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## Gulf Cooperation Council Defense Agreement

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### Summary

A summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), held in Bahrain at the end of 2000, saw the attending heads of state and government take a number of modest measures in the areas of economic and security cooperation which are the organization's objectives. The most important of those measures, in terms of U.S. interest, was the signing of a mutual defense treaty which would, if ratified, formally commit the members of the organization to consider an external aggression against one member as an attack on all. The United States currently provides the security umbrella for those states as part of its Persian Gulf deployment, and has an interest in the defense agreement, to the degree that its mutual defense provisions might enable the GCC states to shoulder more of their future defense burden. This is a one-time report.

The Gulf Cooperation Council, founded in 1981 during the Iran-Iraq war, is a slowly maturing organization of six oil-producing Persian Gulf states – Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates – which has the stated goal of increasing economic and administrative cooperation between these wealthy and conservative Arab regimes. The governments have made incremental progress in a number of fields over the years, and GCC coordination at the level of Foreign Ministers and Ministers of Petroleum is now routine before major international meetings. But the GCC governments have, in general, moved deliberately and cautiously, and increased coordination has not led uniformly to increased cooperation, much less integration. Labor, capital, and investment barriers among the states are gradually being whittled away, but a common customs regime, one of the organization's primary stated tasks, will not be in place until 2005, even on the present timetable.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See "US-Gulf Cooperation Council, Trade and Investment: Trends and Implications", CRS Report RL30383, December 3, 1999.

A defense agreement approved at the December 2000 summit meeting is something of a new departure for an organization whose members have so far been careful to cede very little of their sovereignty, and cautious on defense coordination. In an effort not to irritate Iraq and Iran, their more powerful neighbors, the GCC members never made mutual defense a major stated goal of the organization. Nevertheless, it has always been a background objective and has, over the years, increasingly moved to the forefront with scheduled meetings of Defense Ministers regularly complementing other ministerial-level sectoral meetings.

## **The Agreement**

The December 2000 summit participants agreed, according to press reports, to make a formal commitment by which they would consider any outside aggression against one GCC member as aggression against all members.<sup>2</sup> The treaty obligation, which has been described as necessary in order to give appropriate legal status to an existing informal commitment, is unlikely to include automatic triggers for mobilization in the event of an attack. It still has to be ratified by the member governments before going into effect; so far, only Bahrain has done so, and there is no timetable for completion of the process. The pact, which has been under discussion by the GCC Defense Ministers for over a year, appears to have been approved as a condition for agreement on a package of measures which would move the countries somewhat further down the road toward common defense. Those include agreement to expand the existing joint defense force, called Peninsula Shield and stationed in Saudi Arabia near the Iraqi border, from its present 5000 man strength up to 22,000 men, and agreements to move forward on a common secure communications network and an early warning system.

## **Status of GCC Defense Cooperation**

The members of the GCC have moved very slowly toward meaningful defense cooperation. The joint Peninsula Shield force, technically in existence since 1986, played virtually no role in the 1990-91 Gulf crisis and has rarely been manned at even its presently authorized strength. The increase to a mechanized infantry division strength of 22,000 was authorized prior to the recent summit, and it is not clear whether the members will now be more prepared than they have been in the past to permanently earmark or assign their scarce manpower to the joint force. Even the newly funded measures, the \$70 million early warning system and the \$80 million secure communications network, have been under development for over two years. By linking the operations rooms of the national commands, and their radar and early warning systems, those projects will offer improved capacity for cooperation, but not necessarily a joint or common defense capability.

Each GCC member has preferred to assure its primary defense against external aggression through unilateral measures: strengthening its own armed forces to the degree possible, and accepting defense cooperation agreements with outside powers. The United States, through the Central Command or CENTCOM, has signed defense cooperation

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<sup>2</sup> The text of the pact has not been published. Kuwaiti Minister of Defense Salem al Sabah described a draft in these terms in 1999. *Mideast Mirror*, Nov 18, 1999.

agreements with all the members, except Saudi Arabia, and is seen by the GCC states as the primary guarantor of their external security. Most of the states have signed additional defense cooperation agreements with the United Kingdom and France, while Kuwait also has agreements with Russia and China. Immediately after the Gulf War, the GCC states also signed an agreement with Egypt and Syria, in Damascus, that provided a framework for military and economic cooperation but that has largely been ignored since that time and is considered to be moribund by its participants.<sup>3</sup>

## Hurdles to Increased Defense Cooperation

The GCC is an association of like-minded, conservative Arab states which have come together to cooperate in facing the challenges of the times and of their strategically important region, but which are still heavily influenced by a long tradition of mutual competition and conflict. One of the states, the United Arab Emirates, is itself a confederation whose members have widely differing views as to domestic, foreign and defense policy. Long standing disputes between the ruling families are diminishing slowly as border agreements are reached and a new generation of rulers comes to the fore, but history casts a long shadow in the region and one border dispute, between Bahrain and Qatar, continues to impact negatively on the GCC as an organization.

