

Security threat key concern ahead of GCC summit

The "militarisation and nuclearisation" of Iran threaten to spark a fourth Gulf war that will engulf the region and may drag in Turkey, analysts warn ahead of the GCC Summit.

- By Samir Salama, Associate Editor
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Abu Dhabi: Leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) will meet on December 6-7 in Abu Dhabi, where the prestigious bloc was created 30 years ago, as security threats surround the region — Iran to the east, Iraq to the north and Yemen to the south.

The "militarisation and nuclearisation" of Iran threaten to spark a fourth Gulf war that will engulf the region and may drag in Turkey, analysts warn ahead of the GCC Summit.

"The drivers for a Gulf war are apparent. All diplomatic steps taken by US President Barack Obama appear to be failing, meaning there is an increased likelihood of a military confrontation that may not only include punitive strikes on Iran but also a war in the Levant that could drag in Turkey," said Dr Theodore Karasik, Director of Research and Development at the institute for Near East and Gulf Military Analysis (Inegma).

Preparing for action

Dr Karasik warned the kind of military hardware deployed in the region indicates that the US is preparing for action. "The United States has been bolstering air defence and ballistic missiles by deploying more Patriot missiles and Aegis-equipped destroyers.

"It has increased the number of minesweepers, deployed another carrier group, and is sending another one to the edge of the Indian Ocean, all in order to reach striking distance of Iran.

"Hardline Iranian leaders in turn are keeping up preparations for a possible war with [the] United States. These leaders seem to have been affected by the results of the Hezbollah-Israeli June 2006 war and have subsequently become confident of emerging victorious from a showdown with the US.

"The tactics of holding regular military exercises, arresting various anti-regime activists and/or sailors, and harassing US warships prove that some Iranian leaders [especially within Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)] are not afraid of the US and were willing to up the stakes and risk sparking a military confrontation and a war.

"Finally, Israeli leaders have made it clear that they will not allow Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. The political situation in Israel, coupled with the Israeli policy against Gaza activists, would make it tempting to many leaders there to take unilateral action and drag the US into a war [willingly or unwillingly].

"Also Israel wants to regain its deterrent posture after it was shattered in the last war against Hezbollah."

Dr Karasik suggested that the consequences of this crescendo towards conflict and its aftermath must be examined in detail to minimise the potentially catastrophic impact on GCC economies and political stability.

Dr Karasik said the "disastrous" Iraq war is spreading regional sectarian strife and methods of warfare throughout the region.

"Bahrain is becoming a political laboratory for Shiite-Sunni relations where the Sunnis themselves are divided between Salafists and those who call themselves Secularists," he said.

Uneasy alliance

At the highest level of state competition, Saudi Arabia's monarchy celebrates Arab tribalism and rests on an uneasy alliance with the religious establishment, while Khomeini's concept of vilayet-e-faqih [guardianship of the jurists] in today's Iran is anti-monarchical, anti-tribal, notionally populist, and accords unequivocal primacy to the clerical class.

The spillover of this competition affects Lebanon and Syria, specifically highlighting who is Sunni and who is Shiite, particularly the Arab Shiite represented by Hezbollah. Significantly, people are identifying each other as Sunni or Shiite, not as Muslims. The sectarian consequences for the region in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War thus merit serious consideration.

Dr Karasik argues at the same time that it is not clear whether the civil war unleashed by the US invasion is over.

"At present, the prevailing opinion seems to be that Iraqis are "tired" of violence and now prefer a democratic process, no matter how flawed or skewed.

However, voices from Saudi Arabia increasingly appear dissatisfied with the consolidation of the Iraqi state and fearful of Iranian encroachment, potentially implying a heightened Saudi-Iranian rivalry within Iraq and potentially an all-out proxy war brewing in the wake of the withdrawal of US forces over the course of 2011.

On Al Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula, Dr Karasik said the Salafist-Jihadist discourse represented by Al Qaida Arabian Peninsula calls for attacks on energy infrastructure and violence against civilians, Muslim and non-Muslim.

"The recent attacks on cargo carriers as an economic target is also a case in point. In addition, Al Qaida on the Arabian Peninsula doctrine calls for attacks on Gulf nations' cyberspace that can have an impact on governance and economics. Although cyber-terrorism is an attractive option for terrorists, who value its anonymity and its media appeal, the increasing e-governance by the GCC makes any such potential and actual attack highly significant. Overall, such attacks can be low in sophistication but can have a high impact via psychological effects and loss of commerce and revenue.

Dr Karasik said that the continued and growing reality of "threats from within" on the physical, economic and electronic infrastructure of the Gulf states must be analysed from the perspective of efforts to directly address threats through security and legal approaches as well as economic and political integration and reconciliation efforts which have taken diverse forms across the region.

Increased tensions

Dr Abdul Khaleq Abdullah, Professor of Political Science at Emirates University said the militarisation and the nuclearisation of Iran's domestic and foreign policy is bound to increase regional tensions.

"The GCC states need to beef up their military capabilities in anticipation of a possible military confrontation between Iran and the United States. This worst-case scenario of a fourth Gulf war cannot be easily ruled out if the current tight UN economic sanctions fail to stop Iran's nuclear ambitions."

Dr Abdullah added that from a GCC perspective, security challenges are abundantly clear and come from all directions.

"To the north there is the politically unstable and volatile Iraq. Fragile Yemen to the south is a potential strategic liability as it heads into a failed-state status. The difficult Iran to the east is becoming more difficult to understand and predict."

Dr Abdullah argued there is also the US, which despite the close relationship is "no longer as reliable as it used to be".

While he describes the US as an indispensable partner, Dr Abdullah said that trust in Washington is eroding fast and it is probably at its lowest because of its mishandling of Gulf security. Its miserable performance in Iraq and Afghanistan and its confusing behaviour towards Iran are not convincing.

"A militarily weak Iraq sitting next to politically emboldened Iran, is not a reassuring regional security formula," said Dr Abdullah, holding Washington "fully responsible for creating this new regional malaise".

Dr Abdullah stressed that GCC states are "fully determined to match Iran step by step and go all the way to the very end, including developing their own nuclear options."

Dr Abdullah said that he believes if Iran eventually chooses to develop its nuclear capabilities, the GCC states, either collectively or individually, will go nuclear too.

"They [the GCC states] are not going to stand idle and accept as fait accompli the emergence of Iran as a nuclear power which drastically alters the current delicate balance of power in favour of Tehran. This is fiercely resisted not just by Saudi Arabia and the smaller GCC states but even by Iraq."

Dr Karasik could not agree more. "If Iran goes nuclear, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey will quickly follow. The question is which umbrella will the remaining GCC states fall under?" he said.

However, Dr Abdul Rahim Al Shahin, Associate Professor of Political Science at the Emirates University, sees the worst-case scenario of a fourth Gulf War is "very unlikely".

On what should the US and its allies do to contain these threats, Dr Al Shahin says only creating a moderate self-government in Iran, Iraq and other states in the region will bring lasting peace and nonproliferation, which will take time.

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