

The GCC Militaries since Desert Storm: An Assessment

Feb 22, 2001



Brief Analysis

When Secretary of State Colin Powell and former President George Bush touch down in Kuwait on Sunday, celebrations scheduled to commemorate the expulsion of Saddam Husayn’s forces ten years ago will also—albeit less explicitly—recognize the more robust state of Gulf militaries. A decade after Operation Desert Storm, each of the six states comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—possess armed forces that are not just more modern, but larger than ever before:

Table I. GCC Military Inventory

	Tanks	Artillery	Combat Aircraft	Armored Vehicles	Warships
1990/91	11,155	755	414	3,304	8
2000/01	12,038	1,030	692	5,178	7

These numbers, however, offer little indication of potential battlefield performance—actual capability in wartime is a function of various factors that include training, leadership, doctrine, and tactics. Indeed, some of the weaponry represented by these figures may not be operational due to lack of support, spare parts, and trained personnel. CSIS scholar Anthony Cordesman has stressed the fact that these types of numbers are not all-telling: "In general, Southern Gulf military spending is extremely wasteful, lacking in interoperability and standardization, emphasizes weapons numbers and ‘glitter factors’ over overall systems integration, fails to adequate[ly] fund sustainability and maneuver capability, and underfunds advanced training."

Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE have significantly expanded as well as modernized their inventories. In fact, the United Arab Emirates is scheduled to start taking delivery of eighty state-of-the-art F-16 fighters this year, planes produced specifically for the UAE. Oman and Qatar, on the other hand, seem to have limited their efforts to modernizing their forces. The table below illustrates these trends in greater detail. (All of the figures have been drawn from 1990/1990 and 2000/2001 editions of *The Military Balance*, published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies).

Table II. Military Inventory 1991-2001; State-by-State

Country	Year	Tanks	Artillery	Combat Aircraft	Armored Vehicles	Major Surface Combatants
Bahrain	1991/2001	154/106	22/98	24/34	103/365	0/1

Kuwait	1991/2001	245/385	72/59	35/82	675/495	0/0
Oman	1991/2001	175/117	75/115	57/40	8/183	0/0
Qatar	1991/2001	124/44	14/40	18/18	198/212	0/0
S. Arabia	1991/2001	1550/1055	475/448	189/417	1780/2870	8/4
UAE	1991/2001	1207/331	97/270	91/101	540/1053	0/2
TOTAL	1991/2001	1155/2038	755/1030	414/692	3304/5178	8/7

Significant growth has occurred in all countries and nearly every category of weaponry, despite the retirement in many cases of older or obsolete models.

Table III. Qualitative Military Inventory 1991-2001

	Tanks	Aircraft
	Med-High Quality/Low Quality	Med-High Quality/Low Quality
Bahrain	106/0	22/12
Kuwait	368/17	54/28
Oman	117/0	12/28
Qatar	0/44	12/6
Saudi Arabia	765/290	266/151
UAE	286/45	45/56
TOTAL	1642/396	411/281

As illustrated in Table III, approximately 80 percent of the GCC's tanks are of medium or high quality. Aircraft fleets, on the other hand, are considerably outdated—nearly 70 percent of the models are "low quality," despite the addition of newer models to regional air forces throughout the last decade. As for armored vehicles and artillery inventories not represented in the table above, procurement has outpaced modernization efforts. Finally, warships have played only a marginal role, with modernization clearly characterizing the evolution of naval inventories.

For the purpose of strategic deterrence, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have long possessed Chinese CSS-2 and Soviet Scud-B missiles, respectively. None of the GCC states are thought to have acquired weapons of mass destruction (WMD). However, most of the countries comprising the GCC possess well-developed petro-chemical industries that could provide a basis for a modest chemical weapon capability in the future, should they decide to do so—perhaps in response to an Iranian or Iraqi nuclear breakout.

The Gulf Cooperation Council is better equipped in 2001 than it was in 1991, but serious questions remain as to whether or not these impressive inventories can translate into dividends on the battlefield. If Saddam tests the

waters with more than routine saber rattling, or Iran experiments with its own military might, the Gulf monarchies will find out if indeed size matters.

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