

Jarosław Jarzabek

The Military Balance in the Gulf - an overview

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Jarosław Jarzabek

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Introduction – political and strategic situation

In the past few decades the Middle East has been one of the most militarized regions in the world. The reasons of this high level of militarization varied depending on the time period and particular country. During the Cold War many of the region's countries played a role of the client states of the United States or the Soviet Union and took part in the proxy wars waged by the two sides of this conflict¹. This has made them a major recipients of the American and Soviet military assistance as well as significant buyers of their weapons². The Middle Eastern arms race was an offshoot of the great Cold War arms race between the East and the West, but it had also its own conditions and specificity. The states of the region strengthen their military potential and capabilities not only to get a stronger position in the Cold War rivalry, but also to realize their own regional goals and

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¹ The Soviet Union sought to protect its southern flank by installing there pro-Soviet regimes and undermining the influences of the Western powers, while the United States tried to rebuff the Soviet attempts. The United States had build their regional influences around a group of their allied, dependant or client states, which included primarily Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iraq (until 1958), Iran (until 1979), Israel (since late 1960.), and Egypt (since late 1970.) as well as some smaller states aligned or dependant directly to the US or to one of their major allies in the region, like Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia (until 1969), Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, North Yemen. Soviet Union supported pro-Soviet or anti-Western regimes and their own client states in Egypt (until mid-1970.), Syria, Iraq (since 1958), Algeria and South Yemen. M. Duric, T. Lansford, *US-Russian Competition in the Middle East*, [in:] *Strategic Interests in the Middle East*, J. Covarubias, T. Lansford (eds.), Farnham/Burlington 2010, p. 64-65.

² At the end of the Cold War, in 1985, the average military spending of the Middle Eastern states were almost 17% of their GNP and over 32% of the of the central government expenditures. Arms imports in this period of time constituted over 27% of the total imports. In the 1990. this numbers dropped sharply, as in the whole world, but still remained much higher than in the other regions. A. Cordesman, *The Military Balance in the Middle East*, Westport 2004, p. 30-36.

ambitions, to settle some old grudges with their neighbours or to solve some internal problems.

After the end of the Cold War the Middle East experienced a period of de-escalation of the conflicts in the 1990. During this decade only two of them, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the situation in and around Iraq, were a subject of constant regional and international concern. An Iraqi invasion on Kuwait and the First Gulf War in 1990-1991, the Gulf sub-region of the Middle East entered an era of a U.S. guaranteed stability. Feeling safe and reassured by American political support and military presence the Arab Gulf states decreased their military spending³. Also Iran, after the death of bellicose ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and governed in the 1990. by moderate presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005), did not seem to pose a significant threat to the regional security. The situation has changed after the events on the 11 IX 2001, when Iran was described by U.S. president George W. Bush as a part of the Axis of Evil – a group of states that sponsor terrorism, conduct an aggressive foreign policy and seek to obtain the weapons of mass destruction. The U.S. led invasion on Iraq in 2003 has seriously complicated the situation in the Gulf and contribute to the rise of the already existing tensions between the Arab states and Iran.

The military balance in the Gulf is now influenced by a number of factors. One of the most important among them is the rivalry between two regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, for the supremacy in the region. The other, related to the former, is the fear of the Arab Gulf states with Sunni Muslim majorities, of the rising Iranian influence on their Shia Muslims minorities. The next factor are the complicated relations between the Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf states, which on the one side seek the Saudis as their protector from the potential Iranian threat, and on the other are afraid of their hegemony. The civil war which rages in Iraq is the next decisive factor. The self-proclaimed radical and fanatical Islamic State becomes a major threat not only for Iraq and Syria, but also for the Arab Gulf states, as it gains a lot of tacit supporters among the fundamentalist Sunni Muslims there. The last of the key factors influencing the military balance in the Gulf is the presence of the U.S. armed forces, which remains very strong, despite the withdrawal of the military units from Iraq in 2011.

