The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington

Building bridges of understanding

Dominance versus Disruption: Asymmetry in Gulf Security

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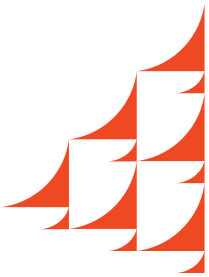

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The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington (AGSIW), launched in 2015, is an independent, nonprofit institution dedicated to providing expert research and analysis of the social, economic, and political dimensions of the Gulf Arab states and how they impact domestic and foreign policy. AGSIW focuses on issues ranging from politics and security to economics, trade, and business; from social dynamics to civil society and culture. Through programs, publications, and scholarly exchanges the institute seeks to encourage thoughtful debate and inform the U.S. foreign-policy and business communities regarding this critical geostrategic region.

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About the Author

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He joined NESA in 2011 after serving the Office of the Secretary of Defense for Policy in numerous positions, including as director of the Gulf and Arabian Peninsula, the Department of Defense liaison to the Department of Homeland Security, the senior country director for Pakistan, the NATO operations director, the deputy director for peacekeeping, and the spokesman for the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Prior to that, he served in the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy as an international law enforcement analyst and special assistant for strategy.

Des Roches retired as a colonel from a 30-year career in the active and reserve Army, serving on the Joint Staff, U.S. Special Operations Command staff, and in conventional and special operations troop units deployed throughout the Middle East, Europe, and Afghanistan. He is a regular commentator on regional affairs and author of numerous articles on Gulf security. He is the editor of *The Arms Trade, Military Services and the Security Market in the Gulf: Trends and Implications* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2016) and the theme editor of the Oxford Journal of Gulf Studies Spring 2016 special issue on security. He holds advanced degrees from the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies and Kings College London, which he attended as a British Marshall Scholar. Des Roches also holds an advanced degree from the U.S. Army War College, and a Bachelor of Science from the United States Military Academy, West Point.

Editors' Note: May 17, 2019

Recent events in and around the Gulf have provided a pointed reminder that overwhelming superiority of forces doesn't guarantee immunity from a determined adversary – even when the latter's access to sophisticated weaponry is limited. The following paper examines the defining characteristics of asymmetrical hostilities, in particular, the imbalance created when different security objectives – dominance or disruption – come into play.

Executive Summary

The Gulf Arab states and Iran have very different security objectives that require disparate financial outlays to meet their strategic goals. Gulf Arab states spend a massive amount of money on defense and they outspend Iran many times over. Iran generally is able to achieve its security aims efficiently and certainly less expensively than are the Gulf Arab states. While this imbalance has prompted considerable discussion, this paper considers the contrasting security objectives of the Gulf Arab states and Iran as a major cause.

This paper analyzes the security objectives of the Gulf Arab states and Iran. It shows that the Gulf Arab states can only prosper if they or their Western partners (notably the United States) dominate their security area of interest. They cannot survive long if sea or air lanes are closed; they are integrated into the global economy in a manner that requires uninterrupted commercial and military traffic; and any disruption damages their security.

Iran, on the other hand, can generally achieve its security aims if it simply disrupts the regional security environment. Disruption is far cheaper than domination – a spoiler strategy can achieve its aims at a fraction of the cost of that of a rival, who must maintain smoothly operating international trade.

By categorizing the security objectives of the Gulf Arab states and Iran as either dominance or disruption, analysts can better understand relative disparities in defense resources.

Introduction

Gulf security analysts often place great emphasis on the asymmetry in defense procurement and spending in the region. The Gulf Arab countries routinely top the global list of arms purchasers. They have built up significant forces, many equipped with the most modern weapons in the world. They have built bases to host the major Western military powers, including the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Turkey. Meanwhile, Iranian and Iranian-supported forces are deployed and operate throughout the region at relatively much lower expense, with fewer, cheaper, and often theoretically obsolete weapons.

