A photograph of an offshore oil rig at sunset. The sky is a gradient from dark blue at the top to orange and yellow near the horizon. The silhouette of the complex metal structure of the oil rig is visible against the bright sky. The ocean in the foreground has small, choppy waves.

Despite enjoying the strategic advantages that come with their location, Arabian Gulf countries are subject to enormous maritime security challenges due to power imbalances in the regional security equation.

Strategies of Gulf countries for Confronting Maritime Security Threats

A View from the Region

Dr. Ashraf Mohammed Kishk

The American Navy officer Alfred Mahan underlined three important elements that speak to the impact of naval power on the strength of countries: first, fleets and vessels are more efficient and stronger than land forces. Second, the cost of maritime transportation is less than other forms of transport. Finally, the countries that want to be influential in the world must possess a naval force.

Despite enjoying the strategic advantages that come with their location, Arabian Gulf countries are subject to enormous maritime security challenges due to power imbalances in the regional security equation. To this end, small countries' defense options include engaging in defense alliances and building self-security, or the ability to achieve national security without relying on external forces. While self-security can include armament or other forms of protection, it remains contingent on countries' material capabilities and population size. Furthermore, they are unable to arm themselves to an endless level.¹

Within this framework, maritime security disputes in the Gulf region increased through 2019, with attacks on oil tankers off the coast of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the Gulf of Oman. These attacks have been perceived as huge threats, fueling fears that they could turn into a "tanker war," such as the one in the Iraq-Iran War where 411 ships, including 239 oil tankers, were attacked by Iran. These attacks involved drowned forces as well as irreparable damages to the ships and tankers.²

Fears of another "tanker war" are also informed by the fact that these recent attacks occurred near the Strait of Hormuz, an important point for transportation of oil exports for countries in the region. According to the American Energy Information Administration, about 18.5 million barrels of oil are transported via the strait. This includes a combined total of fifteen million barrels of oil per day from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Iraq, and Iran,³ which account for one-third of world daily maritime transport of crude oil and oil derivatives.

Additional challenges include the ongoing crisis in Yemen and threats by the Houthis to maritime security in the Bab al-Mandab strait. There have been numerous incidents in this regard, most notably the attack by the Houthis on two Saudi oil tankers carrying two million barrels of crude oil in July 2018. In response, Saudi Arabia suspended transport of oil shipments.⁴

Attacks on the oil sector have caused ongoing conflicts in the

Arabian Gulf to escalate to an unacceptable level, as oil is a major source of national income in the Gulf countries and is vital to Western economies. Consequently, in July 2019, the United States formed the Bahrain-based Maritime Military Coalition for Security and Protection of Navigation in the Arabian Gulf. Active since November 2019, the Coalition aims to protect maritime navigation in the Arabian Gulf. The Coalition includes Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, as well as the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Albania. Thus far, the United States has provided "command-and-control" ships, and other member states are offering patrol vessels to liaise between the command ships. In addition, France formed the UAE-based European-led Mission for Monitoring Navigation in the Arabian Gulf late last year, whose mission is to defend the waters of the regional Gulf states. Eight European countries have joined this mission.

The two most important Gulf-led efforts to develop the maritime security sector and defend the waters of the regional Gulf states are the Bahrain-based Joint Maritime Coordination Center for the Gulf Countries, which was founded in 2013, and the Peninsula Shield Force, a joint military force formed by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The Gulf countries have also been keen to develop their maritime capabilities in order to conduct maritime patrols in their exclusive economic areas that extend up to 200 km. While there are no exact figures available, naval drills and exercises in the Gulf increased in 2018 and 2019. One drill, conducted in Saudi Arabian waters, was markedly similar to NATO's naval exercises.

Gulf countries are also seeking to expand their presence in the Horn of Africa. To date, this includes the UAE setting up a military base in Djibouti, and Saudi Arabia's efforts to do the same. The UAE and Saudi Arabia have also formed security agreements with Somalia and Eritrea, respectively. The UAE will develop Somalia's Berbera port for thirty years in order to eventually become an Emirati military base, and Saudi Arabia will fund the establishment of an international airport in Mogadishu and build military bases for the Eritrean military.

Another effort in this respect was Saudi Arabia's initiative to set up the Council of Red Sea and Gulf of Aden Arab and African Countries in January 2020. This council comprises eight member states: Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Sudan, Djibouti, Yemen, Somalia, and Eritrea. The Council will be based in the Saudi Arabian capital of Riyadh and seeks to strengthen cooperation between these countries in all areas, including maritime security in the Red Sea and the Gulf of



Arabian Gulf. Oiler USNS Lenthall refuels tanker Maersk Peary. (Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Joshua Scott / Public Domain)

Aden.⁵

There have been significant responses from the Arabian Gulf and the international community in order to confront maritime security threats, which are regarded as the core of security of the Arabian Gulf. Nonetheless, have these mechanisms been sufficient?

