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The Real Challenges of Security Cooperation with Our Arab Partners for the Next Administration

By Anthony H. Cordesman

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Please provide comments to acordesman@gmail.com

U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Stephane Belcher

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The next Administration faces serious problems and issues in its security cooperation with its Arab allies that cannot be papered over with reassuring rhetoric. Some problems are all too obvious results of the rise of ISIS; the legacy of the U.S. invasion of Iraq; and the problems in the fighting in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen. Other problems, however, are less obvious, but equally or more important.

One such problem is the need for effective cooperation in the civil dimension. This need is largely ignored or downplayed in the current focus on war and counterterrorism, but is as important as any aspect of cooperation in the military and counterterrorism dimensions.

Events since the beginning of the Arab Spring have shown with brutal clarity that there can be no security without stability. Military and security solutions are only half the solution to bring an end to terrorism, extremism, insurgency, and conflict.

So far, however, all of the civil forces that have shaped the Arab Spring and regional upheavals and violence—*failed governance, corruption, failed secularism and the resulting rise of extremism, breakdowns in the rule of law, poor economic development and gross overreliance on the state sector, unfair distribution of income, hyperurbanization and population migration, massive pressure from population growth, and poor youth employmen*t—remain key problems. In fact, most have grown steadily worse since studies like the UN's *Arab Human Development Report for 2002* began to warn that they were pushing the region to the crisis point.[1]

The combined impact of extremism and civil war in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Libya are all cases in point. All of the forces that create civil instability and sources of internal anger and conflict have grown far worse since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011.[2]

The challenges in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia have also grown sharply. Moreover, the Gulf and other oil exporting states are now only beginning to fully react to the impact of a nearly 50% cut in petroleum export revenues. Additionally, only a few MENA states have attempted the kind of comprehensive reform program Saudi Arabia has with Vision 2030, and no state has yet shown it can deal with its growing civil problems.

More, however, is also needed by way of security cooperation. The U.S. Department of Defense is all too correct in stating there is no military solution to any major source of extremism and conflict in the MENA region. "Nation building" may present major challenges, but foreign aid is potentially a key tool in helping states like Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen create effective governance, restore their economies, and offer all their people hope and development.

It is equally important in dealing with other less stable states like Egypt and Tunisia, and cooperative efforts to help a wide range of MENA states to create and support workable reform plans like Vision 2030—using international institutions like the World Bank and

IMF, which can play a critical role in bringing lasting stability. Counterterrorism and stronger military forces alone can only create conditions where lasting stability becomes possible—they cannot make that possibility a reality. Developing some form of plan for civil aid is a critical step for the next Administration.

ISIS is only one extremist/terrorist threat of many, and its defeat will—at best—lead to threats from dispersed ISIS fighters and other existing and new extremist groups, as well expose the seriousness of other sectarian, ethnic, and tribal tensions. It is time to think of cooperation in counterterrorism and cooperation in creating civil stability in terms of decades, rather than focusing on a single worst case enemy for a few years.

The United States and its European allies need to stop focusing on ISIS-ISIL-Daesh and address the full range of risks that affect their Arab allies and the secure flow of petroleum exports to the global economy. Even now, ISIS is only one of many extremist threats in the region, and creates far less casualties than a civil war like the fighting between the Arab rebels and Assad regime.

The data on terrorism are scarcely precise and given sources often provide a major range of uncertainty and different ways to estimate the same trends. This is true even of the one official report that should be most authoritative. The U.S. State Department *Country Report on Terrorism for 2015*, issued in May 2016, estimates that ISIS/ISIL committed 931 terrorist attacks in 2015, or 7.9% out of a global total of 11,774. [3]

- ISIS/ISIL was responsible for 6,050 deaths from terrorism in 2015, or 21.3% of a global total of 28,328.
- IISS/ISIL was responsible for 6,010 injuries from terrorism in 2015, or 17% of a global total of 35,320.
- ISIS/ISIL was responsible for 4,759 kidnappings and hostage takings in 2015, or 39% of a global total of 12,189.