But do Gulf Arab powers – some of which have a generation-long relationship for military training and equipment with the United States – nonetheless find themselves, as many analysts argue, at a security disadvantage compared to Iran? And how can Iran, which has

been isolated from most global markets for decades, and which has struggled to import or produce even the most basic military equipment, have developed what many analysts view as a more effective military force?

Iran's Military Advantage

One of Iran's key military advantages is that it does not seek to provide a security regime. Iran's prosperity is either based on internal markets or, ironically, through the use of international trade systems that are maintained primarily by the United States and its partners. Even after the withdrawal of the United States from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement, Iran's oil made its way to markets on sea lanes secured by Western powers and their allies, although the recent expiration of sanctions waivers for some purchasers of Iranian oil has slowed that traffic to a trickle. Iran's impressive domestic science and engineering capacity incubates and imports knowledge largely acquired in Western educational institutions.

Iran's status as a free rider on the international economic order is paradoxical. Iran benefits from a regime of free trade and safe shipping lanes to which its contributions are, at best, minimal. Indeed, when it appears as if Iran's access to global markets is about to be curtailed, Iran often threatens the stability of this very system. For example, when sanctions have been imposed on Iranian oil exports, Iranian leaders have often threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz and thus choke off the Gulf Arab states' ability to export oil and gas and import food and other vital supplies.

The asymmetric nature of this threat pattern highlights a fundamental difference between Iran and its Arab adversaries. As a revisionist power, Iran's security strategy is to *disrupt* (or threaten to disrupt) the regional and global order. The Gulf Arab states, on the other hand, cannot prosper (or even survive) unless they establish *dominance* in the security environment in order to preserve the regional status quo. Establishing dominance requires imposing order and stability in a manner akin to policing. It is manpower and resource intensive and requires constant surveillance and monitoring. Any challenge to dominance from any quarter must be immediately countered, and stability cannot be maintained via destabilizing tactics.

As a revisionist power, Iran's security strategy is to disrupt (or threaten to disrupt) the regional and global order.

Disruption, on the other hand, is both inexpensive and relatively easy to achieve. A power seeking to disrupt has the inherent initiative: It can observe and probe the security environment for locations and conditions that allow a maximum disruption for a maximum length of time for a minimal amount of effort and resources. Disruption requires minimal ability to sustain operations; raids, one-off attacks, and limited strikes against remote vessels and facilities[1] can all disrupt the security regime and require a disproportionate amount of resources and effort to restore security.[2]

1 Iran's strategic reliance on asymmetry for its defense is surveyed in Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran's Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles and Cyberspace," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 3 (2017): 89-103.

2 This analysis has been informed by the work of J. Matthew McInnis, particularly J. Matthew McInnis, *The Future of Iran's Security Policy: Inside Tehran's Strategic Thinking* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2017).

Disruption: Initiative and the First-Mover Advantage

A disruption strategy particularly suits Iran because it rewards first movers that choose to initiate conflict. Because Iran effectively stands outside of most global political standards and systems, it can act with relatively few international normative constraints. Iran is already excluded from most global trade and security forums, and is for the most part self-sustaining in the defense realm. It is not dependent upon international imports to the extent its neighbors are in either the civilian or military sectors and it does not have a senior security partner that could constrain its actions.

These factors give Iran a marked first-mover advantage. In any situation in which Iran takes a provocative action – say, seizing the south shore of the Strait of Hormuz – it would face an adversary that would have to respond as part of a coalition, and which would be constrained by constitutional debate in the West, as well as international norms and expectations. For example, the United States would probably respond immediately to an Iranian provocation with forces already in the region but would not be able to mobilize and deploy major forces into certain conflict without some congressional support and at least an attempt to gain support for such a step from U.S. partners, such as the European Union, or at the United Nations.

Because Iran effectively stands outside of most global political standards and systems, it can act with relatively few international normative constraints.

