

Air Warfare Center: Saudi Readiness to Confront Threats to its National Security

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During his visit to the Nellis US Air Force Base, Prince Major General Turki bin Bandar bin Abdul Aziz, commander of the Saudi Royal Air Force, announced on 17 March that the Kingdom plans to establish an air warfare center in the Eastern Region. He emphasized two things in this regard. First, the center will be similar to the one at Nellis Air Base in the US and second, the center will be supported with qualified staff and sophisticated systems that will allow air crews and technical staff to train in an environment similar to the realities of modern warfare.

In my opinion, this decision is very important not only in terms of developing the defense capabilities of Saudi Arabia, but also as an important step towards achieving regional balance of power. It is true that changes in the nature of security threats have created new realities that are different from traditional military confrontations and that “asymmetric wars” are now the real challenge. However, the enhancement of air capabilities remains highly strategic for three reasons: firstly, the dangers of land-based threats have receded significantly, especially since 2003. Second, although countering the current threats requires strengthening all branches of the military, air cover remains a major component for the operations of these forces, and third, there is a need for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to strengthen its air capabilities at an accelerated pace in light of the ongoing crisis in Yemen which is now being used by some Western institutions to call upon their governments to stop supporting the Kingdom in leading the Arab Coalition.

While acknowledging the importance of benefiting from the experiences of major powers in establishing such centers, the Kingdom, nevertheless, has all that it needs to enhance its air capabilities. First it has a vast practical experience that the Saudi air force had acquired during the confrontation with the Houthi militias in Yemen. Then there were the many exercises and drills in which the Saudi Air Force has participated in the past few years jointly with a number of Arab and Western countries. These exercises, which were largely aimed at simulating a real state of war, included but not limited to, the “Green Flag” drills with the British Air Force last year, and participating seven times in “Exercise Red Flag” with the US Air Force. Thirdly, the Kingdom has significantly enhanced its capabilities both in terms of the size of military spending and the possession of very advanced modern fighter jets, a fact that was confirmed by many recent reports issued in this regard. Amongst all these, I think the most important factor is the human element. The Kingdom has invested heavily and wisely in the training of air force crews in renown specialized training centers, making such personnel the main focus of the development process. Furthermore, the Kingdom has taken many other major steps, such as the establishment in May 2017 of the Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI). A recent report published in the famous US “Defense News” magazine pointed out that the Kingdom “has begun its journey to military self-sufficiency”. The most important move in this regard is the Kingdom's plan to develop its infrastructure and industry, including the defense sector and military industries. Investments in the plan are expected to total about \$ 426 billion by 2030.

The importance of these and other measures indicate beyond doubt that the Kingdom's endeavors to enhance its military capabilities in general and the air force in particular is a strategic choice. It is also a thoroughly-calculated response to present and future regional developments. At present, coalitions such as the Arab Coalition to Support Legitimacy in Yemen and the Global Coalition Against Daesh have become the main mechanism for confronting security threats. The air forces play a leading role in the operations of such coalitions. The threats are exasperated by the continuing efforts by Iran to develop new generations of missiles and supplying those missiles to its militias in Yemen. Looking to the future, we find that there are strong signs in the horizon of new arrangements in the form of a proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance which may include cooperation in many areas. This means that the developing and strengthening the air force has now more than ever become an urgent necessity.

Based on the above, the development and modernization of the Saudi Air Force will contribute to the achievement of regional balance of power, which is a prerequisite for achieving regional security. It is true that alliances and partnerships are important, but the ability of a country to defend its security by its own forces remains the basis for controlling regional interactions and influences. Saudi Arabia which, according to several reports and studies, already has a superior air force compared to Iran, has the capability to exercise deterrence in the face of any reckless adventures that may threaten the vital interests of the Kingdom or the other Gulf countries in general.

With all this in mind, I believe that there are three parallel tracks that need to be followed: First, there is a need to integrate the Saudi plans with that of the other Gulf states, including the United Arab Emirates, which announced in 2017 a plan to restructure its air force based on the assessment of risks and identification of needs. Second, to diversify the Kingdom's international partnerships which play an important role in controlling the regional security threats, and third, benefiting from the experiences of other countries and defense organizations in the world, including the NATO, which issues what is known as the "Strategic Concepts" every ten years. A Strategic Concept is a review of the security/ threat environment that specifies the elements of the Alliance's approach to security and provides guideline for the adaptation of its military forces.

In short, the establishment of the air warfare center is more than a mere further enhancement of the performance of the Saudi Air Force, but rather a strong confirmation of the readiness of the Kingdom to face any current or future threats to its national security.

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