In addition to the historical competition which has caused the ruling families to move slowly toward measures which would limit their sovereignty, the GCC states do not fully share a consensus on defense priorities. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are focused on the threat from Saddam's Iraq, and are prepared in the circumstances to envisage a closer relationship with Iran than are their colleagues down the Gulf. Saudi Arabia has responded favorably to signs of moderation in Iranian policy over the past few years, and is expected to sign an agreement on police and border security cooperation with Tehran. The southern Gulf states on the other hand, farther from Iraq and very conscious of the potential threat from their powerful Iranian neighbor, resist having the preponderant Saudis set the organization's priorities and insist that any common defense measures also encompass the Iranian threat. The U.A.E., in particular, wants stronger support from its GCC colleagues in its dispute with Iran over Iranian occupation of the mid-Gulf islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs, and might try to use the new defense pact, if it is ratified, to define Iranian occupation of those islands as an aggression against it. Finally, two states, Oman and Qatar, tend to espouse accommodation with both Iran and Iraq.

GCC caution in mutual defense measures is reinforced by a desire to avoid polemics with neighboring states. Iran has long insisted that a viable security regime in the Gulf can only be developed by the states of the region, free of outside powers' involvement; as the GCC's limited common effort has so far been in the opposite direction, they have moved hesitantly and with limited visibility so as not to aggravate their relations with the regional power. The GCC members are also sensitive to charges leveled at them from other Arab countries, and Arab nationalists, that GCC defense cooperation undercuts the mutual defense commitments of the Arab League. As Saudi Arabia and Kuwait based their call for Arab military help in 1990 on the Arab League's defense pact, they cannot ignore

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<sup>3</sup> Egyptian Foreign Minister Amr Mousa to Cairo MENA, December 12, 2000; quoted by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service 12/20/2000.

these arguments and their public statements insist that GCC cooperation is within the framework of the Arab League pact.

Finally, each GCC state gives absolute priority to its own national defense efforts. Their thin manpower pool precludes any meaningful force buildup and limits enthusiasm for a major commitment to a joint defense force stationed in, and commanded by, Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup> More importantly, each state has jealously guarded its defense procurement capabilities. Given the governments' reliance on expensive, high-tech and manpower-saving defense mechanisms, defense procurement has been subjected to intense political scrutiny and control in each capital, and no government has shown a readiness to subordinate its national interest to GCC-wide efforts toward joint procurement, or even interoperability among different national systems. The GCC has even emphasized that it has no objective for common defense procurement.<sup>5</sup>

## U.S. Policy

The United States has consistently encouraged GCC defense cooperation, within a framework of cooperation with U.S. forces. CENTCOM has been in the forefront in pushing for policies such as common procurement planning to assure the greatest possible interoperability, and has had some success in planning joint exercises with multiple GCC partners. To the degree that there is a growing GCC common defense mechanism, it is in large measure due to CENTCOM's efforts. Indeed, the secure defense communications and early warning networks are scaled-down versions of a CENTCOM proposal of two years ago, namely that the GCC countries develop a theater missile defense system with U.S. help. That proposal, which was actively pushed by former Secretary of Defense Cohen, was not accepted at the time by the GCC members, in large degree because of its high visibility, cost, and accusations that it was designed to benefit American defense contractors above all. That the GCC is now moving forward, quietly and in a more modest fashion, with some key elements of the "Cooperative Defense Initiative" (in particular, those elements that deal with planning for chemical/biological attacks) shows that they recognize the necessity for greater multilateral cooperation, even if they are unwilling to accord it a high priority. Bilateral defense cooperation will continue to be the key to their efforts, coordinated to some degree through the GCC but more commonly, in a de facto manner, through their respective relationships with CENTCOM.

The U.S. military presence in the Gulf continues to provide for international access to the region's energy supplies, containment of Iraq, and the security of the GCC states. Our defense cooperation agreements (or, in the case of Saudi Arabia, less formal agreements), provide for facilities, prepositioning of supplies, training, and substantial host nation support; at any given time around 20,000 American servicemen and women are present in the area, ashore and afloat.<sup>6</sup> The agreements provide for American assistance

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<sup>4</sup> For comparative military strengths of the Gulf states, see CRS Report "The Persian Gulf, Issues for U.S. Policy, 2000," November 3, 2000 (RL 30728),.

<sup>5</sup> "Official Rules Out Common GCC Arms Deals," Financial Times Information, October 17, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Testimony of Principal Assistant Secretary of Defense Alina L. Romanowski, House Committee (continued...)

to the individual GCC states after mutual consultation, with no automatic trigger and no consideration of assistance to the GCC as an entity. But, taken together with the regular consultations, exercises, and contacts between CENTCOM and the local military establishments, the United States in effect provides the basic elements of a GCC-wide mutual defense system.

## **Conclusion**

The GCC pact appears to add little to the mutual defense capability of the organization. The ratification process, moreover, is likely to take time and is not assured of success. The issues which have slowed meaningful GCC defense cooperation – from historical differences to unwillingness to coordinate defense acquisitions – will continue to militate against dramatic progress in mutual defense. The U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf, on which the individual GCC states rely, will most likely continue to provide the major de facto defense coordinating mechanisms for the GCC for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>6</sup> (...continued)

on International Relations, March 23,2000. See also CRS Report “The Persian Gulf, Issues for U.S. Policy, 2000,” November 3, 2000 (RL 30728).

# Gulf Cooperation Council States and Persian Gulf Region

Map adapted by CRS from Magellan Geographix



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