This requirement for coordination and consultation, either with international organizations or within the United States (the Gulf Arab countries' lead security guarantor), means Iran's strategy can be to establish a fait accompli, and then hope that the response is delayed by a lack of military capability among the Gulf Arab states or by a debate in Western countries over the cost, necessity, and utility of supporting governments that are seen as undemocratic.[3]

This first mover advantage enjoyed by Iran in a more modest way mirrors the security positions of Russia and China. Both countries have shown that if a fact is created on the ground (in Crimea and the South China Sea, respectively) local and Western powers will likely not be willing to escalate conflict but rather seek to apply other, less immediate means of pressure, such as travel restrictions and diplomatic and economic sanctions.

As ineffectual as these measures have been in compelling Russian and Chinese withdrawal from illegally occupied territory, they are likely to be even less effective against the Iranians. The Russian and Chinese elite are dependent upon the West in ways the Iranian elite are typically not. Russian and Chinese elites hold extensive properties in the West, often bank there, and frequently send their children to Western institutions for their education. Russia and China are also far more dependent upon trade with the West than is Iran. Even with

3 Western – particularly U.S. – willingness to support Gulf Arab states with military forces diminishes rapidly as the possibility of fatalities increases. See DB Des Roches, "The Evolving American Security Role in the Gulf," in *The United States and the Gulf: Shifting Pressures, Strategies and Alignments*, eds. Steven W. Hook and Tim Niblock (Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2015).

these disadvantages and an enhanced regime of sanctions, Western nonmilitary efforts have failed to bear fruit in Crimea and the South China Sea. Iran, which is less vulnerable to these measures, will not have failed to notice all of this.

Negating the first-mover advantage requires a persistent and robust security presence across the entire area in which Iran might seek to seize territory, as well as constant intelligence and monitoring efforts against Iranian force projection capabilities, such as landing craft and transport aircraft. The requirements to negate a first-mover advantage alone necessitates the much greater Arab military spending and capacity. To prevent Iran from exploiting the first-mover advantage and creating a situation that would require a (possibly politically unacceptable) military response, the Gulf Arab states and their security partners are forced into a position where they have to constantly monitor and defend all of their likely points of vulnerability.

Dominance versus Disruption: Domain Analysis of Inequality

The differing strategic requirements facing Iran and the Gulf Arab states largely explain the disparity in defense spending and force structure between the two. This inequality is apparent when examining three domains of warfare – air, sea, and land – and thus explains why the Gulf Arab security challenge is considerably more expensive, manpower intensive, and complex when compared to Iran's.

Air Warfare

The security gap between the Gulf Arab states and Iran is most notable in the field of air warfare. Iran's air force was mostly imported during the time of the shah more than 40 years ago, augmented with some purchases of Soviet-bloc equipment and possibly with aircraft that Saddam Hussein sent to Iran during the Gulf War. Maintenance and operations of any of Iran's aircraft has been a persistent challenge; procuring parts for the aged, U.S.-made F-14 fleet in contravention of U.S.-led sanctions has been a major effort of Iranian intelligence.

It is uncertain if Iran would be able to put a militarily significant number of fighter aircraft in the air at any given time, let alone engage in combat operations against a determined enemy for a protracted period. The Iranian military aviation capability is insignificant due to lack of parts and limited pilot training and flight hours.[4]

By contrast, the Gulf Arab militaries field some of the largest and most modern air forces outside of NATO. The United Arab Emirates flies both late generation French Mirage fighters as well as a variant of the U.S. F-16, which, in some respects, is more advanced than those flown by the U.S. Air Force. The Kuwaitis fly the extremely advanced F-18 fighter, which was developed by the U.S. Navy as its air superiority fighter of choices.* The Emiratis conducted

4 See Douglas Barrie, "Iran and the Challenge of Combat-Aircraft Recapitalization," in *Gulf Security after 2020* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018), 23-27.