However, if one uses the advanced search option in the actual University of Maryland Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) database that the State Department uses to measure terrorist activity, ISIS accounted for a maximum of around 1,219 incidents, or about 20.4% of the 5,955 terrorist incidents in the MENA region alone in 2015—a year when other terrorist/extremist threats like AQAP and the Al Nusra were tied down in fighting in countries like Libya, Syria, and Yemen.[4]

The same START data base does not provide point estimates of casualties or killings in its advanced search option, and has five different levels for estimating the number of attacks for which ISIS/ISIL is responsible, given the uncertainties in attribution. **Figure One** shows the range of estimates for 2013-2015 for the maximum estimate of ISIS involvement—the key years in the emergence of ISIS—and it is clear from this estimate that ISIS probably accounted for a similarly low percentage of total terrorist/extremist killings and injuries.

If one looks at the key test of violence—total fatalities of all kinds—there are no reliable UN or NGO estimates that reflect the totals in either Iraq or Syria. ISIS does seem to have been a dominant cause of the 61,304 civilian casualties Iraq Body Count (IBC) estimates in Iraq between the start of 2013 and October 2016, as well as refugees and IDPs in Iraq—but no specific estimates for ISIS are available and ISIS is often given the blame immediate reporting for other sources of sectarian and ethnic fighting.

Estimates for total civilians killed in Syria since 2011 by the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, UN and Arab League Envoy to Syria, and Syrian Observatory for Human rights vary sharply by period and number, but seem to cover a range of some 302,000 to around 500,000. Looking at the START database and other data on direct ISIS killings, they probably accounted for around 7-10% of the total and the fighting between the Assad regime and all Arab rebel factions caused almost all of the remaining 90-93%.

Libyan casualties were dominated by tribal and Libyan factional fighting. Casualty data for Yemen are largely guesstimates, but it is clear that total casualties in Yemen were dominated by government/Saudi/UAE vs. Houthi-Saleh fighting and extremist casualties in Yemen were dominated by AQAP.

The extremist/terrorism threat is only a fraction of the broader threat of ongoing and potential violence in the region. Civil war, insurgency and counter insurgency dominate today's fighting and instability, and new internal conflicts and the rising threat posed by Iran need far more attention in shaping U.S. cooperation with its Arab partners.

For all the uncertainties involved, it is clear from the previous data that the levels of violence within the MENA region, and the portion actually caused by ISIS in the region, vastly exceed the combined threat that all sources of terrorism and extremism create in Europe and the United States. It is also clear that the fighting is not dominated by any clash between civilizations. It is dominated by conflicts within one civilization, and by conflicts where most casualties are caused by Muslims killing Muslims.

Moreover, it is insurgency and struggles for power between tribes, sects, and ethnic groups— not extremism and terrorism—that dominate today's violence and casualties in the MENA region. Counterterrorism is a key element of any effort to use force to bring stability, but scarcely the most critical one. Putting an end to civil conflicts and insurgencies, failed authoritarian rule, and extremist insurgencies, and deterring and containing Iran have a far higher overall priority for security cooperation.

At the same time, it is critical that the new Administration work with its Arab allies to deal with the full range of Iranian threats. This requires both a consistent effort to find ways to deal with Iran's more moderate leaders and make it clear to the Iranian people that there are real alternatives to confrontation and conflict, and a far stronger and more coherent effort to deal with the fact Iran's hardliners continue to build up serious threats to their Arab neighbors.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA nuclear agreement has bought time in limiting Iran's progress in creating nuclear weapons, but it is a fragile structure where Iran has not yet gotten the benefits that act as a continuing incentive to obey the agreement. Moreover, the United States' Arab partners still have serious doubts about the

agreement in spite of Iran's actions to reduce its nuclear capabilities and meet the requirements of Implementation Day. In fact, much of the Arab world is still filled with conspiracy theories that the United States is somehow planning to abandon its Arab partners and ally itself with Iran.