Military potential of the Arab Gulf states

The armed forces of Saudi Arabia are by far the largest and most powerful of all the Arab Gulf states. As of 2012 the armed forces had some 233 500 active military personnel, of which 75 000 in the Army, 13 500 in Navy, 20 000 in the

³ *Ibidem.*

Air Force, 16 000 in Air Defence Forces, 100 000 members of National Guard (including 25 000 tribal levies), 9000 in Industrial Security Force and over 15 000 man in paramilitary units (Border Guard, Coast Guard etc.)⁴. Those modern and well equipped forces play a major role in balancing and stabilizing the very dynamic and unpredictable region of the Gulf. Saudi Arabia itself has the largest oil and one of the largest gas reserves in the world. As the biggest Arab state in the Gulf sub-region (with the population of over 26 millions and the territory of 1 960 582 square kilometers) it plays a role of a natural leader for the surrounding smaller states, but has also serious ambitions to be a leader in the whole Arab world. The importance of Saudi Arabia results as well from its geopolitical and geostrategic position. Saudi Arabia has land borders with every other country in the Gulf except Iran, and has extensive access to two most important shipping lanes in the Middle East – the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea⁵.

As a major U.S. ally in the region Saudi Arabia may benefit from the protection the Americans provide against any potentially serious external threat, like it has happened during Iraqi invasion on Kuwait in 1990. The analysis of the Saudi politics of security shows however, that the kingdom does not want to rely on the external security guarantees, but consistently builds military potential which would allow them to deter all the potential aggressors and deal with existing threats alone. At the moment the risk of a major conventional conflict with any of Saudi's neighbours or any other state in the region is insignificant. Such a threat could be potentially posed only by Iran, would relations between the two deteriorate badly. Much more actual are the asymmetric threats, as the civil wars and instabilities in the neighbouring countries, particularly in Iraq and Yemen, as well as the dangers posed by insurgent and terrorist groups in Saudi Arabia itself⁶.

To deal with those threats Saudi Arabia developed large standing army and equipped it with the most modern and efficient weapon they could acquire. Despite the huge expenses on armaments and other military purposes the capabilities and level of readiness of different forces seems to be uneven. In 2013 Saudi Arabia's military spending reached 67 billion USD (9,3% of their GDP), which places them on the 4th place in the world, behind the United States, China and

⁴ *Military Balance 2013*, IISS, p. 400-403.

⁵ Saudi Arabia has also its specific monarchical-religious regime and two most important Muslim holy places (Mekka and Madinah), is the most influential member of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), is active member of Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Conference and an undisputed leader of Gulf Cooperation Council. All of this makes it an important religious, economic and political leader not only in the Gulf sub-region but also in the whole Middle East and far beyond. A. Cordesman, K. Al-Rodhan, *Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric Wars. Volume 1*, Washington 2007, p. 163-165.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 165-166.

Russia only. This means that the kingdom continues its policy of strengthening their internal and external security and gradually increases their military expenditure each year⁷.

The land forces are very well armed to realize their mission of facing the potential territorial threats. They possess strong armoured and mechanized units as well as the support of artillery, anti-tank, air defence and aviation units. There are however problems with cooperation and coordination of actions between different forces and the ability of Army to efficiently use the advanced equipment they possess is questionable⁸. The Saudi Arabian Navy is less well-equipped than the other forces, but is slowly improving its readiness and effectiveness. The Navy represents a reasonable surface naval power, but apparently they still lack the ability to fully secure long coastal line on two very important and difficult areas of Persian Gulf and the Red Sea⁹. The Royal Saudi Air Force is one of the most advanced and well-equipped in the Middle East. It operates a large and still growing fleet of modern aircrafts, which includes next to combat and transport aircrafts also airborne early warning and control (AEW&C) and electronic intelligence (ELINT) aircrafts¹⁰. Air Defence in Saudi Arabia is organized into a separate force (excluding the air-defence components integrated into other services) and represents an impressive power when it comes to the numbers and quality of equipment¹¹. The National Guard, which including tribal levies, is more numer-

⁷ Since 2004 the military spending of Saudi Arabia has raised of 118%. *Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2013*, SIPRI [April] 2014, http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=476# (27 VIII 2014).