*Correction: This paper originally stated the Kuwaitis fly F-15 fighters developed by the U.S. Air Force. Kuwait flies F-18 fighters developed by the U.S. Navy.

flight operations in the 2011 Libya interventions and demonstrated an ability to stage their aircraft remotely. By relying on the relatively robust and easy to maintain F-16 platform, they have managed to avoid many of the sustainment and maintenance issues that typically bedevil countries that operate sophisticated foreign aircraft. David Petraeus, when he served as commander of U.S. Central Command, suggested that the UAE on its own could defeat the Iranian air forces.[6]

Saudi Arabia also has a robust air force and has displayed a surprisingly impressive ability to conduct operations from a remote base over a sustained period of time. Saudi Arabia fields both the relatively complex U.S. F-15 fighter bomber as well as the British Tornado fighter. Saudi Arabia flies these aircraft in both a fighter as well as a ground attack role and has displayed an ability to operate at some distance from bases, and proficiently conduct difficult operations, such as multinational air-to-air refueling and forward-based maintenance operations. The Saudi air forces could potentially establish air supremacy over the Gulf and conduct offensive airstrikes some distance within Iran.

The Iranian response to this striking imbalance would not be an attempt to challenge Arab supremacy in the air, but rather would focus on disrupting civilian aviation and the ability of the Gulf Arab states to maintain civilian air traffic over the Gulf. By declaring numerous notices to civilian aviation of closed areas due to military exercises, missile firings, and other military activities in civilian airspace, the Iranians could disrupt a significant amount of air travel and air commerce into the Gulf Arab states without much cost or effort. Iran would portray these events as normal military training, not aggressive military activity, but the disruption to civilian aviation would be significant.

... the Gulf Arab militaries field some of the largest and most modern air forces outside of NATO.

A key supporting approach to this asymmetric strategy is to rely on missiles rather than airplanes for power projection.[7] Airplanes are complicated, expensive, and require continuous maintenance and training for their operators. Once basic research is completed, missiles are relatively inexpensive. They do not require much maintenance, and they do not have operators. Once an assembly line is established, the cost of each missile decreases drastically.

Iran's power projection aims are not reliant on precision strikes the way the Gulf Arab states' must be: Iran is relatively immune to international opinion and weapons suppliers' sensitivities. Therefore, it can field a relatively imprecise set of ballistic missiles and not have to worry much about criticism. Again, Iran would be able to operate in a largely disruptive manner – targeting cities rather than installations – and achieve most of its strategic aims. Of course, such action would be a significant military escalation and would invite a strong military response by Gulf Arab states, but their freedom of action could be tempered and restrained by Western security partners seeking to forestall a destabilizing regional conflict, including through constraints placed on weapons sales.

6 Josh Rogin, "Petraeus: The UAE's Air Force Could Take Out Iran's," *Foreign Policy*, December 17, 2009.

7 For an overview of Iran's missile objectives see Victor Gervais, *Iran's Missile Programmes: Evolving Strategic Objectives and Capabilities* (Abu Dhabi: Emirates Diplomatic Academy, 2018). Another valuable assessment is Michael Elleman, "Iran's Missile Priorities after the Nuclear Deal," in *Gulf Security after 2020* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2018), 27-33.

Iran's disruption strategy has limitations: It is unlikely to be of much use in an all-out war, but, for precisely that reason, among others, Iranian strategic calculations seek to avoid an all-out war.[8] This is a tactical approach that reflects the inherent weakness of Iran's conventional air strength and accepts that Iran's air forces are unlikely to match those of their rivals. So rather than seek to *dominate* the air (as the Gulf Arab states do), Iran can rely on *disrupting* the air. This focus on disruption reflects both the strategic mismatch between air forces as well as the revolutionary spirit and revisionist aims of the Islamic Republic.

