

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Egypt: a regional superpower again

The Gulf countries need to find new military defense options, in the face of Washington's appeasement-motivated "low profile."

The visit of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, beginning Jan. 9, opens a new chapter for the whole region. The tour was in the making since the decision at the last Arab Summit in Amman on Nov. 15, that individual Arab League members could restore diplomatic ties with Cairo, severed since 1979. Except for Libya, Syria, and a few other countries, including Tunisia, most members have sent their ambassadors back to the Egyptian capital. But it was only at the end of the Gulf Cooperation Council meeting in Riyadh, on Dec. 30, that an official invitation was given to Mubarak.

This GCC step is in sharp contrast to the other resolutions, which have been characterized as either "too mild" or frustrating, when it came to defining Iran's role in the Gulf war. Officially, this was blamed on Oman and the United Arab Emirates, alleged to have pushed a softer approach toward Iran, because of trade links. Actually, local observers reported that the olive branch to Iran was pushed by Syria's Hafez al Assad, represented at the summit by his foreign minister, Farouk al Sharah, and by Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah. Iran's ally, Syria, was appointed as a mediator.

The GCC countries know that only Egypt could be in a position to defend them in case of war with Iran, as Pakistani troops are being withdrawn from Saudi Arabia, and other parts of the region, at the end of their contract. Reportedly, some 10,000 Egyptian troops are already stationed in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait.

Mubarak's visit will follow by only a few days the visit of U.S. Defense Secretary Frank Carlucci, who will outline Washington's policy of displaying a "lower profile," a codeword for a smooth withdrawal from the region. The first step came on Dec. 29, when the State Department announced it was seriously pondering Moscow's proposal for an international peacekeeping naval task force, stating that it would be in addition to the U.S. presence. A second step would be for such a task force to be sent in, and the U.S. force withdrawn. With bargaining with Moscow under way, the United States is not expected to intervene to defend the Gulf countries or their shipping.

Hence, GCC countries are betting on Egypt to play a much wider role. A crucial project discussed during the visit of the Egyptian defense minister, Marshal Abu Ghazala, to Kuwait in mid-December, is reactivating the Organization of Arab Industries (OAI), created in Cairo before Camp David. Originally set up between Egypt and other members of the Arab League, with primary funding from the Gulf, the OAI was to become a major regional arms production center. After Camp David, Arab financing stopped, and the OAI was dropped for some time, then reactivated as purely Egyptian. It has since led Egypt into several military ventures, notably with Argentina, for the production of a battle-field missile, the Condor II, an updated version of the Soviet-made Scud-B medium-range missile, with North Korea, and several ventures with Turkey's military industries.

A several-year plan for investing up to \$20 billion is being discussed to reactivate the OAI in its original purpose. Already on the table would be credits amounting to \$4.5 billion, to help Egypt repay its military debt to the United States, in exchange for a broader military presence and technical assistance in the Gulf.

Coherent with Washington's desire to disengage from the Gulf, U.S. administration officials have indicated that they might be ready to supply part of the military technology, if Riyadh will finance the deal. From the cynical election-year standpoint, that U.S. public opinion will be less affected if Egyptians die instead of Marines, they are also encouraging Egypt to get more involved in the region generally.

Such promises are not easily believed. The delivery of Stinger missiles to Bahrain was approved by the Senate, after harsh conditions were imposed and the administration committed itself not to propose any more Stinger sales in the region. In late November, Richard Armitage promised that there would be no more military sales to Jordan. In December, the Saudis were told that their offer to buy F-15 advanced jetfighters was rejected and that they had to accept 60 of the old F-15 version.

Large Gulf investments are being channeled into French military industry for the production of a French version of the Stinger, the ground-to-air Mistral missile. These investments are part of a package which includes closer bilateral military cooperation between France and Egypt. Egypt plays a significant role in supporting Chad's government against Libya. Because of the close relations recently developed between their two armies, Turkey is also expected to play an important role in the framework of Egypt's cooperation with France in the Gulf.