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GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL ESTABLISHES UNPRECEDENTED JOINT MILITARY COMMAND

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In a significant development at the 35th Ministerial and Heads of State Summit in Doha, Qatar, all six Gulf Cooperation Council member-states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) agreed to the establishment of a unified armed forces command. This major breakthrough is not to be confused with the quite different *Dir Al-Jazeera* (Peninsula Shield). That force, based at Hafr Al-Batin in northern Saudi Arabia and established in 1984 during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq war, is the one that [dispatched several of the member-states' defense units to Bahrain in 2011.](#)

The new joint military command will, prudently, be based in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. The kingdom, beyond being the only GCC country with strategic geographic depth other than Oman, has the largest economy and armed forces as well as a populous citizenry numerically greater than all the citizens of the other five member-states combined. It is also the site of the GCC's General Secretariat, the largest and oldest of the pan-GCC think tanks dedicated to precisely the kinds of greater cooperation that the member-states seek to achieve, sustain, and protect.



Leaders from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE meet for the Gulf Cooperation Council's 35th Ministerial and Heads of State Summit in Doha, Qatar. Photo: Qatar News Agency.

***Dir Al-Jazeera* in Context**

Dir Al-Jazeera presently consists of 4,000 land-based forces. All six countries, including those of Oman and Qatar – which over extended periods earlier had reservations regarding the force's

capabilities, readiness, overall effectiveness, and utility – are represented in the force.

Critics have frequently pointed out that the force lacks credibility. That is, one ought not to expect it to be able to protect against an invading force that is battle-hardened and better equipped, or of any significantly larger size. To view it from that prism, though, is a recipe for misunderstanding. The force's real position and role can be likened to a neighborhood fire brigade – a metaphor, so to speak, for the kind of assistance it rendered Bahrain. It is also much more than that. Symbolically, strategically, and geopolitically it serves as an important linkage for all six countries not only to one another, but also to their friends, allies, and strategic partners further afield.

The force exists in this additional sense in part so as to ease, facilitate, and more readily assure the positive strategic decision-making processes in the capitals of the Five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council. Not to have included aspects of the arrangement that would appeal to their ultimate defenders and, as proved to be the case with regard to Kuwait in 1991, their liberators, would have been less than wise. Harkening back to 1984, when the fear of Iran turning west to attack the GCC countries as payback for their support of Iraq was real and palpable, the GCC countries were united in not wanting any of the world's most powerful countries to have any reason to bicker or delay in any response to a request to help thwart an attack or reverse an aggression.

Modeling NATO's Military Structures

In contrast, the unified command that was agreed to at this summit will not have a standing force. Rather it could be likened in concept to an Arab NATO. In that sense, special units in each GCC

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country's existing military establishments will comprise the forces of the new unified command. As the education, training, and experience in field exercises and simulated warfare increases over time, units of the emerging generation of armed forces personnel will be similarly designated. In short, the structure of the new arrangement will be one where specific units will from now on be "on call," as it were, for what could amount to possible double duty – fighting for their country in addition to possibly fighting for a fellow member-state within the GCC.

The consensus and resolve for all six GCC members to agree to such a breakthrough has no precedent in the history of regional defense plans. This is especially true given: (1) the deep and widespread cynicism among analysts worldwide about GCC defense capacities; (2) the unprecedented deep political disagreements and divisions among several of the GCC members in the past year; and (3) the suspicions and doubts regarding the wisdom of Oman's multifaceted relationship with Iran as well as its reluctance, thus far, to have anything to do with the GCC union plan. That these obstacles were ultimately overcome can be attributed to a combination of circumstances.

Confluence of Factors

The impetus for finalizing this historic agreement was threefold. First and foremost, it was the shared morale of the fighter pilots of several of the GCC countries air forces – namely those of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE – that are part of the international coalition formed to fight the so-called Islamic State. Second was the unprecedented and very large set of military exercises that Saudi Arabia's armed forces orchestrated and administered in the kingdom several months ago. There had previously been numerous bilateral military maneuvers between American, British, and other countries' militaries, and between some GCC countries themselves as well as several pan-GCC exercises in the organization's earlier years. But in context, nature, scope, and focus, there had never been exercises anywhere near as large and diversified of any of the GCC armed forces as earlier this year in the kingdom's Eastern Province.



Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (left) is received by His Highness the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani (right) upon arrival in Doha for the 35th GCC Summit. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

A third impetus, unstated, largely unacknowledged, and admittedly speculative, is that it grated on GCC defense leaders and senior personnel that outsiders, who understand little about the severe demographic and other constraints on the GCC militaries, continually denigrated their ability to defend themselves unaided by their foreign, and overwhelmingly Western, allies. It was arguably inevitable and unavoidable that the perennially snide comments of numerous Western commentators about who and what the people of this region are, have been, and can achieve on their own account, would provoke a reaction at some point.

This is not to say that such sentiments prompted or provoked this action. They did not. But in reaching such an accord there is reason to acknowledge a

sense among the participants that the grounds for outsiders' dismissiveness of the seriousness of the GCC people's intent ought to be less from now on.

What the GCC militaries seek to accomplish in protecting all that they have achieved these last forty plus years cannot, or ought not going forward, be dismissed with quite the same degree of credibility or pomposity as before. In that there is indeed something new afoot – something quite positive, welcomed, necessary, and timely that did not exist before.

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