Iran does, however, poses immediate threats to its Arab neighbors—and to the stable flow of energy exports out of the Gulf—that are critical to the global economy, key U.S. trading partners, and the health of every aspect of the U.S. economy.[5]

- Iran continues to build up its ballistic and cruise missile forces and is actively seeking to give them the kind of precision strike capability for conventionally armed missiles that can offset the U.S. and Arab advantage in airpower, damage key military targets, and destroy key civilian targets like petroleum infrastructure, power plants, and desalination plants. If Iran is successful, and continues to build up air defense with systems like the S300, it can replace its search for "weapons of mass destruction" with "weapons of mass effectiveness."
- Iran continues to build-up a mix of asymmetric naval, missile, and air forces it can uses to attack or threaten shipping and petroleum exports throughout the Gulf, Gulf of Oman and nearby waters in the Indian Ocean.
- Iran is seeking modern fighters and other weapons from Russia. This could tilt the military balance towards Iran and make it easier for Iran to use its growing asymmetric forces with less risk of escalation.
- Iran—and its Revolutionary Guards and Al Quds Force—has steadily sought to increase its military and political influence in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. It has also played a role in increasing sectarian tension in states like Bahrain and Yemen. Iran is almost certain to try to exploit any defeat of ISIS in Syria or Iraq to strengthen its influence and security role in these countries, and the tensions between Iran and the largely Sunni Arab states create a growing risk of broader levels of tension and violence between Sunni and Shi'ite.

All of these threats create key tasks for the next Administration in working with its Arab partners and with key allies like Britain and France. All need to work together to shape an effective mix of military warfighting capabilities that can deter Iran without appearing to try to create a force committed to warfighting, or appearing to create an invasion capability.

The next Administration and the new Congress need to come firmly to grips with the strategic importance of the United States' Arab partners.

The United States replaced its focus on rebalancing to Asia, to one on global rebalancing in the Department of Defense's FY2016 budget documents, and has built up a strong presence in the Gulf region. However, the fact that the Congress could pass legislation like the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) is a warning that there is no broad political understanding of the importance of the United States' Arab security partnerships, or the critical role they play in both counterterrorism and securing Gulf energy exports.

The new Administration and Congress need to conduct a full and transparent public examination of the U.S. strategic partnerships in the region, the role of each Arab partner in fighting terrorism and extremism, and the value of each partner in deterring Iran and dealing with other regional threats. As is the case with U.S. strategic partnerships in Europe and Asia, some form of detailed annual public report is clearly needed.

The fact that Arab governments have not supported terrorism needs to be made far clearer, and so does their critical role in fighting it. Such a report needs to address the value of basing and other military aid from Arab states, and the degree to which their military forces are interoperable and cooperate with the forces of the United States and our key European allies. At the same time, our Arab partners need to fully understand our commitments to them, and our capabilities to support them in a crisis.

There also needs to be a far better understanding that rising U.S. energy production may reduce direct U.S. dependence on energy imports, but does not reduce U.S. sensitivity to the global rise in petroleum prices if a major crisis occur in export flows.[6]

Direct petroleum imports are also now a small portion of total U.S. imports that were worth some $2.27 trillion in 2015, or 13% of a total GDP of $18.04 trillion. Some 46% of these U.S. imports were purchased from Asian countries in 2015, and that 35.7% of these imports came from six key U.S. trading partners that are heavily dependent on Gulf petroleum exports in the first eight months of 2016: China, Japan, South Korea, India, Vietnam, and Taiwan.[7]

In this process, Americans need to develop a far better understanding at every level that United States' Arab partners do have different values and cultures, and that alliances must be based on common interests and not some hope for a common identity. Equally, Americans need to understand that alliance is a far better source of influence than legislative confrontation.

The United States will also need to address the negative impact of its Presidential campaign. The new Administration needs to make it clear to both Americans and to Muslims throughout the world that it will work with largely Muslim states and governments, and not exclude Muslims or see Islam as a threat. This is not simply a matter of preserving and strengthening U.S. ties to Arab states. It must be a key part of the overall U.S. effort to fight extremism on a global level in world where research by the Pew Trust indicates that active Muslims are increasing at twice the rate of Christians and Hindus, and that the Muslim population in the world will increase by 73%—or 1.6 billion people—between 2010 and 2050.[8]

The United States and its Arab Partners need a new approach to burden sharing and common force planning. The Arab Gulf states have scarcely had what President Obama has called a "free ride" in providing security forces. The challenge now, however, is not to spend more, but to spend less and still achieve greater effectiveness.

