

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نیاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

http://www.fpif.org/articles/iran_outgunned_in_the_gulf

Iran: Outgunned in the Gulf

By Rex Wingerter,

February 16, 2012

Iran has threatened to close the Straits of Hormuz – a “choke point” in the Persian Gulf through which about **20 percent** of the world’s oil passes - if the West **imposes sanctions against Iran's petroleum** exports. This threat is not without historic parallel. In 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and launched its war against the United States after Washington blockaded oil shipments to Tokyo. Japan relied on 80 percent of its oil from the United States; oil sales make up **80 percent** of Iran's exports. A complete oil embargo on Iran, just as it would have done to Imperial Japan, would result in economic calamity.

Like all historic analogies, this one is imperfect: President Roosevelt’s oil embargo was not without cause as Imperial Japan had invaded Manchuria and was ravaging the rest of China and Indochina. In contrast, Iran has invaded no country and exhibits no intent to do so. Western concern instead rests on the speculation that Iran’s nuclear program could result in the development of a nuclear weapon and conjecture that once so armed, Iran would intimidate neighboring states into subservience and achieve hegemony in the Persian Gulf at the expense of the West.

Another departure from the analogy is that Imperial Japan appeared to have sufficient military might and a geostrategic advantage to take on the United States. The Islamic Republic, in contrast, is so militarily disadvantaged compared to its opponents as to make its threat to close the entrance to the Persian Gulf almost farcical.

Outgunned in the Gulf

In nearly every measurement of military power, Iran is overshadowed by the firepower of the neighboring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a six-member organization consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). While never saying so, the six monarchies created the coalition in 1981 to fend off the destabilizing political aftershocks sparked by Iran's 1979 revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Its members are Arab and predominately Sunni (except in Bahrain where the ruling elite are Sunni but nearly 70 percent of the population is Shiite); Iran in contrast is Persian and majority Shiite. The impending membership of the monarchies of [Jordan](#) and [Morocco](#) reinforces the conservative nature of the GCC. Assuring the longevity of the royal families rather than establishing regional cooperation is the organization's reason for being. [Yemen](#), another non-Gulf Arab state, is seeking GCC membership.

Iran surpasses the GCC in one important military metric: the number of military troops. According to the Israel-based [Institute for National Security Studies](#), Iran has nearly twice as many armed personnel than does the GCC states - 520,000 uniformed service members against a GCC force of less than 350,000 – with Saudi Arabia accounting for 60 percent of the total. Iran also has twice as many men between the ages 18 and 49 available for military service, according to the [CIA World Fact Book](#). But as the U.S. wars against Afghanistan and Iraq demonstrated, modern day military victories are decided not by the size of armies but by how quickly and forcibly a country can project its sophisticated munitions against a rival. And in this latter category, Iran suffers distinct weaknesses.

According to [Iran and the Gulf Military Balance](#), published by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), the GCC (including Yemen) surpasses Iran in nearly every type of conventional weapon. In many cases, the Arab/Sunni coalition possesses two or three times the number of key armaments than does Iran, as shown in the below table:

	Fixed Wing Combat Aircraft	Attack Helicopters	Main Battle Tanks & APC	Anti-ship & Anti-submarine Helicopters	Warships with Anti-ship missiles	Major and Small Naval Ships
GCC & Yemen	773	271	9,342	150	58	571
Iran	339	83	2,978	63	60	965

Source: *Iran and the Gulf Military Balance* (CSIS, December, 2011)

Iran similarly falls short in the crucial arena of air superiority, where control of the skies often means victory on the ground. The CSIS study calculates that in the category of “modern” warplanes, Iran’s 190-plane air force confronts a GCC air force of 576 planes. But Iran is far worse off than the numbers suggest: a decades-old Western-led arms embargo on Iran has made it nearly impossible for the Islamic Republic to purchase modern warplanes or advanced weapons technology. The most sophisticated aircraft in Iran’s inventory includes out-of-date Russian MiGs and U.S.-made F-4s and F-14s bought before the 1979 revolution. It also acquired in 1991 some French-made combat aircraft that Iraqi pilots flew into Iran while escaping U.S. warplanes. But the reliability of those planes is questionable because, as [one military analyst](#) put it, the “Iranians have extraordinary difficulty sustaining their military equipment due to a lack of spare parts and trained mechanics.” The CSIS report noted that the embargo has prevented Iran from acquiring “large numbers of modern armor, combat aircraft, longer-range surface-to-air missiles, or major combat ships.” The consequence, concluded CSIS, is that “much of [Iran’s] conventional military force is obsolescent or is equipped with less capable types of weapons.”

Comparative Military Budgets

That the GCC spends twice as much on its military establishment than does Iran further underscores the imbalance between Iran and the Arab Gulf states. The Stockholm International

Peace Research Institute [calculates](#) that over the past decade, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE, have devoted about 7 percent of their GDP to military expenditures while Iran's expenditures have averaged just less than 3 percent of its GDP. In terms of actual, overall military spending since 2000, the three states have averaged about \$16 billion a year against Iran's expenditures of about \$8 billion.