⁸ The Saudi armoured and mechanized brigades operate the M1A2 Abrams as well as a number of older M60A3 main battle tanks. A large fleet of armoured infantry fighting vehicles (AIFV) and armoured personnel carriers (APC) consist of AMX-10p, M-2 Bradley, M-113, M-3 Panhard and some other types in smaller numbers. Combat support is provided by strong components of self-propelled and towed artillery, mortars, multiple rocket launchers, as well as self-propelled and portable anti-tank and air defence sets. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 400-401.

⁹ The principal force of the Navy consist 3 French-build F-3000s class frigates, 4 French-build F-2000 class frigates, 4 US-build Tacoms class corvettes, and is supported by a significant number of patrol boats, mine-sweepers/mine-layers, amphibious ships etc. A. Cordesman, *op.cit.*, p. 333-334; *Military Balance 2013*, p. 401.

¹⁰ The main combat force is represented by F-15 Eagle, Tornado and Typhoon fighters and multi-role fighters, while the transport fleet operates mainly C-130 Hercules aircrafts and some other in smaller numbers. The new contracts of procurement of significant number of aircrafts, including i.a. F-15 Eagle, Typhoon, training aircrafts, MD-530 and UH-60 helicopters, have been signed and will be realized in the coming years. This shows that the Air Force development is one of the highest priorities of Saudi armed forces. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 401-402.

¹¹ This includes the batteries with PAC-2 and upgraded PAC-3 systems, Crotale/Shahine, FIM-92A Avenger, FIM-43 Redeye, MIM-23B I-HAWK, Mistral, as well as anti-aircraft guns and radar systems. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 402.

ous that the land forces, provides internal security and acts as reinforcements to regular forces. It is lightly armed with armoured infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personnel carriers, as well as some self-propelled and towed artillery.

Just the cursory glance on the Saudi Arabia's armed forces military equipment shows, that it was almost entirely purchased abroad, mainly in the United States, the Great Britain and France. Participation of local industry in arming the monarchy's armed forces is minimal, which makes Saudi Arabia fully dependant on foreign deliveries of arms, ammunition, spare parts etc. Aware of that, since a couple of years, the authorities attempt to develop local military industry, mainly by engaging in offset and industrial participation programmes.¹² The offset programmes are aimed not only at developing the capabilities of local military production, but more generally at diversifying the economy, forcing technology transfer or creating new jobs. Despite the efforts however, the success of the policy seems to be so far limited.

The other states of the Western Arab Peninsula, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and United Arab Emirates (UAE), share many common features regarding their military capability and potential. Being much smaller than their big neighbour, the Saudi Arabia, they hold a similar position in the Gulf Cooperation Council, forced to manoeuvre between Saudi protection and hegemony. The authorities of those countries are aware that they would be unable to efficiently defend their territories in case of a large-scale invasion of any of the bigger states of the region. Therefore on the strategic level all of them rely on the protection guaranteed by the United States, which is reaffirmed by the permanent U.S. military installation on their territories and stationing of American troops. On their own side, the smaller Gulf states try to develop their military capabilities in some sectors, concentrating mainly on the air force, air defence and navy.

Of the above mentioned states United Arab Emirates has definitely the most powerful armed forces, with over 51 000 active military personnel. The high national income allowed them to become one of the biggest defence spender in the Arab world¹³. As a results military forces of UAE have an extensive array of high-quality equipment for both their army, navy and air force¹⁴. In the coming

¹² *Military Balance 2013*, p. 369.

¹³ The level of UAE military spending raised sharply after 2008 and, according to SIPRI estimates, reached 19 billion USD in 2011 and 14,3 billion USD in 2012. A. Cordesman, K. Al-Rodhan, *op.cit.*, p. 285-286; *Military expenditure data by country*, SIPRI 2014, <http://portal.sipri.org/publications/pages/expenditures/country-search> (29 VIII 2014).

