

The Intervention in Bahrain Through the Lenses of Its Supporters



By John Duke Anthony

June 30, 2011

****Editorial Note:** The following essay by Dr. John Duke Anthony analyzes the Gulf Cooperation Council's response to Bahrain's request for defense assistance this past March. It was written for the website of the Abu Dhabi-based Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR; <http://www.ecssr.ac.ae>). The ECSSR is one of the GCC countries' oldest and most productive think tanks and research institutes on public policy issues. A shorter version of this essay was published on the ECSSR website and can be accessed at: <http://t.co/MLsibJx>.

In the third week of March 2011, Bahrain's national leadership issued an unprecedented call for assistance. It asked its fellow Gulf Cooperation Council members to mobilize portions of their security forces and deploy them to Bahrain. The purpose: to assist in countering a domestic uprising, portions of which had called for the regime of the ruling Al-Khalifa family to be overthrown and replaced by a republic.

Action and Reaction

Several GCC governments immediately responded favorably. They did so emphasizing that their actions were incontestably legitimate and in keeping with the founding *raison d'être* of Dar Al-Jazeera, or Peninsula Shield (PS). (Established during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, the documentation associated with PS' inception was deposited with the United Nations).

Bahrain's request and the GCC members' response to it were further justified in terms of the right to self-defense clause of Article 51 in the UN Charter, as well as in conformity with international norms pertaining to a nation state's legitimate right to self-preservation. The legal relevance of these two facts that underscored the appropriateness of what Bahrain and its fellow GCC countries did arguably should have been self-evident. But, alas, in the eyes of many observers this was not the case.

Indeed, upon learning of what transpired, numerous foreign detractors sharply criticized the intervention. Among them were not only a prominent cabinet member of one of Bahrain's Great Power allies but also high-ranking leaders in Iran and Iraq. The critics' remarks implied that what Bahrain and its fellow GCC member states did to counter a major challenge to internal security in Bahrain was imprudent and excessive.



Map of Bahrain

Power and Purpose

What has been missing from much of the foreign commentary regarding PS is not only an understanding of its formation, purpose, and nature. Also missing is knowledge of PS' achievements prior to its most recent utilization in the case of Bahrain. In agreeing to establish PS, the original goal of the six founding heads of state was to help prevent the Iran-Iraq conflict from spreading to one or more of the GCC members. To that end, the members took care in determining where PS might best be located. With Kuwait being the GCC country then most threatened with the possibility of Iran attacking it by land, the GCC's leaders decided to place the PS in northern Saudi Arabia a short distance from the Saudi Arabian-Kuwaiti border at Hafr Al-Batin.

The Strategic Objective

From the moment of its inception to its entry into a state of relative dormancy following the end of the Iran-Iraq war and continuing to its most recent activation, the PS -- as concept and in terms of the units periodically



<http://sites.gcc-sg.org/DLibrary/index-eng.php>

Gulf Cooperation Logo and Active Years

assigned to it from the members' armed forces -- has been associated with a pan-GCC strategic objective. The goal: enhancing the member's deterrence and defense capabilities with a view to ensuring their security and stability.

Viewed in this context and from the perspective of its evolution over the past quarter of a century, PS provides credence to the members' longstanding policy that an attack upon any one of them will be regarded as an attack upon all six. As such, the members have reasoned from the outset that should one or more of them request assistance from fellow members as in the case of Bahrain, or from one or more non-GCC countries as has occurred in the past, the request would likely be honored more rapidly and credibly than otherwise. In the international media's commentary regarding the invocation of PS in the case of Bahrain, the omission of this background and context history has served no good interest.

Principle and Precedence

But what has happened with regard to Bahrain ought not to be viewed in isolation from an examination of PS' demonstrated strategic effectiveness in two other cases. In the first, PS' very existence and stated purpose helped pave the way for the formation of a formidable internationally concerted action to restore regional peace. Comprised of 27 countries, and working in close association with the respective GCC defense establishments, the coalition successfully defended the GCC countries during the Iran-Iraq conflict.

That PS was but one among other factors helping to hasten the end of the Iran-Iraq war is beyond dispute. Indeed, its existence, combined with the assertiveness of the GCC Secretariat, the six GCC heads of state, and their foreign ministers, contributed to a twofold strategic success the likes of which no other Arab sub-regional grouping has achieved. In the first instance, the GCC helped facilitate Iran and Iraq's acceptance of the United Nations Security Council's unanimously mandated cease fire, the first such feat since the Korean War. In so doing, it removed what had been a major security threat to the Gulf region's massive hydrocarbon fuels that were then as now vital to the material well being of most of humanity.



