# From Spears of Victory to World Defense Show: Cooperation between Italy and Saudi Arabia against the backdrop of the GCAP dossier

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The trajectory is clear: in a few weeks, the Italian Air Force has moved from an unprecedented operational-training commitment in Saudi skies to an intense agenda of institutional relations and industrial dialogue in Riyadh. The conclusion of **Spears of Victory 2026** (January 18–February 5) and the participation of the Chief of Staff at the **World Defense Show 2026** (February 9–10) indeed compose a single narrative: **interoperability, strategic presence, and partnership building** in an area of growing geopolitical centrality. In the background, the more ambitious theme also emerges: Saudi interest in the **GCAP**, the sixth-generation fighter program developed by the United Kingdom, Italy, and Japan.

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## Spears of Victory 2026: a significant operational “first”

The **Spears of Victory 2026**, defined as Saudi Arabia's most important air exercise, took place at the **King Abdulaziz Air Base** and was organized by the **Air Warfare Center** of the Royal Saudi Air Force (RSAF). The 2026 edition brought together equipment and personnel from **ten countries**: besides Italy and Saudi Arabia, there were **United States, Greece, United Kingdom, and France** (among NATO), along with **Jordan, Pakistan, Bahrain, and Qatar**, with additional countries as observers (including **Turkey, Bangladesh, Oman, Malaysia, and Morocco**).

For Italy, the distinctive element was not only the level of training but the “historic” value of the participation: **for the first time, the Italian Armed Forces took part in an exercise in Saudi Arabia**. And there is another first that highlights the trust placed in the Italian contribution: **for the first time in the history of the exercise (started in 2021), a foreign aircraft with Airborne Early Warning capability was invited to perform command and control functions**.

The deployed device combined combat capabilities, air battle management, and protection:

- **three Eurofighters** from the **36th Wing** (Gioia del Colle), employed in **air-to-air**, **air-to-ground**, and also **“swing-role”** missions in the same sortie;
- an **E-550A CAEW** from the **14th Wing** (Pratica di Mare), used for **command, control, and air battle management**, exploiting long-range detection and ensuring “information superiority”;
- support from the **Logistics Command** and a team of **Air Riflemen** from the **16th Wing** (Martina Franca) for the protection of assets and personnel.

The scenarios—with over **90 assets** involved—grew in complexity, with crews immersed for about three weeks in a **multi-domain** environment, aimed at integrating different forces and developing common tactics and procedures against current and emerging threats.

# World Defense Show 2026: from the runway to the political-industrial table

A few days after the exercise closed, the focus shifted from the sky to relations. On **February 9 and 10, 2026**, the Chief of Staff of the Italian Air Force, **Gen. S.A. Antonio Conserva**, participated in the **World Defense Show 2026**, one of the main international fairs on defense, security, and military technologies, organized by the **General Authority for Military Industries (GAMI)** at the **Riyadh International Convention & Exhibition Center**.

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The mission had a dual nature:

**1) Military diplomacy and operational cooperation**

On the sidelines of the opening ceremony, Conserva had a conversation with the **Commander of the Royal Saudi Air Force, Turki bin Bandar Al Saud**, addressing topics related to the Middle Eastern geopolitical context and international cooperation. This was followed by bilateral meetings with the heads of other air forces: the **Commander of the Egyptian Air Force**, the **AFCENT Commander**, and the **Chief of the Air Staff of the Royal Air Force**, with a discussion also on the prospects of the **GCAP** and the implications in terms of interoperability and future capability development.

**2) Dialogue with industry and national supply chain**

The visit included a meeting with the Italian Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, **S.E. Carlo Baldocci**, and talks with Italian industrial entities present at the exhibition (including **AIAD, Leonardo, ELT Group, Iveco Defence Vehicles**), as well as a stop at the **MBDA** pavilion and a visit to the **Eurofighter Typhoon** stand.

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## The common thread: interoperability today, future programs tomorrow

By aligning dates and content, an evolving relationship emerges based on three levels: **training presence, institutional consolidation, industrial dialogue**. Italy, with Eurofighter and CAEW, brought high-level assets and expertise to Saudi Arabia and experienced a coalition context broader than the typical NATO one. Immediately after, in Riyadh, it strengthened channels with partners and allies and maintained direct engagement with the defense industry.

In this context, the **GCAP** represents a strategic horizon: multinational exercises build procedures and mutual trust, while next-generation programs transform that trust into **long-term cooperation and technological development architectures**.

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