¹⁴ The armoured and mechanized unites are well armed with French *Leclerc* tanks, many different types of AIFV and APC mainly of French, Russian and Brazilian origin, and are supported by also well equipped artillery, air defence, anti-tank and assault helicopters units. The navy so far has 5 corvettes and a number of smaller patrol and coastal combatants, but purchases planned for the coming years (including at least one frigate and 6 corvettes), will significantly strengthen its capabilities. The air force is armed with F-16 and Mirage 2000

year new procurements are planned, particularly to strengthen the navy and air defence. The major problem they have to face is the constant lack of well qualified personnel to man the equipment. The other issue is the complicated structure of the armed forces. They are united under federal the Union Defence Force, but individual emirates, especially Abu Dhabi and Dubai, retain significant autonomy and control over their own forces. Bahrain has quite well trained and equipped thou very small forces. As the island nation, they invest more in navy and the air force, but as the events of 2011 showed, the kingdom has to rely on the external help to deal with their internal problems¹⁵. Kuwaiti armed forces were reformed and significantly improved since 1990, when the Iraq invaded and sized the without almost any resistance. Still, despite those developments, they are too small (15 500 active personnel and 27 300 in reserve) to secure the country, in case any of the country's more powerful neighbours wish to invade it¹⁶. Thus Kuwait has to rely heavily on the GCC cooperation and the strong contingent of U.S. forces stationing on its territory. Oman retains a capable, well-trained and reliably equipped armed forces, supported by a long history of close cooperation United Kingdom. As in the other Arab Gulf states the armed forces are well founded, which allows them to obtain modern and technologically advanced equipment. The level of training and state of readiness are relatively high in comparison to the other region's states¹⁷. In several respects Qatar differs form the other small Gulf states. Despite sharing an offshore gas formation with Iran, the relations between the two have always been rather good. To the contrary the relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia has a long history of tensions and clashes¹⁸. This fact is resembled in Qatari foreign and security policy, which is more independent from the Saudi Arabia and sometimes even contrary to it. In the recent year Qatar for example actively supported religious Islamic regime in Egypt and radical Sunni Islamic forces in Libya, Syria and Iraq, which Saudi Arabia opposed. The small Qatari armed forces count less then 12 000 soldiers, but have relatively modern equipment, are well-trained and motivate¹⁹.

multirole fighters, transport airplanes and helicopters. And the air defence is in the process of rearming in the modern PAC-3 systems. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 407-408, 414.

¹⁵ The protests of the Shia majority in the country against the ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa royal family were only suppressed after the military intervention of Saudi, Qatari and Emirati troops under auspices of the GCC's Peninsula Shield force. *Saudi Arabia Strikes Back*, „Foreign Policy” [14 III 2011], http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/03/14/saudi_arabia_strikes_back (29 VIII 2014).

¹⁶ The alliance with the United States allowed Kuwait to obtain modern U.S. military equipment, including i.a. M1A2 Abrams tanks, air defence and anti-tank systems, F/A-18 Hornet multirole fighters, AH-64 Apache assault helicopters. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 388-389.

¹⁷ A. Cordesman, *op.cit.*, p. 343-345; *Military Balance 2013*, p. 396-398.

¹⁸ A. Cordesman, *op.cit.*, p. 343-345.

¹⁹ *Military Balance 2013*, p. 399-400.

Iraqi armed forces are now fully engaged in the civil war with the radical Sunni rebels in the north of the country, and thus will not be included into this overview. It is obvious however that the development of the situation in Iraq will greatly influence the military balance in the Gulf region. The success of the rebels form Islamic States might embolden the religious fanatics in other Gulf states and lead to the expansion of the religiously motivated violence on the other states. Should the Iraqi government crush the rebellion, the strengthen Shia dominated authorities might seek the closer cooperation with their Iranian counterparts.

Military potential of Iran

The military and security situation of Iran is much different then its Arab neighbours, as are the threats and problems they have to cope with. Iran remains a major military power in the region of the Gulf with a numerous army and large number of arms. The capabilities of Iranian military are, however severely limited by a number of both internal and external factors.

