To whom it may concern,

Firstly, my apologies for a late, and consequently unreferenced submission, but having recently undertaken a research report in to the Australian Defence Force’s presence on the Arabian Peninsula and Persian Gulf, and its past operational history in the Middle East Area of Operations (MEAO), I have identified several incongruities and trends of concern in Australian defence planning and doctrine with regard to these issues.

At the time of writing, The Department of Defence records that 6 of Australia’s 12 global operations could be defined as occurring within the MEAO. Admittedly, several of these are small-scale, ongoing peace-monitoring operations, but nonetheless this is a substantive figure that bears remembering. Additionally, in a parliamentary briefing dating back to 2011, it is stated that “The Australian Defence Force (ADF) has deployed forces to the Middle East almost continually since the 1991 Gulf War”. I am concerned that this operational history, tempo and focus is not reflected in Australia’s principal strategic planning documents.

For instance, the 2009 White Paper sought to re-define and narrow Australia’s strategic interests to its areas of immediate geographical concern and core tasks in a seeming attempt to preclude future expeditionary conflicts to the Middle East. It also made minimal mention of Australia’s presence in the U.A.E and our broader security interests in the region such as energy security, developing partner capacity amongst regional states and protecting Australia’s trade interests.

This changed in 2013 when a more realistic approach to the region was outlined, including a section on the significance of the U.A.E as an enabling factor for Australia’s regional operations. Nonetheless, minimal focus was apportioned to the risks of overseas basing in the Middle East. Interstate and intra-state tensions are presently abundant amongst the States of the Gulf Cooperation Council, whilst States such as Qatar and the U.A.E are becoming increasingly assertive and independent in their foreign policy and defence realms. Also, maintaining a visible military presence in an Arab Nation runs the risk of being inflammatory. These factors could affect Australia’s future operational flexibility in the region if our chosen operations do not align with the foreign policy outlooks or popular opinions of our host-States and thus warrant acknowledgement.

It is my hope that the next White Paper will not revert to the unrealistic, idealistic view of the 2009 Paper that sought to ignore Australia’s continual involvement in the Middle East, particularly in light of Operation Okra. Rather, I hope that it is accepted that a majority of recent ADF operations could be classified as being contained within the ADF’s fourth principal task, and geographically located within the MEAO. Defence of Australia and planning for major Asia-Pacific contingencies cannot be discounted, but similarly due focus in the next White Paper should be given to outlining the risks, costs and benefits of basing our troops and assets in the region’s where we operate the most, that being the Persian Gulf and Middle East.

I appreciate the opportunity to have made a submission and consent to publication.

Michael Thomas.