

Could the Gulf States Intervene in Syria?

by [Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Apr 17, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Knights \(/experts/michael-knights\)](#)

Michael Knights is the Jill and Jay Bernstein Fellow of The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, and the Persian Gulf states. He is a co-founder of the Militia Spotlight platform, which offers in-depth analysis of developments related to the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq and Syria.



Brief Analysis

The participation of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in the Libyan conflict demonstrated the Gulf Cooperation Council's activism and capability. In recent months, therefore, speculation has focused on possible GCC intervention in the Syrian civil war. On February 27, Qatari prime minister Hamad bin Jassim al-Thani told the Friends of Syria conference in Tunis that "we should do whatever is necessary to help [Syrian oppositionists], including giving them weapons to defend themselves." On March 31, Saudi foreign minister Saud al-Faisal echoed this statement: "The arming of the [Syrian] opposition is a duty." What capabilities, then, would the Gulf states bring in terms of support to armed proxies? And what would be the risks related to their intervention?

BACKGROUND

External security assistance to states and substate groups can be divided into two broad categories: foreign internal defense (FID) and unconventional warfare. FID support comprises security assistance provided to a government for the purpose of overcoming insurgent or terrorist groups, while unconventional warfare refers to support provided by external actors to the insurgents. In either case, foreign support may include provision of training, equipment, or operations, in some cases via direct involvement of foreign combat forces.

GCC states have a significant track record in FID and are quickly gaining experience in unconventional warfare missions. Both FID and unconventional warfare accentuate funding, technology, airpower, and special forces -- attributes possessed by the Gulf Arab monarchies. Likewise, factors that have traditionally hindered GCC military effectiveness -- limited manpower, inability to field large numbers of high-quality units -- are deemphasized. The partial deniability afforded by the use of militant proxies is also attractive to the cautious Gulf monarchies.

PRECEDENTS FOR SYRIA INTERVENTION

Saudi Arabia offers a significant pedigree in terms of unconventional warfare campaigns: the kingdom was centrally involved in both the eight-year North Yemen civil war and the decade-long anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan. In the Yemeni conflict, Riyadh orchestrated a long-running aerial program of armament supply; in Afghanistan, it provided hundreds of millions of dollars in support (peaking at \$630 million in 1987). More recently, GCC involvement in FID and unconventional warfare missions has involved more states (particularly the UAE and

Qatar) in the following conflicts:

- Afghanistan. Since 2006, the UAE has deployed a battalion-size group of mechanized and special forces to Afghanistan. The special forces component operates in Kandahar, in collaboration with Jordanian special forces, conducting full combat operations against Taliban militants. This deployment follows on significant battalion-size UAE peacekeeping deployments to Lebanon, Somalia, and the Balkans since the 1970s.
- Yemen. Since Egyptian troops departed in 1970, Saudi Arabia has never diminished its influence on Yemeni politics and continues to intervene militarily in the country, both directly and via proxies. In 2009, Riyadh launched a nine-week aerial bombing campaign against Houthi rebels in northern Yemen, losing 137 troops during the resultant clashes. More recently, the kingdom upped its support of Salafist mosques and sheikhs in northern Yemen, including provision of salaries, armored vehicles, and weapons. For its part, the UAE has provided significant stocks of armored vehicles and weapons to Yemen via the Jordanian military, in addition to funding the deployment of Jordanian special forces trainers.
- Libya. Qatari and UAE armed forces played a major role in the recent campaign to unseat Muammar Qadhafi. Both nations deployed special forces inside Libya, placing them in the thick of the fighting. Qatari and UAE aircraft were used to shuttle arms and armored vehicles to the Libyan rebels in Benghazi and the Nafusa Mountains south of Tripoli. And both countries were directly involved in organizing the resistance and coordinating with NATO air forces. As Qatari armed forces chief of staff Maj. Gen. Hamad bin Ali al-Attiyah noted in October 2011, "The numbers of Qataris on the ground were hundreds in every region [and focused on] running the training and communications operations...and planning the battles." Since the fall of Qadhafi's regime, the UAE and Qatar have vied over who will provide the most security assistance to the new government and individual militias, using Jordanian and Turkish training academies to deliver the training packages.
- Lebanon. Since 2006, the UAE has provisioned Lebanon with several hundred vehicles, shipments of small arms and ammunition, body armor, and anti-riot gear for paramilitary police forces. The outbreak of fighting between the Fatah al-Islam militant group and Lebanese units at Tripoli's Nahr al-Bared refugee camp in May 2007 prompted the UAE to supply nine SA-342L Gazelle helicopters from its own stores, deployed within two weeks of the outbreak of fighting and armed with machine guns, unguided rocket pods, sensors, and self-defense systems.

Most recent episodes of GCC military intervention have been conservative or defensive in nature, such as FID support to Afghanistan, Lebanon, Yemen, Bahrain, and post-Qadhafi Libya. Although cases of unconventional warfare against a target state are less prevalent, Saudi support was central to two of the region's longest-running insurgent campaigns, while the Qatari and UAE intervention in Libya marks a watershed in the offensive military confidence shown by these states.

The formula that seems to facilitate GCC involvement in unconventional warfare against regional states comprises three elements: a preexisting grudge or interest in unseating the regime; a strong international mandate or major allied power underpinning the operation; and the cooperation of a trusted regional partner with strong military capacity (such as Pakistan, Jordan, or Turkey). Libya showed that the Gulf states could act boldly when they possessed an international mandate and faced an unpopular and isolated regime. GCC military ties to the Jordanian special forces community could result in a particularly powerful combination in a Syria intervention.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

GCC military intervention in Syria's civil war could provide a significant boost to the opposition Free Syrian Army's viability as a military force. But such intervention will only come about if Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE receive a mandate from a major international forum, and if a military ally such as Turkey or Jordan strongly commits to the endeavor. Lethal aid would also probably remain indirect and low volume (e.g., small pots of Gulf money given to Lebanese and Iraqi arms smugglers) until either the United States or France provides antitank weapons, secure communications equipment, and other vital resources.

Perhaps the key consideration regarding GCC intervention is not whether it can meaningfully affect the conflict, but how Gulf Arab involvement might shape the future environment in Syria and the region. In Afghanistan and, most recently, Libya, GCC sponsorship of proxies continued after the conflict and may have had deleterious consequences for state stability and central government control. Gulf support for rebel groups tends to empower radical Islamist currents within the insurgent and political milieus.

Furthermore, if the Gulf monarchies do become involved in covert action in Syria, the Iraqi and Syrian conflicts could become intertwined, with Arab rebels in both countries facing Iranian-influenced Shiite-led governments. If Washington wished to, it would probably have little trouble deterring the Gulf states from providing significant lethal aid to the Syrian opposition, since a fragile constellation of factors is required to encourage these conservative states to act in the first place. And if the Gulf states are given the green light to militarily intervene in Syria, it would pay dividends to closely coordinate their actions with Western nations who have a long-term interest in the country's stability.

Michael Knights is a Lafer fellow with The Washington Institute, specializing in the military and security affairs of Iraq, Iran, Libya, Yemen, and the Gulf Arab states. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆
Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[Gulf & Energy Policy \(/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy\)](#)

[Military & Security \(/policy-analysis/military-security\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](#)

[Syria \(/policy-analysis/syria\)](#)