One of the biggest problems are the international sanctions and embargo, which very strongly limit the possibilities of purchases of new arms as well as spare parts to possessed weapons. As a result, the major part of Iranian military equipment is obsolete and outdated and the serviceability of significant part of the equipment is questionable²⁰. Iranian military still operates many types of arms acquired before Islamic Revolution in the 1970., by the Shah regime, mainly from the United States, Great Britain and France²¹. During Iraqi-Iranian War (1980-1988) and later Iran purchased new weapons mainly form China, Russia, North Korea²². Taught by experience, Iranian leaders aim at developing indigenous capacity military industry,

²⁰ Especially when it comes to the more complex types of military equipment, like main battle tanks or combat aircrafts. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 358, 378-380.

²¹ Of those still in use are among others: main battle tanks M60, M47/48, Chieftain; many types of self-propelled, towed and rocket artillery; most of the bigger surface ships in the navy (corvettes of U.K. *Vosper* class and U.S. *PF-103* class, fast attack crafts of French *Combatante II* class); most of Iranian combat and transport aircrafts (fighters F-5 Tiger, F-4 Phantom, F-7 Airguard, F-14 Tomcat, Mirage F-1, C-130 Hercules etc.); almost all of their attack, multirole and transport helicopters (AH-1 Cobra, Bell 214, Bell-205, Bell-206, Bell-212, Ch-47 Chinook, SH3D Sea King; as well as many types of surface-to-air and air-to-air missiles. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 378-380, A. Cordesman, *op.cit.*, p. 255-278.

²² For example T-72, T-62, T-55 main battle tanks; armoured infantry fighting vehicles and armoured personel carriers (BMP-1, BMP-2, BTR-50/60; many different types of artillery; 3 Russian *Kilo* class submarines and many smaller ships and boats; anti-tank weapons (AT-3 Sagger, AT-4 Spigot, AT-5 Spandrel; air defense (SA-2 Guideline, SA-5 Gammon, SA-7 Grail, SA-14 Gremlin, SA-15 Gauntlet, SA-22 Greyhound, SA-24 Grinch); some combat and transport aircrafts (MiG-29, Su-24, Su-25, Il-76, An74, An-140; many different missiles types. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 378-380, A. Cordesman, *op.cit.*, p. 255-278.

which would be able to equip the military and make it independent of foreign assistance and support. Despite the efforts to expand its defence industries, Iran's success to minimise its reliance on foreign suppliers is so far limited. They seem to be able to „(...) produce domestically a variety of light weapons, military vehicles, anti-tank and anti-ship missiles, heavy artillery rockets, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, drones and UAVs, and light tanks and small naval vessels (...)” but are „(...) unable to manufacture advanced weaponry such as advanced fighter jets and heavy armour”²³. Most of the indigenous military production is based on acquired licences or is a result of the development and modernization of older equipment²⁴. Iran apparently lacks the ability develop their own, original weapons which would meet the requirements of the modern battlefield.

Other factor greatly influencing the potential and capabilities of Iranian military is the level of its financing. Overall Iranian military expenditures are rather low in comparison to its Arab counterparts, both in terms of total spending as well as a percent of GDP. In the recent years military expenditures consist slightly over 2% of Iranian GDP and they totalled some 12 billion USD in 2011. Although in 2012 president Mahmud Ahmadinejad announced the increase of the Iranian military budget of 127%, but it soon turned out, that the rise was rather a result reclassification of some expanses than the allocation of new resources to the defence²⁵. Thus one may assume, that the real level of Iranian military spending remained the same. This relatively low level of military spending is first and foremost the result of the overall difficult economic situation of Iran. On the other hand it also shows that Iran manages its resources reasonably and does not spend on military purposes more money than they actually can afford – a rather rare virtue in the Gulf region²⁶. This data show, that the level of militarization of Iran is not as high as their Arab counterparts and the concerns related to the threat Iran may pose to the security of the Middle East, expressed by some politicians and experts, are exaggerated.

The structure and organization of the armed forces is the next factor influencing its battle value. Iranian military personnel is numerous in comparison to other

²³ *Military Balance 2013*, p. 358.

