-control units, and other components—valued at about \$2.4 billion.

While some members of Congress have raised concerns about the effect of the Arab Spring on the strategic vulnerability of US bases in the Mideast—such as in Bahrain, host of the US 5th Fleet—Harrigian notes basic mil-to-mil exchanges are a big part of access discussions and must be considered in light of the allied perspective.

Basing and access are political, but it “is critically important that our staff and our people have relationships across the GCC, and in places like Jordan, so that we work through plans and work access issues which arise when we need to execute plans,” Harrigian said.

The US is also mindful that its own strategic goals must find common ground with those of its partners, whether with military sales or stationing troops or serving as a location for aircraft.

“In shaping those discussions, it is largely a matter of how [a particular country] sees us. We need to be invited, and without that it becomes problematic,” Harrigian said.

For GCC powers that were part of Operation Unified Protector, the lessons of Libya are being slowly internalized. As officials within the UAE have taken note of their contributions to the Libya operation, they see a sort of template for an Arab-led no-fly zone over Syria as a possible future option. With Jordan now on the cusp of entering the GCC, some of the member countries envision an organization more geared toward security.

“The GCC, plus Jordan, in terms of an organization like NATO, ... seems to be something in the works,” Karasik observed. “In an informal sense, it already seems to exist.” ■



USAF photo by MSgt. Kevin Nichols