Naval Warfare

The differing strategic challenges facing Iran and the Gulf Arab states are even more evident in an assessment of naval security. While both Iran and the Gulf Arab countries are dependent upon maritime transportation of oil and gas for most of their foreign earnings, the Gulf Arab states are far less resilient and self-sufficient. Food, medicine, and other vital supplies generally come to the Gulf Arab states by sea; Iran can transport supplies to ports outside of the Gulf (and thus independent of the Strait of Hormuz chokepoint) or over land to the north.[9]

Compared to the region's air forces, the Gulf Arab states' naval forces are relatively small and underdeveloped, for several reasons. First, through the modern period, outside powers generally allied with them have viewed the region as essential to their trade interests and thus have provided sea dominance on their own, without any need for local participation. First the British Royal Navy, which viewed the Gulf as a vital adjunct to the security of India, and then the United States has sought to maintain freedom of navigation in the Gulf itself. The Gulf Arab states have benefited from this naval security umbrella, but consequently the development of their own naval traditions has been stunted by the overwhelming outside presence in and adjacent to their waters.

... rather than seek to dominate *the air (as the Gulf Arab states do), Iran can rely on* disrupting *the air.*

Second, many of the security institutions of the Gulf Arab states have been developed with one eye on protection from external predations, such as land or naval invasion, and another on regime protection and coup proofing – especially in past decades when such occurrences were far more frequent in the Arab world. Naval forces, which are not armed or trained to fight on land and are usually located away from government institutions, are of limited use in defending most regimes from the threat of a coup. Given this and development of the Gulf Arab states under the security umbrella of first the British and then the U.S. Navy, it is not surprising that naval forces have been relatively underdeveloped compared to other armed forces, especially air forces.

8 Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, "Iran's Defense Strategy: The Navy, Ballistic Missiles and Cyberspace," *Middle East Policy* 24, no. 3 (2017): 90.

9 For a general review of Iranian naval developments by a former U.S. 5th Fleet commander see John Miller, "Iranian Maritime Improvements: Challenges and Opportunities," in *Gulf Security after 2020* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2017), 17-23.

Most of the Gulf Arab countries have developed navies dedicated to coastal patrol rather than open-seas action. They generally can be used in interdiction operations or play a law enforcement role rather than lending themselves to total sea dominance. The big maritime power mission of controlling the sea lanes falls to the outside powers with a naval presence, especially the United States and Britain.

Ensuring freedom of navigation in the Gulf is a multinational task, coordinated by the U.S. Navy command post in Bahrain via a multinational joint task force. This sort of coordination is generally easier to achieve among navies (which move individual ships operating at sea, a relatively austere environment) than armies (which move thousands of individuals operating among cities and civilians), and this coordination has been long and well established. Iran does not participate in these efforts, though it is also reliant upon maritime exportation of oil and gas.

This multinational naval effort is constant and persistent. Its aim is to ensure unfettered imports and exports. The Gulf Arab states, together with their U.S. and European partners, are obliged to keep the sea lanes free of obstructions and closures if they wish to maintain their way of life and the health of the global economy, especially the major markets of South and East Asia. The United States, Britain, and France dispatch capital warships to the Gulf at great expense both as a show of force and to effectively deter and thwart any challenge to freedom of navigation.

Iran benefits from this system but, as noted, would not be harmed as much as the Gulf Arab states if freedom of navigation is curtailed. Thus, Iran is able again to focus on disruptive capabilities at sea. The most disruptive capability is laying mines. Seaborne mines are close to a perfect asymmetric disruptive weapon. They are technically unsophisticated, relatively cheap, easy to employ, expensive and difficult to neutralize, persistent, and indiscriminate. Aside from the immediate effect of a mine blast, the strategic effect is to deny shipping access to huge areas of the ocean. If one mine is found, it is possible there are others; so, the time-consuming, expensive, and often inconclusive process of minesweeping is necessary. Meanwhile, maritime insurers charge higher premiums for ships to operate in areas where there are reports of mines, thus raising the cost of vital imports and exports.

