

COMMENTARY

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Why the GCC Has No Teeth?

Hayat Alvi

US Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island

The US is selling weapons and military hardware to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with great fervour, and they are buying them with equal insatiability. The GCC states fear an attack by Iran. The US is also repeatedly ensuring GCC allies that missile defence programmes and radar systems, also referred to as a “security umbrella,” will be put in place to protect them from incoming Iranian missiles. However, the reality is very different, and there seems to be tremendous denial pertaining to it.

That reality involves the lack of military manpower within these countries (they even rely on migrant labour for most if not all sectors), despite all the collective security measures that the GCC countries are trying to take and display. This deficiency will preclude them from dealing with Iran or any other formidable power in any efficient or effective manner, irrespective of their sophisticated military hardware. If you do not have the numbers (that is, the military manpower) needed to operate the weapons and hardware, then how can you effectively defend yourself?

The *CIA World Fact Book* provides the statistical data about the populations and male and female military manpower available for each of the six GCC countries. Then I compared those total numbers, collectively, to the male and female military manpower of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). These are the findings:

Military Manpower Available:

Bahrain

Males 508,000

Females 290,000

Kuwait

Males 1 million

Females 617,000

Oman

Males 986,000
Females 737,000

Qatar

Males 389,000
Females 166,000

Saudi Arabia

Males 8 million
Females 6 million

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Males 2.7 million
Females 981,000

For all the six GCC states, total male and female military manpower available is 22.4 million. We can assume that females will not be allowed to serve in combat, so subtracting the female military statistics leads to a total of 13,583,000 male manpower in the GCC militaries.

Now, let us look at Iran's statistics for military manpower:

Males 23 million
Females 22 million

Again, removing the females from combat, we come to 23 million Iranian males available in the military. The caveat here is that Iranian women have played significant supportive roles in the past, particularly in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), and Ayatollah Khomeini did not hesitate to recruit and use and dispose of children (boys) in the war. The current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei might follow the same playbook.

Moreover, this has not taken into account any potential role of Iran's allies and proxies, including Hezbollah, which some estimates say are 50,000 strong. Syria, though not in a position to fight another front in the Persian Gulf, is still Iran's ally and could possibly serve supportive roles. In addition, there are significant Iranian allies and proxies in Iraq, which could potentially come in use in the event of a conflict.

The other advantage Iran has is the indigenous population, which consists mostly of Iranian nationals, total 78 million. On the other hand, most of the GCC states' indigenous populations – or nationals – are diminished, if not grossly outnumbered, by migrant non-nationals who cannot hold citizenship nor serve in militaries. Consider the following statistics:

Bahrain

Population: 1.2 million, of which 235,108 are migrant non-nationals

Kuwait

Population: 2.6 million, of which 1.3 million are migrant non-nationals

Oman

Population: 3 million, of which 577,293 are migrant non-nationals

Qatar

Population: 1.9 million, of which 1.5 million are migrant non-nationals

Saudi Arabia

Population: 26 million, of which 6 million are migrant non-nationals

United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Population: 8 million, of which 7.3 million are migrant non-nationals

The numbers speak for themselves, in terms of the limited indigenous national population pools of the GCC states, especially for military purposes. Furthermore, GCC states are not likely to have the will power to fight a war against Iran. The preference is to have more powerful allies, namely the US, do their bidding.

Linked to this reality is the other hard fact: the precedent set by the Gulf War 1991, wherein the US and coalition forces came to their rescue. Why would the GCC states not rely on the same powerful allies in facing and fending off future threats? In my view, at the eleventh hour (if not sooner) that is exactly what they will do: knock on the US door and beg Americans to come to their rescue yet again. While the Obama administration might be trying very hard to avoid that scenario, analysts like me will take some convincing that this will not be the case. When states lack teeth to fight their own fights, they will turn to friends who have the sharpest canines to destroy the enemies. The sooner we Americans embrace this reality the better, as it just might serve as the impetus for us to end our ridiculous obsession with the GCC oil. As Voltaire put it eloquently: “It is not inequality which is the real misfortune, it is dependence.”

Dr. Hayat Alvi is an Associate Professor at the US Naval War College and the views expressed are her own. Email: hayat33@hotmail.com

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