Photo Credit : Jim Rudoni

Bahraini Protesters outside of an embassy.



Photo Credit : Al-Jazeera English

Bahraini young women calling for peace.

The GCC's second success during the Iran-Iraq war, like the first achievement, was accomplished in close association with its foreign friends and allies. In the course of helping to restore regional security and stability, the member states and their strategic international partners prevented the Iranian Revolution from expanding to the GCC countries.

The collective spirit, interests, and efforts that led to PS' formation and the GCC countries' important financial, energy, and geopolitical contributions to ending the conflict were achievements of no small moment. Indeed, all six GCC countries emerged from the war not only with their safety, endurance, and monarchical systems of governance intact but their sub-regional

cooperative venture measurably stronger and more cohesive than before the conflict began.

The 1990-1991 Kuwait Crisis

In the second case, building on the success of the first, 33 countries joined forces with the GCC in 1990-1991 to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. In that instance the sense of pan-GCC strategic defense oneness, for which PS's continued existence remained a central component, was even more effective. Indeed, the previous Iran-Iraq war defense cooperation between the GCC's member-countries, on one hand, and their Great Power allies and the Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council, on the other, was not only repeated but strengthened and expanded.

This second GCC success was no less remarkable for the nature and number of its geopolitical achievements. For example, in addition to the thirty-three countries that committed troops to the campaign, inclusive of most of the 15 members of the United Nations Security Council, the secretariats of the GCC, the 55-member Organization of African Unity, and the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference also supported the GCC countries' efforts to restore Kuwait's national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. In addition, the GCC's Secretariat and the member-states' leaders persuaded six of the 22 League of Arab States members -- Djibouti, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, and Syria -- to join their six votes to produce a winning coalition of 12 League of Arab States' members in support of restoring security and safety to the Kuwaiti people.

In the aftermath of the second GCC success in association with PS and their major foreign defense partners, the GCC countries made a concerted effort to evaluate what lessons had been learned. They also explored what possibilities there might be to build upon their success. To that end, the members agreed to examine an Omani proposal to increase the GCC's deterrence and defense capabilities. Oman recommended that the size of PS be expanded from its maximum of 22,000 troops to 100,000 soldiers, a number that approximated the strength of an Iraqi Republican Guard division during the reign of Saddam Hussein.



Map courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Map of Kuwait.

In the end, after extended discussion and debate, a majority of the GCC's governments opted not to increase the number of troops placed physically under PS command. The reason: the reality of their respective severe demographic limitations weighed significantly against expanding the PS' size and role in the then foreseeable future. Strengthening this rationale was the view of several that, were they to undertake such an effort, not only would success most likely elude them for a very long time but the very effort would also almost certainly delay achievement of a more longstanding and arguably greater goal: namely, increasing the capacities for deterrence and defense of their respective national armed forces.

The more prudent and reasonable course of action for the time being, the members believed, would be to pursue a more modest objective. This would be to continue working to strengthen and increase the effectiveness of their respective national defense establishments. When and if this goal could be achieved, the majority reasoned, they would then be in a better position to reconsider PS' size, configuration, and roles, appropriate location for its center of command and control, and decisions pertaining to dedicated units and facilities, training, exercises, and interoperability.

For these reasons, in tandem with realizing that the original purpose for which PS was formed had succeeded, several GCC countries successively transferred their PS-designated military forces back home. In the process, their leaders took care to state that the repositioned units would remain committed to responding to GCC-centric

security and defense responsibilities on an as-needed basis. In this way, PS was not formally disbanded but substantially demobilized. Even so, the strategic principles and the conceptual rationale underpinning PS' original formation and utilization remained as theoretically and strategically, if not as operationally, in being as before.

In this light, the strategic self-defense objectives behind the establishment of PS as well as the provisions for its invocation on an as-needed basis, such as occurred in the recent case of Bahrain, can be better understood. What should also be clearer is that PS' mandate remains what it has been from the beginning: to assist where and when necessary, upon request by one or more of GCC governments, in the maintenance and/or restoration of the member-states' security and stability.

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