The Iranians generally lay mines from small boats, which appear from above as fishing vessels. Thus, for a minimal investment in small boats and mines, the Iranians can deny large areas of water to most commercial shipping and dictate the deployment of considerable naval assets. Of course, mines are even more of an issue in restricted waterways, such as the Strait of Hormuz. Given the importance of the effort, the majority of the U.S. Navy's global minesweeping force is based in the Gulf.

Other Iranian asymmetric naval weapons are designed to nullify the large, expensive Western capital ships, such as aircraft carriers. The Iranians have dedicated a significant effort to the development and purchase of anti-ship missiles and high-speed torpedoes, which can be launched from a variety of platforms at sea (such as small attack boats) and from shore. While these weapons are more expensive than naval mines, they have the advantage of being active, targeted weapons, which can be quickly directed at a ship (as compared to a passive mine, which a ship must strike). Thus, they can be quickly employed to threaten a ship. Iran's preferred missile strike tactic is the mass firing of missiles against a large ship in the hope of

overwhelming its defenses: The logic for the Iranians is that if they fire 15 missiles and only one gets through, they still win. With torpedoes, Iran made a great show of purchasing the Russian Shkval high-speed torpedo, a system that challenges most modern defenses due to its speed.

Finally, Iran has been the global leader in the development of small boat "swarming" tactics in which a large group of small boats, many with explosives on board, approach a larger ship all at once from multiple directions. The aim is to overwhelm a ship's close-in defenses and explode at the hull, damaging or sinking the ship. Initially, swarm tactics were the naval equivalent of the Basij human wave assaults seen in the later stages of the Iran-Iraq War and require small boat operators to sacrifice themselves, along with the boat, in an explosion. Recently, however, the Iranians have been developing a remote piloting computer, which can operate the boat without a human on board. This new technology was used in the Houthi attack on the Saudi ship Al Madinah in January 2017.

Iranian weapons and tactics at sea are not focused on controlling sea lanes but rather at denying control to Iran's rivals.

Once again, Iranian weapons and tactics at sea are not focused on controlling sea lanes but rather at denying control to Iran's rivals. This disruptive mode of warfare is much cheaper and far less manpower intensive than the requirements of establishing dominance at sea.

Land Warfare

The Iranian model of land warfare is inexpensive as well as cost effective. It has evolved considerably since the Iran-Iraq War, which featured mass attacks by poorly trained Iranian militias. Since then, Iran has avoided conducting land warfare in its own territory or with entirely Iranian units, relying instead upon militias drawn from various foreign Shia populations under the guidance of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These units are generally provided with leadership, training, weapons, intelligence, and funds from Iranian sources but also operate with local resources and support. They have also coordinated with each other across borders, most notably Syria's borders with Lebanon and Iraq.

The most prominent of these substate armed groups are Lebanese Hezbollah and the various militias that make up the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq. Both of these organizations operate with a degree of popular support among local Shia populations and in countries lacking a strong central government. The amount and type (military, financial, political) of Iranian support to Hezbollah and the various Popular Mobilization Forces varies from group to group and issue to issue, and the degree of Iranian direction and control over these groups varies and is often disputed. But, with a relatively small Iranian investment, they generally serve Iranian interests in preventing the formation of national governments in Lebanon and Iraq that could pursue policies counter to Iran's interests. Additionally, they can be counted on to avoid opposing Iran on any major issue of security.

Iran's ground proxy forces in Syria are an entirely different proposition. The Iranian-sponsored Shia militias that have fought in Syria are generally deployed under Iranian command to serve Iranian purposes. These formations are made up of militia groups of foreign Shias, including

from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, who are equipped by Iranians and fight in ethnically defined units but under the direction of Iranian officers. A substantial number of Iranian officers of mid- and high-military rank have died in Syria – this is indicative of a "cadre" system whereby the majority of the enlisted ranks of the Shia militias fighting in Syria are drawn from other nationalities, but the officers and key support positions are filled by Iranians.

