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The Rise of Arab Air Power

After decades of irrelevance, are the air forces of the Arab world on the mend? Florence Gaub has no doubts. The strategic threat posed by Iran has prompted a number of Arab states to overhaul and expand their air arms.

By Florence Gaub for ISN

When pictures of Mariam Al Mansouri – the first female fighter pilot in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) – traveled around the world in September, it symbolized the changing role of women in the Arab world and the collective fight against the Islamic state. But it also captured a new military phenomenon: after decades of strategic irrelevance, Arab air power is on the rise. In 2014, as Syria, Egypt, and Libya face strategic challenges for which their traditionally large air forces appear to be ill-suited, Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar have significantly expanded their aerial capabilities, largely as a means of balancing against Iran. Although building up air power makes sense, especially for small states like Qatar and the UAE, their task is now to ensure that it is deployed in tandem with other tools, rather than becoming a substitute for a broader strategy.

A new balance of power in the air

Until recently, Arab air forces played no role in the strategic landscape of the Middle East. Although Egypt and Syria had numerically strong fleets, neither had seen combat in three decades. Famously, both air forces were destroyed within a few hours by Israel during the Six Day War in 1967. Egypt, which was the strongest Arab air power at the time, lost 338 aircraft, most of which did not even have time to take off. Although both forces had recovered somewhat by 1973, air power was not decisive in retaking the Sinai (although one successful air battle, led by Hosni Mubarak, is still commemorated on October 14 every year). In 1982, a major air battle between Syria and Israel damaged Syria's air defense system considerably, but Arab air forces have been largely grounded since then. Indeed, the Gulf War of 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003 showed that Arab airspace belonged to anyone but the Arabs. On the whole, American-led bombings contributed significantly to the liberation of Kuwait and later to the fall of Saddam Hussein. The American bombing of Libya in 1986, regular Israeli incursions into Lebanese air space, and the Israeli strike against a nuclear facility in Syria in 2007 confirmed the notion that Arab air forces were serving primarily ceremonial purposes. Before the Arab Spring, Egypt and Syria had strong air forces on paper, with 461 and 555 combat-capable aircraft respectively (in part the result of decades of rule by former air force officers in Mubarak and Hafez al-Assad), but neither had seen any meaningful action.

By 2014, the picture has changed dramatically. Nominally, Egypt remains the leading regional air

power with 569 combat aircraft, while the Syrian air force has suffered significantly from a civil war conducted largely by air. The latest estimates report 295 combat aircraft, although many of those may no longer be operational. Both forces are involved in conflicts which cannot be won from the air alone. Not only have their antagonists acquired Surface-to-Air-Missiles (an Egyptian helicopter was downed in January in the Sinai), they can only be defeated on the ground. While air power is useful for achieving large-scale destruction (e.g., of ammunition storage, supply routes, or communication nodes) and has some impact on enemy morale, it obviously cannot engage in house-to-house combat. More importantly, air power relies crucially on intelligence, without which airstrikes are little more than guesswork. In both of these areas, Egypt and Syria are currently weak.

Libya is also in a challenging situation. Retired General Khalifa Haftar is conducting Operation Dignity mainly with the remains of the Libyan air force. The previous regime lost most of its 374 combat aircraft during the 2011 conflict as a result of a no-fly zone that deliberately targeted aircraft that were bombing civilians. In the summer of 2014, Haftar was reported to have 12 aircraft, but the latest reports claim that only three are left –mostly due to a lack of maintenance and spare parts. The current situation in Libya shows that air power will not solve the issue of localized violence.

Meanwhile, new air powers have emerged. Saudi Arabia, which had a relatively small air force until the early 2000s, now operates 305 fighter jets and ranks second in the region. It also has a *de facto* regional monopoly on Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS), which provide an important advantage in aerial combat. The UAE, a country with a population of 5.6 million, now ranks fourth with 201 aircraft. It also hosts the Gulf Air Warfare Center, where Gulf and American air forces conduct training exercises.

These states are currently the leading regional air forces by far: while Iran roughly matches Saudi Arabia in numbers (though not in quality), the fifth largest Arab air force is Algeria's, with a little more than half of the Emirati fleet. No other Arab country approaches this number. Iraq, which once had a powerful air force, now has three jets left, while Lebanon has nine. For its part, Oman uses its air force primarily as a job creator, launching a recruitment campaign in response to demonstrations in 2011. It now operates 52 fighter jets.

Crucially, the emerging air powers in the Gulf have not been reluctant to act against other Arab states. Qatar and the UAE both sent jets to assist NATO during its Libya operation in 2011; Doha's air force, now at 18 combat aircraft, sent a third of its capabilities; the UAE sent twelve fighters. The active roles of these countries far exceeded the previous contributions of Arab military forces to Western-led operations. In the summer of this year, the UAE and Egypt were said to have bombed Islamist positions in Libya, although whether Egypt sent actual aircraft, or simply allowed the Emiratis to take off from their air bases, is unclear. More recently, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain (39 combat aircraft) and Jordan (85 combat aircraft) joined another coalition to fight the Islamic State, resulting in captain Al Mansouri's fame. Although how many air strikes the UAE and Saudi Arabia have conducted is not clear, one thing is: the two states are building powerful air forces in more than numerical terms. What both lack is not equipment, but training and readiness – elements now being acquired by conducting actual air strikes.

Air power: one tool among many

In large part, Gulf air power is the result of the region's antagonism with Iran. The implosion of Iraq, long considered a bulwark against potential aggression from Tehran, and the discovery of a nuclear program in Iran, certainly contributed to the perceived need for powerful air forces. The impressive expansion of Arab air forces is largely a message of power projection designed for Tehran: due to its geostrategic location, a potential military conflict with Iran would be conducted by air and water

rather than by land (unless Iraq was used as a battleground).

In addition, air defense systems have proliferated throughout the region, making strategic bombing more difficult than it used to be. Syria's system, revamped after the 2007 Israeli strike, is now considered strong enough to deter military action against the regime. The Gulf states are pursuing an integrated air defense system capable of countering missile threats, and Egypt has upgraded its system, too. Overall, Arab air space is being reclaimed by Arab states.

The problem with air power, however, is that its usefulness as a strategic tool is often overstated. Successful campaigns with important air power components, such as Serbia in 1999 and Libya in 2011, have created the impression that ground forces are no longer crucial to fighting, and winning, wars. But air power, and particularly aerial bombardment, is hardly a strategy in itself. Instead, these are simply tools that must always be used in tandem with other tools, including naval and ground forces, in support of a broader strategy. Especially for small states like the UAE or Qatar, building-up air power makes sense, but it will provide little protection, for instance, against a major ground invasion, which remains the norm in regional warfare.

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