The Gulf Cooperation Council Defense Pact:

An Exercise in Ambiguity

by Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

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Brief Analysis

January 17 marks the tenth anniversary of the start of Operation Desert Storm in the Middle East, when U.S.-led forces began the liberation of Kuwait. In that operation, the militaries of the Gulf monarchies played a minor role.

At their meeting in Bahrain at the end of December, the leaders of these monarchies agreed to a joint defense agreement by which an attack on one would be considered an attack on all. While this agreement could enhance the defense capabilities of these states, they will still be unable to fend off attack by either of their large neighbors, Iraq or Iran. The monarchies will continue to rely on the United States as their ultimate security guarantor.

Mutual Defense among the Gulf Cooperation Council States Mutual defense has always been the ultimate purpose of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) linking Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman. It was set up in 1981, soon after the start of the eight-year Iran–Iraq war when revolutionary Iran — not Iraq — was the major threat. However, fearful of offending either Tehran or Baghdad, the GCC's objectives, as described in its charter, mention neither defense nor military cooperation. If it had a motto, it would probably be "caution." After the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, it took several weeks before a GCC official admitted that military action needed to be considered as a means to expel Iraqi forces.

Against this background, it is entirely possible that the new mutual defense pact will remain a dead letter. The first challenge for the new agreement is ratification by each member state. The meaning of "ratification" differs from country to country. In Saudi Arabia, the king holds the power to ratify treaties. But King Fahd is ailing and Crown Prince Abdullah is the de facto chief decision-maker, although he is without regency powers. Kuwait, the only GCC member with an elected national assembly, presumably needs the acquiescence of that body, which is notoriously jealous of its sovereignty and suspicious of any agreement negotiated by the ruling al-Sabah family. The notion of an attack on one GCC member being considered an attack on all seems likely to challenge Gulf preferences for procrastination and obfuscation. Addressing the summit, Crown Prince Abdullah seemed to acknowledge the difficulties, noting "it was absurd to talk about a unified military front in the absence of a unified and cohesive political front."

The text of the new agreement has not been released, but it is believed to allow for a military communications network linking all the states and a missile warning system. The latter is expected to be linked to U.S. systems as part of the Clinton administration's Cooperative Defense Initiative to integrate GCC defenses within the region as well as with the United States. When it was initially proposed by Secretary of Defense William Cohen in 1998, the project was seen by the GCC as extravagant. Despite the recovery in oil prices since then, the resistance to costly purchases remains.

The pact also may call for expansion of the Peninsula Shield force, the largely symbolic joint ground force which is only about 7,000 strong. After the Gulf War, Oman proposed it should be made into a real force with 100,000 men, which is implausible given the difficulties of recruiting and retaining locals with the skills and dedication to be ground soldiers.

Intra-GCC Differences Rivalries, sometimes apparently petty, persist among members states of the GCC. Agreement on the defense pact had nearly been reached a year earlier but the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani, who is also his own defense minister, refused to attend a meeting chaired by the Saudi defense minister, Prince Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz, with whom he reportedly has been at odds. As recently as last November, the emir of Bahrain boycotted the Islamic summit in the Qatari capital, Doha, because of a lingering border dispute. (Milking the opportunity, the Qatari leader, Sheikh Hamad, made a show of nevertheless attending the GCC summit in the Bahraini capital.)

Perceptions of threats also differ widely. The Saudi and Kuwaiti leadership live in mortal fear of revenge by Saddam Husayn because of U.S. and British air patrols from bases in their countries. The UAE and Qatar, further away from Iraq, think sanctions have gone on too long and only hurt the Iraqi people. (To the irritation of Washington and London, the UAE member state of Dubai almost openly tolerates oil smuggling by Iraq.) For the UAE, Iran is the major threat. The Iranian occupation of three islands in the middle of the Gulf, claimed by the UAE, is a festering diplomatic sore. The GCC summit last month once again issued a statement supporting the UAE's claim but again, pointedly, only backed peaceful resolution of the dispute.

Still Dependent on the United States Even if the defense pact (ratified or not) appears to gain some substance, the United States will remain the ultimate guarantor of the independence of all GCC members. None of the GCC states has a military tradition which has been successfully translated into a modern-day fighting force. The United States currently has formal defense agreements with all GCC members except Saudi Arabia, with service personnel in all countries and pre-positioned equipment in Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE, and Oman. Publicly, this is embarrassing for the GCC as it demonstrates, as did the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq in 1990, that the many billions of dollars spent in the last twenty-five years on defense infrastructure and equipment have not bought independence. With the crisis in the Middle East peace process, the need for U.S. support is also domestically sensitive as the local populations often regard Washington to be biased against the Arabs.

Individual GCC members have ended up demonstrating their own freedom of maneuver. For example, the UAE has bought Russian arms despite having defense agreements with Washington, as well as London and Paris, but not with Moscow. For its part, Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Abdullah has developed links with Iran despite suspicions of Tehran's involvement in the 1996 Al-Khobar bombing in which nineteen U.S. service personnel in the kingdom were killed. This week's meeting of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) oil cartel is also likely to see Saudi Arabia and Iran put their common interests ahead of those of the U.S economy. There are even reports that a limited security pact between Riyadh and Tehran is about to be signed, although the agreement is evidently primarily — if not exclusively — about police matters such as smuggling.

While the United States thinks of containment and deterrence, the GCC states appear to follow the Arab proverb: "Hold your friends close, but hold your enemies closer." Nonetheless, the new defense pact provides an opportunity

to strengthen the security of GCC members, though it is not likely to develop as an alternative to the U.S. security umbrella, nor to provide new opportunities for U.S. diplomacy, due to ambiguities in the relationship between the region and Washington.

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