Benefiting from high oil revenues and unencumbered by an arms embargo, the GCC has purchased some of the most advanced weaponry money can buy and most of it is from the United States. According to the [Congressional Research Service](#), from 2003 through 2010, U.S. arms sales agreements with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE totaled \$31.9 billion. Nearly \$25 billion of that sum was transferred between 2007 and 2010.

At the end of 2011, weapons sales to the Arab Gulf states hit newfound heights with the announcement that Washington would be selling to Saudi Arabia [\\$60 billion](#) in arms over the next decade. The sales included 84 new F-15 fighter jets and upgrades to 70 of Saudi Arabia's existing F-15 inventory. The warplanes, according to the [U.S. Department of State](#), would be the "most sophisticated and capable aircraft in the world," equipped with satellite-guided "smart bombs", anti-ship missiles, and anti-ground-based radar and missile missiles. The package includes over 170 helicopters. Agreements in 2011 were also reached with the UAE for a \$3.5 billion advance missile defense system and possibly 600 "bunker buster" bombs and other munitions; Oman for 18 F-16 fighter jets and other items worth \$3.6 billion; Kuwait for a \$900 million advanced missile defense system; and Iraq for nearly \$5 billion for 18 F-16 fighter jets.

The U.S. Gorilla

The 800-pound gorilla in the Gulf is the presence of U.S. military forces. Bahrain is the headquarters of the U.S. Fifth Fleet's carrier strike group (CSG), which currently includes the largest warship in the world, the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln, hosting about 80 warplanes and supported by an armada of five to nine ships, including guided missile cruisers, destroyers, frigates, and attack submarines. The U.S. Sixth Fleet's CSG sitting in the Mediterranean Sea is poised to intervene in the Gulf, as it did during the Iraqwar. B-1 bombers [are stationed](#) in Oman, along with a storehouse of U.S. munitions. Kuwait is an important refueling depot for U.S. aircraft as well as a perch from which reconnaissance planes operate. U.S. Defense [Secretary Panetta](#) said in November that nearly 29,000 U.S. troops are in Kuwait,

in addition to over 17,000 more in the Gulf states. Complementing U.S. forces are warships and ground troops from France, Britain, and Canada. The cumulative result is that perhaps the greatest concentration of conventional military firepower on the planet is located in or near the Gulf, most of it U.S.-owned or controlled, and potentially aimed at Iran.

In the face of such overwhelming military might, claims that Iran poses a military threat to its neighbors fall flat. The Islamic Republic lacks a credible, offensive military capability and, despite its large ground army, cannot take and hold foreign territory for any meaningful period of time. Superior U.S. and GCC air power would quickly dispatch any invading ground vehicles, as Saddam Hussein's [army discovered](#) after it invaded Kuwait. Iran's leadership is [rational](#) and is not going to commit suicide by launching an attack that it knows it cannot win.

But Iran is not without means to inflict injury on its opponents. The U.S. Institute for Peace [points out](#) that Iran's military is configured in a defensive posture, tailored "specifically to counter the perceived U.S. threat." The CSIS report warned that Iran has sought to bridge the gap in its conventional capability by "developing a strong asymmetric capacity that focuses on the use of smart munitions, light attack craft, mines, swarm tactics, and missile barrages to counteract U.S. naval power." That strategy may be succeeding. In 2002, the Pentagon conducted [a war game](#) where large numbers of small Iranian speedboats attacked American ships in the Gulf with machineguns and rockets. In the simulation, the U.S. Navy lost 16 warships, including an aircraft carrier, cruisers, and amphibious vessels in battles that lasted 5-10 minutes. Since that war game, Iran has only improved and expanded its asymmetric capabilities.

And that is Iran's real threat to the United States— its capability to inflict painful retaliatory strikes. As the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments recognized in a [January 2012 report](#), Iran is seeking to "make traditional U.S. power-projection operations in the Persian Gulf possible only at a prohibitive cost." Iran's asymmetric strategy is denying the United States the freedom of low-cost military intervention.

Iran's rulers could make a pre-emptive strike if they thought their enemies were on the verge of toppling them from power, either through a suffocating economic embargo or incessant covert attacks. Such conduct would be extraordinary dangerous, as it could spiral out of control and lead to a devastating general war in the Gulf with enormous regional and international consequences. But it would not be irrational for Islamic Republic to make a futile attempt to

close the Straits of Hormuz if it sends a strong signal to the West that Iran is willing to risk it all to preserve the regime.

Imperial Japan stands again as an imperfect history analogy. When its leaders were mulling over the option to attack Pearl Harbor, Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto dissented, warning that the United States would retaliate with a vengeance to defeat Japan. But when the Imperial command decided to attack, it was Admiral Yamamoto who drew up the plans to bomb Pearl Harbor. Iran's ruling Mullahs may similarly calculate that the risk of a wider conflict is worth the price of deterring a slow but sure death by economic strangulation. As Mark Twain put it, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."