

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Dr. Anthony Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at CSIS where his research focuses on U.S. strategy and defense plans, Middle East security, proliferation, and the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Prior to joining CSIS, Cordesman served as director of intelligence assessment in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, civilian assistant to the deputy secretary of defense, and national security assistant to Senator John McCain on the Senate Armed Services Committee. Dr. Cordesman is the author of more than 60 books, including *Withdrawal from Iraq: Assessing the Readiness of Iraqi Security Forces* (CSIS, 2009) and *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?* (Praeger, 2009). ■

The Conventional Military Balance in the Gulf

In a conventional war against Iran, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries would almost certainly win, according to Dr. Anthony Cordesman, the Burke Chair in Strategy at CSIS. Cordesman offered his assessment of Iran's military capabilities and potential responses to them at a Gulf Roundtable hosted by the CSIS Middle East Program on June 24, 2010.

According to Cordesman, the GCC countries outspend the Islamic Republic on defense by a factor of ten, and they enjoy U.S. military support. The real threat to Iran's neighbors, and to their unfettered export of oil, lies in Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities.

Although Iran boasts a robust military inventory, Cordesman asserted that a large portion of the country's armor, land-based air defenses, and naval equipment date back to the 1970s and or is no match for the GCC's superior arsenal. The mix of old equipment and less capable Russian and Chinese weapons not only presents significant logistical problems on the battlefield, but helps negate Iran's comparative advantage in manpower. Cordesman noted that "40 to 60 percent" of Iranian planes are non-operational and that artillery must be towed from one position to another. Despite the Iranian government's claim to be developing new weapons – and its occasional arms deals with Russia and China – Cordesman judged that, in reality, the Iranian military is modernizing at an "extremely slow" rate.

Regarding Iran's missile capabilities, he claimed that "almost a cottage industry" exists in exaggerating the Iranian missile threat. Cordesman judged that this threat could become extremely serious over time, but that the accuracy and lethality of Iranian missiles was far worse than many news reports suggest, rendering them useless for most military uses other than as terrorist weapons.

By contrast, he said, Iran has devoted extensive resources to developing its asymmetric warfare capabilities to compensate for its depreciating conventional military infrastructure. The government has significantly modernized its 20,000-man-strong International Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) naval branch and given it principal responsibility for operations inside the Gulf. (The regular navy operates principally

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable 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, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling 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 role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, 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. ■

outside the Gulf). The IRGC has a wide variety of assets at its disposal to threaten shipping lanes, including large-scale mining warfare capability, missile patrol boats, and a fleet of heavily armed attack vessels. Given the world's dependence on oil imports from the Gulf, Cordesman judged that containing these threats will be a long-term strategic consideration for both the United States and its GCC allies.

Cordesman cited Iran's ability to wage indirect, proxy warfare as another key component of its asymmetric threat. While the Al Quds force receives much of the credit for running training camps for unconventional warfare and aiding terrorist groups throughout the region, Cordesman noted that Iranian diplomats and intelligence people are also engaged in these activities. Iranian financial and military support has perpetuated the existence of Hamas, Hizbullah, and Iraq-based military groups, thereby complicating U.S. efforts to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and stabilize Iraq.

In addition to increasing its regional clout and influence, Iran has also invested "massive" resources into strengthening its internal security. The aftermath of the June 2009 elections demonstrated these paramilitary forces' ability to effectively mobilize and quell internal opposition.

Perhaps the most menacing manifestation of Iran's desire to tip the regional military balance in its favor is its pursuit of nuclear capability. Cordesman cautioned that the United States should prepare to cope with a nuclear Iran, but questioned how soon Tehran will be able to convert its nuclear program into an operational threat. Given the poor quality and upkeep of Iran's conventional military equipment and infrastructure, he also suggested that it would take time and extensive testing to make an Iranian-produced nuclear weapon reliable effective.

Iran's asymmetric warfare capabilities threaten GCC countries despite their superior conventional weaponry and U.S. military backing. Cordesman contended that this is partially due to structural and coordination problems within the GCC itself. He characterized the Council's efforts at military interoperability as "little more than empty rhetoric," citing its lack of mission focus and poor coordination. In particular, most GCC countries prefer to cooperate with the United States, France, and the United Kingdom instead of each other, which hampers their interoperability. On a tactical level, Cordesman noted that the Gulf countries have flawed training and integration schemes for their forces; he highlighted that they often train their pilots to be "knights of the air" as opposed to "fighters in an air force."

Despite these flaws, he posited that the United States and its GCC allies have tools at their disposal to contain Iran's threat. He recommended that the United States continue to promote intra-GCC cooperation through continued advisory missions and high-level delegations. Additionally, he argued, the United States should continue to maintain a strong military presence in the Gulf and provide logistical support and training to GCC forces. This requires maintaining its military bases in the Gulf, upgrading GCC countries' defense systems, and providing counterterrorism support and intelligence. He maintained that these measures would both act as deterrents against low-level Iranian acts of aggression and also reassure GCC states that they can count on the United States should Iran overstep its bounds.

To cope with Iran's nuclear program, Cordesman advised that the United States should continue to support sanctions against Iran and closely monitor the development of the country's nuclear program through intelligence and satellite imagery. Given that Iran has close to seventy nuclear facilities – many in northwest Iran and many still likely undiscovered – he cautioned that a U.S.- or Israeli-led military strike is likely to fail to comprehensively destroy Iran's nuclear weapons program. He said that the best military option would be what the Obama administration called "extended regional deterrence" and strong missile defenses.

A detailed assessment of the Gulf military balance, entitled "The Gulf Military Balance in 2010: An Overview," is available [HERE](#). ■

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