The Houthi movement in Yemen is a special case. While there is evidence of substantial Iranian and Hezbollah military assistance to the Houthis, particularly the supply of missiles and drones, it is not clear what the level of Iranian support is in other areas.[10] There have been seizures of Iranian weapons in countries in Africa[11] and the Gulf,[12] and it is widely assumed that these weapons were destined for the Houthi rebels. While Iran has been happy to provide military support to this group in order to tie down rival Arab military resources, the Houthis are largely pursuing their own domestic interests. Iran did not create this group. Instead, Tehran seems to have capitalized on a local movement to carry on an extremely cost-effective war against Saudi Arabia and the UAE and bog its rivals down in a bitter and protracted conflict, in which Iran has little to lose and limited stake in the outcome.

The Gulf Arab states and the West have yet to find a satisfactory means of counteracting proxies.

The Gulf Arab states and the West have yet to find a satisfactory means of counteracting proxies. In large part because of the desire to avoid outright war, the various Iranian-supported Shia forces are not generally dealt with by the outside world as Iranian military assets, but rather are treated primarily as a local phenomenon since they tend to have substantial local public support and portray themselves as entirely indigenous, spontaneously generated, and independent movements that operate without outside support or direction.

Additionally, confronting these groups militarily (particularly in Lebanon and Iraq) would be a significant undertaking, and there isn't sufficient political will for a military campaign that would carry a risk of a large number of casualties. Among the many other reasons that the Gulf Arab countries and their Western allies do not make a concerted effort to mimic the Iranian tactic of deploying local, sectarian substate militias is a fear of blowback. While there have been some tentative efforts in Syria, the Horn of Africa, and Yemen to fund and develop local units, these efforts (and the level of control they cede to their Arab patrons) are extremely limited. Indeed, most Arab efforts to develop nonregular security forces more closely resemble tribal management policies than they do Iran's development of deployable proxy armies. The exception to this trend may be recent UAE efforts in southern Yemen.

The last time there was a major effort to do this among Sunni Muslims – jointly by the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 – one of the main long-term consequences was the emergence of the Salafist-jihadist movement and the rise of al-Qaeda. There is very little desire for any repetition of this experience. Again, Iran's appetite for disruption and ability to leverage chaos lends itself to inexpensive, relatively easy, and effective tactics that its Arab rivals are generally forced to eschew.

10 For example, see "Iranian Technology Transfer to Yemen," *Conflict Armament Research*, March 2017.

11 "The Distribution of Iranian Ammunition in Africa," *Conflict Armament Research*, December 2012.

12 Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain," *CTC Sentinel*, January 2018.

Conclusion

The prodigious imbalance in defense spending between Iran and the Gulf Arab states stems predominantly from the geopolitical security situation that requires the Gulf Arab states and their partners, in their quest for stability and the preservation of the regional status quo, to dominate the security environment. Iran, on the other hand, only has the requirement to disrupt the security environment to achieve its strategic goals. Additionally, because Iran's adversaries operate as part of a coalition with Western democracies, Iran has a first-mover advantage that incentivizes it to take rapid military action and relieves it of the constraints of cooperation.

Iran has tailored its military forces in the air, sea, and ground domain to take advantage of its different strategic imperatives and strategic burden. Iran has developed military capabilities to take advantage of asymmetric techniques that would be challenged to establish security dominance but which effectively disrupt the security environment.

Because of these factors, the Gulf Arab security infrastructure must be exponentially larger, more active, more geographically dispersed, and more capable of concentrating at short notice. This means Gulf Arab militaries – to meet their security and strategic challenges – have to be much larger, more mobile, and more modern than anything fielded by Iran. And it means Iran can be very effective with a great deal less than its Gulf Arab adversaries.