²⁴ Like the Iranian tank *Zulfiqar* based on components of M60 and T-72 tanks, anti-tank and anti-ship missiles based on Western and Russian systems, medium-range ballistic missiles *Shahab-3* and *Safir* being a developed variant of North Korean *No-Dong* missiles, etc. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 358-363.

²⁵ The new defence budget included social-security expenses and Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps construction projects, which totalled more than 50% of the new 24 bn USD of military spending. Military expenditure, Iran, World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS/countries/IR?display=graph> (8 VIII 2014); *Military Balance 2013*, p. 359.

²⁶ Even including all the new expenditures the military budget would still totalled slightly over 4% of Iranian GDP – one of the lowest values among the Gulf states. *Ibidem*.

Gulf states, reaching 523 000 in 2013, and is divided on regular Army (Artesh) with 350 000 soldiers, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corpse (IRGC) with 125 000, Navy with 18 000, Airforce with 30 000 and Paramilitary units of some 40 000 people. The overall level of training and military effectiveness is diverse in individual units and forces, but is believed to be rather limited especially among the 18-month conscripts, who constitute some 220 000 of the regular Army's serviceman²⁷. According to Iranian constitution all the armed forces remain under the command of the Supreme Leader, but at the same time they are highly politicized and strongly divided. The main split runs between the IRGC and the Artesh, with the first being not only a military force, but also a major political and economic actor. IRGC has been created after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and since then plays a role of „Praetorian Guard” of the Islamic regime, greatly expanding its power and influences²⁸. IRGC controls land forces of some 125 000 men, most of them lightly armed and equipped. Their main tasks concentrate on internal security as well as covert operations and asymmetric warfare. In case of mobilization however they take control over all paramilitary forces including the Basiji corps.

The Artesh, to the contrary, is far less political and ideological than the IRGC, being at the same time marginalized in terms of its access to the funding, recruitment or equipment. The rivalry between the two main branches of the military inevitably strengthens the regime, but undoubtedly weakens the defensive potential of the country. The same situation can be observed in the naval forces, where, since 2007, the IRGC naval component (IRGCN) has a sole responsibility for the defence of the Persian Gulf, while the regular navy (Islamic Republic of Iran Navy – IRIN) is responsible for the Caspian Sea and the open seas operations, outside the Strait of Hormus²⁹. The Iranian Air Force operates quite a substantial fleet of aircrafts, although their serviceability is very low due to obsolescence and lack of spare parts. IRGC Air Force is on the other hand responsible for the Iranian strategic missile forces, including its tactical middle- and short-range ballistic missiles.

Despite the aforementioned numerous problems Iran remains the major regional power in the Gulf region. Their conventional armed forces, despite obsolete and inefficient equipment and poor level of training of majority of the soldiers,

²⁷ A. Cordesman, K. Al-Rodhan, *op.cit.*, p. 322-323.

²⁸ Many former members of IRGC hold positions of power in government and industry and a number of senior officers have close ties to the most important Shia clerics. The IRGC dependent companies control large part of Iranian oil, energy, construction, media and communication sectors. A. Cordesman, M. Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities. The Threat in the Northern Gulf*, London 2007, p. 73-74.

²⁹ The IRIN operates all the Iranian major ships including submarines, corvettes, large patrol boats, mine warfare etc. The IRGCN operates mostly small ships and boats designed for asymmetric warfare. *Military Balance 2013*, p. 361, A. Cordesman, K. Al-Rodhan, *op.cit.*, p. 337.

