



Constructing a Robust GCC Response at Sea: Reviving the Arab Counter-Piracy Force

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Piracy off Somalia has been internationally recognized as a major threat that could have significant repercussions on economies. Therefore, countries from all over the world decided to send naval assets or maritime patrol aircrafts to the Indian Ocean in order to deal with the phenomenon and protect their interests. Those assets are operating either under national control or within coalitions. The main coalitions that were established are Atalanta (European Union), Task Force 508 (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), and Task Force 151 (Combined Maritime Forces). Among the countries acting independently, we can mention China, Japan, Russia, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia. When going through the list of all the participating countries, it is noticeable that, despite their key location, most Arab countries are absent from the scene.

Nevertheless, in June 2009, convinced that countries in and around the Arabian Peninsula had a special responsibility to protect waters in their region, eleven Arab states from the Gulf and the Red Sea agreed to set up an all Arab Navy Task Force to prevent the spread of piracy to the Red Sea. The force was to be under a unified command for a one-year period, at the end of which, a review of the situation was to be conducted. Participating countries were to be Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen. Gulf States, most of them located outside of pirates operation areas, got involved in those talks because of increased concern about the danger posed by piracy to their oil and gas exports.

Despite good intentions, the agreement was not followed by concrete steps and naval involvement of Arab countries remained limited to national actions such as Saudi ships or Yemeni coast guards patrolling in the Red Sea or the Gulf of Aden.



UAE Approach

Even if not participating in naval patrols off Somalia, the UAE is acting actively on the fight against piracy. In 2011, from a military aspect, the UAE showed its operational readiness and strong determination to fight piracy by raiding *Arrilah I*, a UAE flagged merchant vessel that had been hijacked by pirates. This national action resulted in the freeing of all hostages and the arrest of the pirates who are now waiting to be prosecuted in UAE.

The UAE is also supporting the reinforcement of regional capabilities such as in the Seychelles with the delivery of two patrol boats, three fast crafts and the construction of a coast guard station. By providing such support, the UAE is helping countries to safeguard their territorial waters and contribute to the fight against piracy.

The Dubai conference organized on April 18 and 19, 2011, whose theme was “Global Challenge, Regional Responses: Forging a Common Approach to Maritime Piracy” was a strong signal of UAE involvement. This conference achieved mainly two aims. First, was to bring together governments representatives and private companies to address the issue of piracy. Second, was to raise money to contribute to a United Nations Trust Fund aimed at financing initiatives such as, for example, prisons refurbishment in Somalia or in countries that accepted to prosecute pirates. At a diplomatic level, on March 31, 2012, the UAE chaired the 11th plenary meeting of the Contact Group on Piracy off the Coast of Somalia.

In order to get an even bigger momentum, it is my opinion that UAE stance should be endorsed at a regional level by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The Gulf Cooperation Council

The Gulf Cooperation Council is mainly a political and an economic entity. Its military component established in 1986, is called the Peninsula Shield Force. It is a standing coalition land force. Up to now, there are only the annual combined exercises but the organization could evolve in the future. Indeed, a significant step in that direction was achieved with the GCC decision in 2010 to establish in Bahrain an information-sharing center. When implemented and



operational, this center will improve regional awareness on maritime traffic and the patterns of life of all maritime actors, making any suspicious action at sea easier to detect, as announced in January 2012 during a maritime security conference held in Abu Dhabi. The next step should logically be to increase cooperation at sea between the GCC navies in order to have a common approach and to deal effectively with transnational crimes (illegal human or goods trafficking, terrorism, etc.) or piracy.

GCC Involvement in the Fight against Piracy

GCC growth and wealth are highly dependent on the sea and the ability of ships to sail safely along sea-lanes. As a consequence, the GCC needs to address piracy issues in a resolute way and takes its share of the fight against this phenomenon. The approach of the problem has to be a global one, as a long lasting solution to piracy is unlikely to be achieved at sea. Improving economy, strengthening political institutions and supporting the implementation of robust security forces in Somalia are the solutions to put an end to the phenomenon. But they are long-term solutions; the Dubai conference in April 2011 was part of this process.

While those long-term solutions will take years to be effective, it is important to implement immediate responses in order to limit piracy effects. Those solutions are basically:

- Reinforcing merchant vessels' internal protection, which is a responsibility of shipping companies;
- Protecting sea-lanes of communication by sending naval units at sea, which is a state responsibility.

In regards to the latter solution, piracy trends in past years have shown the limits of a sole military approach. Indeed, despite the important number of naval assets patrolling the area, the number of pirate attacks remained high. In a certain way, concentration of naval assets in close vicinity of Somalia led to a dramatic extension of the pirate operations area. Nevertheless, naval assets are bringing a necessary contribution, from which Arab countries cannot be absent. Therefore, a GCC counter-piracy group, taking benefits of the lessons learned from years spent



within TF 152, should be implemented. As the backbone of the Arab force that was envisioned in 2009, it could provide good reinforcement to the actual maritime presence off Somalia. Taking benefits of historical links, long lasting economic relations and perfect knowledge of Somali society, especially the clan structure, this force could achieve significant results. Moreover, it could generate a synergy within the navies of the participating states and improve their operational readiness and efficiency at sea, building bases for long lasting security in this strategic area. In addition to this operational consideration, the implementation of such a force would also be a strong political statement that Arab countries are fully committed to the stability of the region. In order to implement such a force, the first step should be to reach a consensus within GCC members. When formed, a GCC counter-piracy force, composed by naval assets and maritime patrol aircrafts, could rely on the information-sharing center established in Bahrain.

A second step would be to gather all the Arab countries that were part of the agreement in 2009. Nevertheless, it appears that some navies, despite good will, would be unable to provide suitable assets. Therefore, as the UAE did to support Seychelles in its contribution to the fight against piracy, GCC countries should consider providing, suitable coast guard equipment and training to participating countries. This limited investment would reinforce littoral forces allowing them to improve the coverage of their territorial waters. Some countries could also limit their contribution to providing maritime traffic information. Locations such as Suez Canal, Bab al Mandeb Strait, Socotra, Hormuz are ideal to monitor traffic and contribute to the maritime surface picture. As such, leaving no blind sector would result in limiting pirate freedom of movement, denying any shelter outside of Somali waters and challenging their logistics channels. Therefore, success in gathering Arab countries under the same umbrella would weaken piracy. The efforts to improve maritime domain awareness would also bring benefits in the fight against illegal trafficking of goods, weapons or people in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden. Those efforts would be a key contribution to the fight against terrorism, which also is a great threat to the GCC.



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