There are many different ways to assess the value of key Arab security partners, but many involve complex assessments of their individual military forces, and the regional military balance. The simplest metrics are economic:

- Virtually every Arab state in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) spends more of its GDP on defense than the United States spends, and more than twice as much of a percentage of its GDP as key NATO allies like Britain, France, and Germany.
- The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimates that GCC states spent over $117 billion on military forces in 2015, and this total does not include substantial additional spending on counterterrorism and paramilitary forces. [9]
- Focusing on this number ignores the role that allies like Morocco, Egypt, and Jordan play as strategic partners, and the key role that Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and the UAE play in providing bases and contingency facilities in the Gulf.
- The Arab states have also taken on a major burden in terms of force modernization and development. The Congressional Research Service (CRS) reports that the GCC placed $165 billion in new arms orders from all supplier countries between 2007-2104, and $106.9 billion of this was placed between 2011-2014 in response to the rising Iranian threat. Saudi Arabia alone placed $86 billion in new arms orders between 2007-2104, and $56.4 billion of this was placed between 2011-2014. The UAE placed $22.6 billion in new arms orders between 2007-2104, and $13.5 billion of this was placed between 2011-2014. Iraq placed $27.3 billion in new arms orders between 2007-2104, and $21.7 billion of this was placed between 2011-2014. Iran placed less than a billion.[10]
- The Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA) uses a different definition of arms imports, but it reports that the GCC spent $110 billion on new arms agreements with the United States in the decade between 2006-2015, and took $31 billion in deliveries—reflecting a steady future trend toward increased interoperability with U.S forces.[11]
- Saudi Arabia and the UAE dominate GCC military forces, and the GCC's capabilities to meet threats like Iran. The IISS reports that Saudi military expenditures totaled $81.9 billion in 2015—the third highest level of spending in the world after $597.5 billion for the United States and $145.8 billion for China. Saudi spending was higher than the $65.6 billion total for Russia, $56.2 billion for the UK and $48 billion for India—the sixth ranking country and the only other developing nation in the top 10. [12]
- Saudi Arabia spent $67.2 billion on new arms agreements with the United States from 2006-2015, and took took $18.0 billion in deliveries. These orders will make a further key shift to interoperability with the United States if JASTA, and Congressional actions to block arms transfers over the war in Yemen, do not intervene. [13]
- The UAE spent over $14 billion on military forces in 2015, a minimum of 4.2% of GDP. It signed $19.5 billion worth of new arms agreement with the United States from 2006-2015, and took delivery on $5.1 billion. U.S. experts estimate that it has developed some of the most effective forces in region. [14]

Iraq signed $15.2 billion worth of new arms agreement with the United States from 2006-2015, and took delivery on $6.7 billion. These orders not only create

interoperability with the United States, they greatly strengthen Iraq's military ties to the United States, and increase use of U.S. support and maintenance—acting to offset Iran's influence. [15] The problem is not that our Arab partners do too little. It is rather that they spend too much and in the wrong and uncoordinated ways. For all the rhetoric coming out of GCC Ministerial meetings and the Manama Dialogue, the Arab states make far too little effort to create truly interoperable forces.

States like Saudi Arabia and Oman do not coordinate effectively. Common facilities are limited, and little effort is made to standardize imports and achieve economies of scale. Integrated exercise and training activity is far too limited, and many aspects of battle management and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance depend on direct support from the United States.

Worse, no common decisions are made about shaping integrated efforts to perform key missions like mine warfare, integrated missile and air defense, and integrated efforts to deal with the Iranian threat to Gulf shipping. There is no effective common effort to deal with key problem countries like Yemen, Iraq, and Syria, or to address the fact that Turkey and Russia have now joined Iran in expanding the impact of outside states.

There is a critical need for tightly integrated spending and force development plans that are clearly tied to common mission priorities. This is critical both in military terms and as a way the United States and its Arab partners can cooperate in cutting costs while still meeting their commons security needs.

But cost is also critical, and domestic spending and stability need to be given priority. The current levels of national security spending in GCC states are clearly unsustainable in an era where petroleum export revenues have dropped by some 50%, and every Arab state faces major domestic spending pressures to create new jobs for its young population and to deal with the overall pressures of radical population growth.