still represent a significant strength, able to face each of their neighbours. Since the U.S. led invasion on Iraq in 2003, the Iranian leadership is aware, that their forces would be no match for the United States, if there was such a confrontation. The Iranians developed a different strategy, which aims at deterring a potential U.S. invasion. Ever since Iran develops all means of asymmetric warfare, including commando and special forces units, midget submarines, small vessels with anti-ship missiles, drones and other UAVs, surface-to-surface missiles, portable anti-aircraft and anti-tank weapons etc.³⁰ All those kinds of units and equipment, relatively cheap in production and to maintain, suppose to fill up the technological gap, and make a potential attack not worthy the risk and costs. Iran is also accused by the U.S., Israel and Arab Gulf states of ambitions to obtain the nuclear weapon, which is a subject of a hot debate since a couple of year. Iranian authorities claim consistently that all the uranium enrichment and other nuclear research works have only civilian purposes³¹. Whatever the true purpose this nuclear program is, one have to admit that, considering Iran strategic, political and economic situation, obtaining a nuclear weapon would greatly benefited the state's security. It would give Iran a strategic advantage, they would not be able to achieve otherwise, especially by developing only their conventional military forces.

Foreign forces in the Gulf

U.S. military presence in the Gulf should be considered a decisive factor in the military balance of the region. For the United States maintaining the armed forces in the Gulf region is a part of the broader security strategy and a tool to realize the national interests. The key American interest in the Gulf region are to ensure undisturbed supply of oil, secure the interests of U.S. oil industry and to ensure the safety of the states of Israel on the southern flank. The other important American interest in the Gulf are the external security and internal stability of their allies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain), ensure the safety of U.S. citizens and their property, guarantee the freedom of shipping on the important shipping lanes, assure the free trade and access to the local markets for the American producers, and finally to maintain the system of alliances created in the last decades of the XX century.

The military presence is the surest way to realize the priorities of U.S. foreign politics in the region, as it reassures and protects the allies as well as deters the

³⁰ A. Cordesman, K. Al-Rodhan, *op.cit.*, p. 417.

³¹ For more details on Uranian nuclear program see: K. Barzegar, *Iran's Nuclear Program*, [in:] *The Nuclear question in the Middle East*, M. Kamrava (ed.), London 2012, p. 225-264; A. Cordesman, M. Kleiber, *op.cit.*, p. 169-194.

enemies. The military presence takes the two main forms: the permanent military installation and temporary stationing forces. The military installation may take the form of the main bases of U.S. armed forces (usually ports and airfields), the transportation and logistic bases (with small permanent staff, but ready to be used when needed, special bases (radar stations, medical centres etc.) and so called Army Pre-positioned Stocks – APS (depots of combat and support equipment, dedicated to the predefined unit, ready to be used right after its arrival.

Almost all the important U.S. military bases in the Middle East are located in the Gulf region. Bahrain hosts the biggest American naval base in the region, with the U.S. 5th Fleet which stations there, and is the headquarter of U.S. Navy Forces Central Command³². The 5th Fleet commands all the U.S. Navy Forces present on its area of responsibility. In practice it means that the fleet has at its disposal at least one Carrier Strike Group (CSG) and a few smaller groups of ships³³.

Equally important are the American bases in Qatar, with two important headquarters: forward headquarter of U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) and forward headquarter of U.S. Air Force Central Command (USAFCENT)³⁴. Additionally in the Qatari Al-Udeid Air Base stations 379th Expeditionary Air Wing³⁵ and Camp as-Salijah is a big APS base, with part of the APS-5 equipment for the units of U.S. 3rd Army. The other part of the APS-5 equipment is located in a huge base Camp Arfijan in Kuwait³⁶. The other American military installations in Kuwait include Army bases (Camp Buehring, „K” Crossing, Camp Virginia), two Air Force bases Ali as-Salam and Ahmad al-Jabar³⁷, and part of the Kuwaiti naval base Sheik Muhammad Nasir al-Ahmad (Camp Patriot in U.S. terminology). After withdrawal of American soldiers from Iraq in 2011, most of the U.S. Army

³² *U.S. 5th Fleet, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Task Forces*, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/taskforces.html> (28 VIII 2014).

³³ A standard CSG consist of one *Nimitz*-class aircraft carrier, one or two *Ticonderoga*-class cruiser, destroyer squadron (two or three *Arleigh Bruke*-class destroyers and *Oliver Hazard Perry*-class frigates), sometimes one or two *Los Angeles*-class submarines and a number of logistic and support ships. *U.S. 5th Fleet, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command Task Forces...*

³⁴ U.S. Central Command is responsible for all the military operation in the area of Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kirgizstan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, United Arab Emirates, Uzbekistan and Yemen. *About U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM)*, <http://www.centcom.mil/about-u-s-central-command-centcom> (28 VIII 2014).

