

## SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

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Exum served for a decade in the U.S. Army, earning the rank of captain for his service in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan between 2000 and 2004. He is the author of the 2002 book, *This Man's Army: A Soldier's Story from the Frontlines of the War on Terror*.

Exum earned a Ph.D. in war studies from King's College London and an M.A. in Middle Eastern studies from the American University of Beirut. ■

## The Expected and Unexpected Challenges of Building Partner Capacity in the Middle East

U.S. efforts to develop the defense capacities of its Gulf Arab partners face technical and political challenges—and pose broader strategic questions for both sides, according to Dr. Andrew Exum. Exum, former U.S. deputy assistant secretary of defense for Middle East policy, spoke at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable entitled “The Expected and Unexpected Challenges of Building Partner Capacity in the Middle East” on February 7, 2017.

## Capacity Development Challenges

The United States embarked on efforts to build Gulf partners' capacity in the 1980s and escalated these efforts substantially in the aftermath of the first Gulf War in 1991. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners allocated substantial increases in their defense budgets and made strategic investments in air defense systems and surface-to-air-missile platforms, Exum said. These efforts have yielded considerable gains in some areas, particularly ballistic missile defense, helping to lessen the burden on the United States to maintain deterrence. However, other gaps remain, and U.S. and Gulf perspectives on where future investments should be made have at times diverged.

From a U.S. vantage point, Gulf states' investments do not necessarily align with the nature of the threats they face, Exum said. Iran, which Gulf states consider the principal threat to their security, employs mostly asymmetrical tools, including armed proxies and special operations forces, in overwhelmingly land- and sea-based operations. However, Gulf states' heaviest investments have been acquiring state-of-the-art systems for air-to-air combat. Considerably fewer resources have been dedicated to strengthening general purpose ground forces and naval forces. With the exception of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), most Gulf states have also not made strategic investments in the development of special operation forces or the particular capabilities needed for close air support.

Exum posited that perceptions of prestige play a role in Gulf states' preferences, as does the history of air power in recent Gulf military history. The hesitation of some

## THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable Series in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. The roundtable regularly assembles a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the strategic importance of Gulf energy, changing Gulf relations with Asia, human capital development, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

U.S. decisionmakers to meet Gulf buyers' demand for high-end aircraft has become a point of frustration in U.S.-Gulf defense relationships. Pressures also exist on the U.S. side, where some elected leaders have political incentives to keep production lines open to support a large number of jobs tied to the defense industrial base.

A key challenge for Gulf states moving forward will be better integrating their defense systems. For example, ballistic missile defense would be significantly enhanced by an integrated network of systems, not least because a network would give much quicker and more unambiguous information about the direction and speed of incoming missiles. Even so, political and structural factors have blocked the introduction of such a network, and existing multilateral bodies such as the GCC have failed to facilitate effective security cooperation. Exum argued that there is still a preference among many Gulf partners to work bilaterally with Washington rather than multilaterally with each other.

## Defining Objectives

More broadly, differences between U.S. and Gulf goals and priorities raise questions for U.S. capacity-building efforts. One of the United States' primary interests in developing partner capacity is to promote burden sharing, both politically and militarily. Yet, Gulf states have been reluctant to invest in some of the places where the United States would hope to see them assume a more active role. Iraq, where Iranian influence has left Gulf states wary of engagement, is one example. U.S. efforts at military burden-sharing also involve trade-offs, Exum argued. The United States has prioritized working within a multilateral coalition with Sunni Arab participation to confront the Islamic State. This approach brings certain advantages by lowering the human and material costs for the United States and by deepening partners' sense of investment in the sustainability of success. Yet, working "by, with, and through" a diverse collection of stakeholders has also made for a more complex and protracted fight, Exum explained.

Moreover, both the United States and GCC powers have shown a degree of ambivalence towards the prospect of building fully independent Gulf defense capabilities, Exum argued. The Gulf is wary of a more extensive withdrawal U.S. troops and infrastructure, which they view as a cornerstone of their deterrence against external threats. Meanwhile, the United States is mindful that greater self-sufficiency by allies may reduce its own degree of influence and access to partner operations. The Saudi-led campaign in Yemen has demonstrated some of these challenges, Exum argued. There, the United States sought to maintain a limited support role despite its differences with Gulf partners over tactics and

strategy. In the end, the United States found itself absorbing the political costs of the war domestically and internationally while having a constrained ability to shape the conduct of the campaign.

The Yemen conflict has been the first large-scale sustained combat experience for most Gulf forces, Exum argued. Most importantly, the campaign has highlighted weaknesses and gaps. Some countries, such as the UAE, have responded by expressing a desire to more actively review performance internally and by engaging U.S. counterparts in a dialogue about specific training and development needs. This openness represents a significant shift, Exum said, from the habitual reluctance of many Gulf partners to draw attention to perceived weaknesses. Yet, the reserved approach still prevails in much of the region, Exum assessed, noting that Saudi Arabia has shown less inclination to systematically analyze or disclose lessons learned. It may be difficult for Riyadh to do so while embroiled in an active conflict, Exum argued, but delaying until the conflict's end may decrease the sense of urgency to make the generational investments needed to identify and act on areas for improvement.

## Looking Forward

Ultimately, responding to a changing threat landscape will require Gulf states to make long-term, strategic investments in building capacity. By virtue of its size, Saudi Arabia's trajectory will be a key determinant for the future of broader Gulf security and military arrangements, Exum argued. How various Gulf states work together will also be crucial, whether through the GCC or through bilateral cooperation. Some of the most crucial investments will not be in their equipment, but rather in their human capital and agility in applying lessons learned. How Gulf militaries prioritize cultivating a strong officer corps, foster an institutional culture of learning, and further a dialogue with U.S. counterparts will have important implications for their capacity development and the nature of their U.S. partnerships moving forward. ■

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