Saudi Arabia spent 12.9% of its GDP on military forces in 2015 by an IISS estimate, and 13.5% by a SIPRI estimate. This was the third highest military burden on a national economy in the world after Oman (16.4%) and Afghanistan (16.4%), and was slightly above Iraq at 12.8%.[16]

To put this burden in perspective, most NATO countries spent less than 2% of its GDP, and the United States spent around 3.5% to 3.6% of its GDP. In spite of President Obama's remarks about the lack of Saudi and Arab Gulf burden sharing, the Saudi burden was also some 3.6 to 3.9 times higher than that of the United States. [17]

Arabs must take responsibility for Arab actions

For all the previous criticisms of the United States, this is an area where the United States' Arab partners need to take the lead. Far too often, the Arab Gulf states seem to have three major exports and not just one. Petroleum is still the key export, but the second is often conspiracy theories, and far too often, the third is responsibility. The United States can be a better partner, but it cannot help states that cannot—or will not—help themselves.

For all the annual waves of Ministerial rhetoric, there has been no serious improvements in GCC force planning, standardization, interoperability, and common facilities. Past Saudi initiatives to strengthen GCC have failed, and the challenges are now far more urgent and demanding.

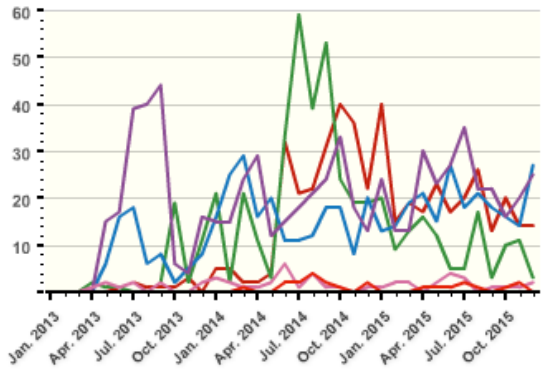
The Arab states badly need effective and integrated force planning. This also needs to be tied to U.S., British, and French efforts to integrate their regional and power projection efforts with those of their Arab partners. These efforts also need to be transparent and accountable. Decades of concepts and vague promises are a warning that it is time to take a much more demanding and realistic approach and to stop throwing slogans, concepts, and good intentions at reality.

Figure One: ISIS Casualties and Fatalities vs. All Terrorist/Extremist Fatalities in 2013-2015

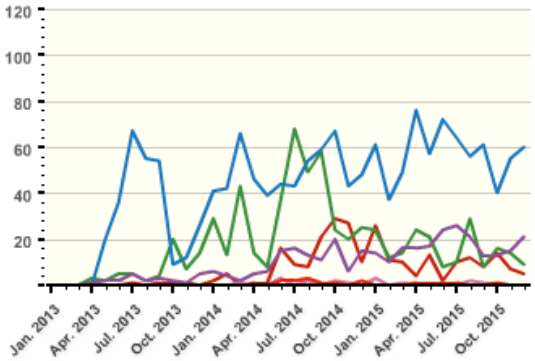
(*Note the sharp difference between the ISIS and Total MENA scales*)

ISIS

Casualties: Injuries and Killings

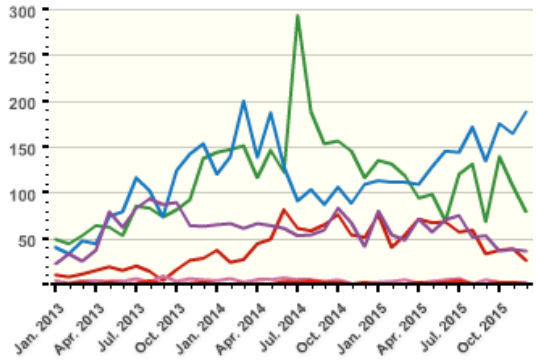


Fatalities

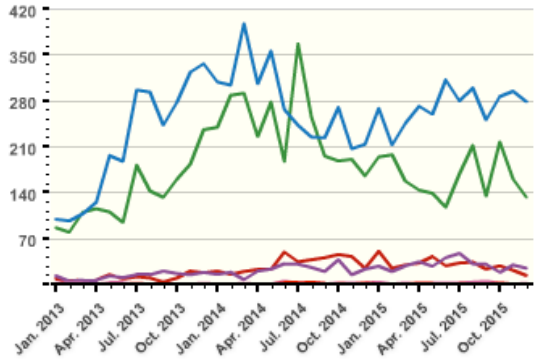


Total MENA

Casualties: Injuries and Killings



Fatalities



Source: START data base, http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/search/?back=1&casualties_type=b&casualties_max=&start_yearonly=2013&end_yearonly=2015&dtp2=all&region=10