To answer this question, five points are noteworthy:

First, analyzing regional-level security interactions between states leads to a conclusion that conflicts are taking place between three types of powers. They include the "interference powers," namely all the international powers that have strategic interests in the Arab Gulf region. The second type involves "adversary powers," such as Iraq in the past, and currently Iran. The final type is comprised of the "balance powers," namely Gulf countries. Therefore, development of self-security of the Gulf countries, including maritime security, is a necessary requirement to achieving a power balance. There are important indicators in this regard. For example, there have been moves by the Gulf countries to purchase high-speed marine naval weapons. Saudi Arabia got the first two French-made speedboats in July 2019 as part of a 39-boat manufacturing deal conducted between the Kingdom and the French company CMN. Under this deal, 18 boats are to be manufactured in Saudi Arabia. These speedboats, which were specially designed to safeguard coasts, are characterized with an unprecedented speed, reaching 50 nautical miles (about 93 km) per hour.⁶

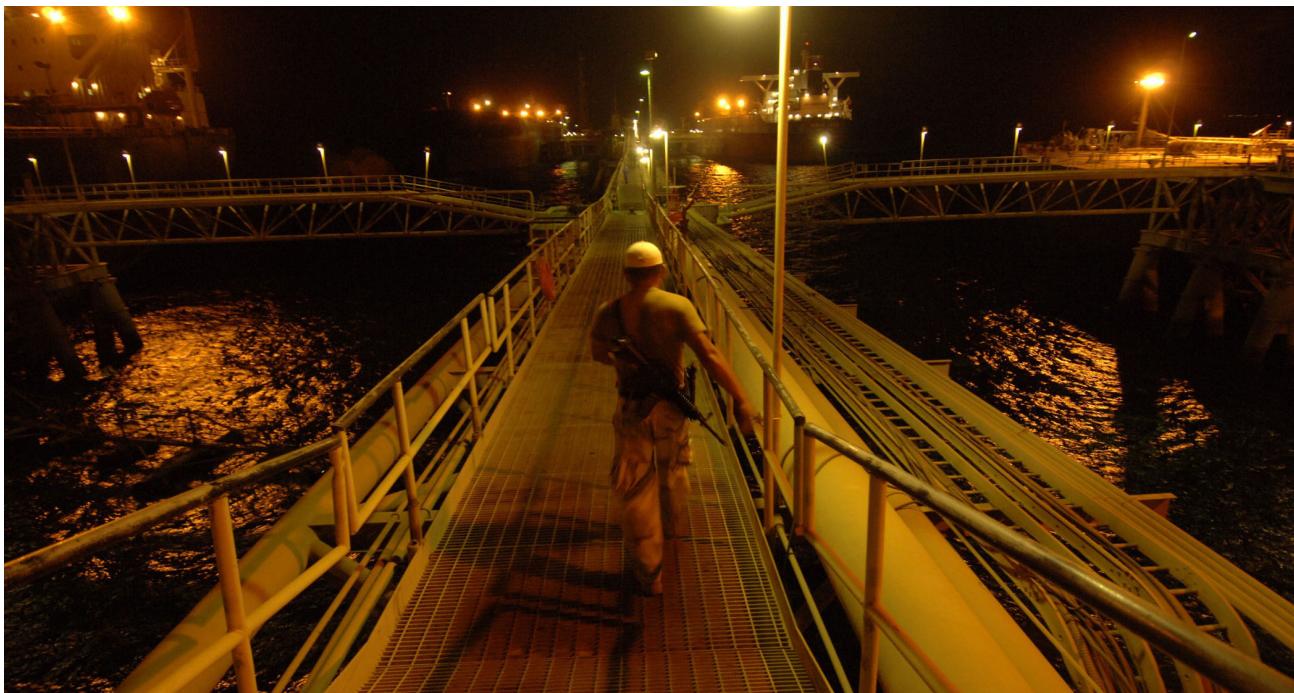
Second, safeguarding maritime security is contingent on Gulf

countries' capability to use modern technology to confront threats. Most notable among these technologies are applications of artificial intelligence, with which ships can be aerially photographed to check whether they carry prohibited materials and terrorist groups. Making use of modern technology to confront threats to maritime security is presently the biggest challenge for the Gulf countries.⁷

Third, current international partnerships to confront threats to maritime security are important. Nonetheless, other powers have vital interests in the Arabian Gulf region and can play a role in confronting threats to maritime security. These powers include India, which imports about 58 percent of its oil and 88 percent of its natural gas from the Middle East. In addition, some 7.3 million Indian nationals work in the Arabian Gulf region, an important source of Indian national income.⁸

Fourth, maintaining maritime security is closely influenced by developments of current regional conflicts, as ending regional crises means achieving maritime security. It is noteworthy that Iran has been seeking to disrupt navigation routes in both the Strait of Hormuz in the north and Bab al-Mandab Strait in the south, effectively heightening tensions with the United States and exhausting Arabian Gulf countries' defense and security capabilities.

Fifth, international partnerships are important. Coordination among Gulf countries, and with other key countries in the region, especially Egypt, is key to achieving regional and maritime security. On January 15, 2020, Egypt inaugurated the largest military base on the Red Sea coast, near the southern



Iraq. A security guard patrols a walkway by the Arabian Gulf. (David Mark / Public Domain)

Egyptian border and to the east of Aswan, a southern Egyptian city. This base includes: an air base and a maritime base, a military hospital, a number of combat and administrative units, and fields for shooting and training all weapon types. There is also a trade dockside, a passenger station, and multi-purpose quays for storing general goods and containers. It also includes the Bernese International Airport and a seawater desalination plant. The spokesperson of Egypt's Presidency described this base as having "a military land, sea, and air striking power." He justified setting up such a base to "current regional and international changes." This means that securitizing the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf region are integral parts of Egyptian national security.⁹

To conclude, the maritime security threats in the Arabian Gulf region have led to the introduction of Gulf and international mechanisms to confront them. Such threats have also heightened regional and international rivalry and conflict within the larger security picture of the Arabian Gulf.

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Dr. Ashraf Mohammed Kishk

Dr. Ashraf Mohammed Kishk is the Director of the Strategic and International Studies Program and Managing Editor of Derasat (Studies) Journal at the Bahrain Center for Strategic, International and Energy Studies.