³⁵ 379th Expeditionary Air Wing is armed with *B1B* strategic bombers and transport airplanes *C-130 Hercules* and *C-17 Globemaster*. *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *ASG-Qatar Fact Sheet, US Army Central*, <http://www.arcent.army.mil/about-us/fact-sheets/asg-qatar> (28 VIII 2014).

³⁷ 386th Expeditionary Air Wing with transport *C-130 Hercules* likely 332nd Expeditionary Operations Group with *F-16 Fighting Falcon*, *A-10 Thunderbolt* and *MQ-1 Predator* drones station there. *332nd Expeditionary Operations Group, Globalsecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usaf/332aeg.htm> (29 VIII 2014).

land force in the Middle East are now located in Kuwait, because of its strategic location between Iraq and Iran as well as because of the rising instability in Iraq³⁸.

Significant U.S. forces are also held in UAE, especially 380th Expeditionary Air Wing in Al-Dharfa air base³⁹ and some support naval forces of the 5th Fleet in Fujaira naval base and in Jabal Ali port in Dubai. Smaller U.S. Air Force bases are also located in Masira and Tumrait in Oman and in Eskan Village in Saudi Arabia. Additionally small units of the British Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy are held in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar, while Abu Dhabi in UAE holds a few French naval, air and land bases, and Australia maintains some air and land forces in Al-Minhad base near Dubai (UAE)⁴⁰.

The exact number of U.S. soldiers in the Gulf region is not known, as next to the permanent personnel of the bases, listed in official documents, thousands of troops stations there temporary and their location is specified as „unknown” or „classified”⁴¹. The overall number of American forces in the Gulf might range between 30 to 50 thousand troops, fully equipped and ready to act. Their real military power is much bigger than the one of the local armies, because their superior equipment, much better training, advance battle management capabilities and ability to call on vast reinforcements.

Conclusions

Traditionally the military balance in the Gulf has been determined by a set of factors, which include the rivalry between the Arabs and Persians as well as between Sunni and Shia Muslims. This however did not lead to any substantial conflict since the end of Iraqi-Iranian War in the 1980. More recently it seems that the crucial elements are rather twofold. First it is rising Sunni Muslim radicalism, which takes more and more violent forms, destabilizes other Middle Eastern countries (so far Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen) and unopposed might finally endanger also rather stable so far Arab Gulf states. Second crucial element is the overwhelming

³⁸ Over 23 000 soldiers, including heavy armored and airborne units, air defense etc. *Military Bases in Kuwait*, *Militarybases.com*, <http://militarybases.com/overseas/kuwait/> (29 VIII 2014); *Military Balance 2013*, p. 373-409.

³⁹ The wing has is responsible for reconnaissance, surveillance, early warning, electronic warfare and other support operation. It is equipped with RQ-4 UAV, KC-10 *Extender* and KC-135 *Stratotanker* airborne tankers and E-3 Sentry (AWACS) airborne early warning and control centers. *380th Air Expeditionary Wing*, *Globalsecurity.org*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/usaf/380aew.htm> (29 VIII 2014).

⁴⁰ *Military Balance 2013*, p. 373-409.

⁴¹ *Total Military Personnel and Dependent End Strength By Service, Regional Area, and Country, United States Department of Defense* [31 XII 2012], http://siadapp.dmdc.osd.mil/personnel/MILITARY/history/SIAD_309_Report_P1212.xlsx (29 VIII 2014).

military presence of the United States which threat these region as their exclusive area of influence and will, as two Gulf War in 1990-1991 and 2003 showed, decisively intervene to secure their interests.

Jarosław Jarząbek – dr nauk humanistycznych w zakresie nauk o polityce, adiunkt w Zakładzie Badań Wschodnich w Instytucie Studiów Międzynarodowych Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego