

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff retired following 37 years of service in the U.S. Navy. His last assignment was as Commander of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, where he oversaw all combat, combat support, and maritime security operations throughout the Middle East. **Mr. Rupert Herbert-Burns** is a maritime security consultant for shipping, petroleum, and analytic organizations with operations in Asia, the United States, and Europe. He specializes in the delivery of anti-piracy services at sea, security risk surveys for vessels in the offshore and petroleum sectors, and ISPS Code consultation. **Mr. Richard “Ozzie” Nelson** is senior fellow and director of the CSIS Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program. ■

A GCC Strategy for Counter-Piracy?

Pirates’ bounties have never been more bountiful in the Arabian Sea. Despite a multi-national counter-piracy effort in the region, pirates are pursuing increasingly lucrative targets with unprecedented skill and sophistication. The GCC states, whose economies rely heavily on maritime trade through the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, feel the piracy threat acutely but have thus far let the United States and Europe lead counter-piracy efforts. Given the proximity of the threat, Richard “Ozzie” Nelson, director of CSIS’s Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Program, said GCC states have a “unique opportunity” to play a more proactive role in counter-piracy efforts in its waters. Nelson, along with Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff, former commander of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, and Rupert Herbert-Burns, senior analyst at Risk Intelligence, assessed the threat piracy poses to the GCC and discussed opportunities for GCC cooperation on counter-piracy at a CSIS Gulf Roundtable event held on May 13, 2011.

Cosgriff asserted that the international community faces a “different, more virulent version” of piracy today than it has in the past. Pirates are venturing further offshore and operations are growing more violent. According to Herbert-Burns, pirates have inflicted around 50 casualties since 2008 and have the ability to outfit their ships with heavy weapons and equipment. Furthermore, the use of modern commercial radar systems has better enabled pirates to seek out and track potential targets. However, Herbert-Burns judged the biggest game changer has been pirates’ use of “mother ships” as long-range, operational bases. These captured vessels, which can travel at a minimum of 240 to 250 nautical miles per day, enable pirates to operate year-round, as opposed to seasonally. He credited these vessels with “driving a lot of the problems” around the Gulf of Oman, Strait of Hormuz, and Northern Arabian Sea.

Separately, in July 2010, an Abdullah Azzam Brigade cell conducted a night attack on a laden VLCC underway in the Strait of Hormuz, serving as a vital reminder that maritime terrorism remains a serious maritime security concern for both GCC governments, their allies and the international maritime industry.

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. ■

If left unchecked, piracy could seriously harm GCC maritime trade activities. As an example of the importance of GCC crude oil shipments to the major Asian consumers, which also depend on the secure passage of tankers through the Gulf of Oman and the South-easterly SLOC to Sri Lanka, Herbert-Burns noted that the terminals at Ras Tanura, Juaymah, Jebel Dhanna, Mina al Ahmadi, Mina al Fahal, Zirku Island & Das Island export over 1.6 billion barrels of crude to South Korea, China, Japan, Singapore, India, Malaysia and Thailand each year. Oil tankers are clearly crucial to GCC economies, and are prime targets for pirate attacks because they bring in large ransoms and pirates are becoming increasingly bold in targeting them. In January 2011, for example, pirates attacked the oil tanker MV Star of Abu Dhabi only 22 nautical miles off the coast of Iran. Moreover, evidence suggests pirate activity is moving northward: last year, 22 attacks and 6 hijackings were recorded north of the 19th parallel, in the North Arabian Sea and Gulf of Oman. Given that roughly 90 percent of GCC oil exports travel through the Gulf into the Arabian Sea via the Strait of Hormuz, this poses a significant problem.¹

Yet, despite pirates' increasingly aggressive methods, Nelson judged that tactically speaking, piracy still poses a low-level threat for the GCC and that, given the right assets, GCC states could manage the threat. Cosgriff and Herbert-Burns echoed this assessment. Cosgriff asserted that GCC states had "nascent capability and capacity" to undertake counter-piracy missions, particularly in the Gulf of Oman. He judged that Saudi Arabia's West Fleet could use its forces stationed in the Bab al Mandab area to almost unilaterally take care of counter-piracy there. Herbert-Burns added that a good portion of GCC naval procurement has focused on littoral vessels and nearly all GCC countries already have some frigate and corvette vessels suitable for counter-piracy operations.

Yet, for the most part, GCC states have had difficulty turning their collective assets into collective action, relying instead on U.S. and European naval support. According to Cosgriff, if the GCC were to address piracy alone, "it would look like something we've never seen before." Instead, he argued, the typical GCC "combined maritime forces model" consists of Gulf countries sending a ship or two into an operation while letting the United States lead. Herbert-Burns agreed that while the GCC has "some capability" to deal with the threat, it "needs assistance." He

¹ Richard Nelson and Scott Goossens, "Counter-Piracy in the Arabian Sea," CSIS Gulf Analysis Paper, May 2011, pg. 3, <http://csis.org/files/publication/110509_GulfAnalysis_Counter_piracy_inthe_ArabianSea.pdf>

suggested that India could play a prominent role in assisting counter-piracy operations given that country's refinery growth and vested interest in protecting Arabian waters. Regardless of the type of assistance, Nelson suggested it was important for the GCC to take a visible, proactive stand against piracy: "If the GCC can't control an issue in its backyard, what are the implications for perceptions of regional stability?"

On a broader, strategic level, Nelson said the international community as a whole – and particularly the United States, Europe, and GCC – needs to address the lack of coherent policies and leadership regarding piracy. Although the United States has demonstrated a commitment to deterring piracy through its responses to attacks on its vessels, it has largely remained on the sidelines until recently. Cosgriff asserted that Task Force 151, which coordinates and deconflicts the counter-piracy efforts of NATO, the EU, China, and Iran have all had "modest success" in deterring pirates, "there are still more potential pirate skiffs than pirate hunting ships and aircraft by a significant measure." However, he remained heartened that of the three ways to address piracy – "watch from afar, watch up close, or do something about it" – the third "more muscular, albeit inconsistently applied" approach was gaining ground. ■

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