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After Iraq: Future U.S. Military Posture in the Middle East

In an attempt to manage the expectations of a notoriously impatient American public, President George W. Bush and senior U.S. military leaders have begun to refer to the struggle against al Qaeda and its associated movements as the "Long War," suggesting that the duration of this struggle may be measured in decades, not years.[1] Although this characterization may be accurate, the duration of this conflict is not predetermined or inevitable. The United States can take steps to shorten the struggle and hasten al Qaeda's defeat. The key is whether the United States can develop a comprehensive strategy that kills or captures today's terrorists and eliminates the sources of radicalization for tomorrow's.

The U.S. military presence in the Middle East has represented one of the leading sources of radicalization and terrorism directed against the United States. Yet, protecting U.S. interests in the region does not require an obtrusive U.S. military footprint characterized by sprawling bases occupied by large numbers of permanently stationed ground troops. In fact, a large U.S. military presence in the region is unnecessary and often counterproductive. If policymakers ignore the role of the U.S. military presence in the radicalization process and fail to assess the actual necessity of a large U.S. military presence, the United States will find itself in a needless predicament not unlike the Herculean struggle against the mythological hydra. For every Abu Musab al-Zarqawi that the United States kills, the continuing sources of radicalization will generate a virtually limitless pool of replacements.

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With the U.S. presidential election quickly approaching, analysts and policymakers have devoted much time and attention to U.S. strategy in Iraq and how to exit that country successfully. As important as these issues remain, the United States should also muster the will to look beyond Iraq in order to design the optimal future U.S. military posture in the Middle East. Recent difficulties in Iraq and Iranian assertiveness make a drawdown currently unwise, potentially increasing allies' questions regarding U.S. reliability and possibly sparking a nuclear weapons program in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. The United States should, however, resist the temptation to increase or redeploy troops to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, as the military has a limited role in protecting vital U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Without a comprehensive review of the necessity and consequences of a robust U.S. military presence, bureaucratic inertia and ad hoc policymaking will result in an overly intrusive and outsized military posture that needlessly antagonizes Muslim populations, dangerously undercuts U.S. interests, and unnecessarily perpetuates the Long War. After the 2008 election, a new administration and a renewed national appreciation for the limits and consequences of military force could set the stage for a comprehensive review and readjustment of the U.S. military posture in the Middle East.

U.S. Interests in the Middle East

A successful military posture in the Middle East must be based on and intricately linked with U.S. interests in the region and the preeminent threats to those interests. Although protecting Israel and fostering friendly relations with moderate Arab governments are certainly important, the United States' most vital interests in the Middle East are reliable access to Persian Gulf oil, counterproliferation, and counterterrorism.[2]

The need for a reliable and unimpeded flow of oil from the Persian Gulf region to the United States and other industrialized countries represents the first and longest-standing vital U.S. interest in the Middle East. Despite renewed conservation and alternative energy initiatives, the Energy Information Agency (EIA) forecasts a 71 percent increase in world energy consumption from 2003 to 2030, with petroleum continuing to satisfy most of this demand.[3] Between 2005 and 2030, the EIA predicts that global and U.S. petroleum consumption will increase 39 percent and 23 percent, respectively.[4] The United States currently imports roughly 60 percent of the oil that it consumes, and the EIA expects this U.S. dependence on foreign oil imports to increase to 62 percent of consumption by 2030.[5] The energy suppliers of the Persian Gulf region will play a central role in satisfying this growing demand for the foreseeable future. In 2003, these countries accounted for 27 percent of the world's

oil production and controlled 57 percent of the world's proven crude oil reserves and 41 percent of the world's natural gas reserves.[6] By 2020, the Persian Gulf's contribution to global oil production is expected to rise to 33 percent.[7] If the U.S. or the global economy were deprived of this oil or natural gas, the economic and political consequences would be devastating and far-reaching.

Terrorists or hostile states could threaten Persian Gulf oil flows in three ways: domestic stability, land-based infrastructure, and maritime assets. A successful revolution or widespread instability in a major oil-producing country such as Saudi Arabia could endanger U.S. access to a large portion of its Middle Eastern oil imports. During the first five months of 2005, Saudi Arabia provided 14.9 percent of U.S. crude oil imports.[8] Second, the region's land-based oil industry infrastructure, consisting of pipelines, oil refineries, and processing plants, presents another area of vulnerability. Egypt's Sumed Pipeline and Saudi Arabia's Abqaiq processing facility present particularly attractive terrorist targets.[9] In February 2006, al Qaeda claimed credit for an attempted suicide attack on the Abqaiq plant.[10] Although the attack caused little damage to the facility, this incident demonstrates al Qaeda's intent to attack oil infrastructure. Finally, roughly 17 million barrels, or two-fifths of all globally traded oil, flows through the Strait of Hormuz every day.[11] States such as Iran or terrorist groups such as al Qaeda could threaten the oil flow through the Strait of Hormuz or other key waterways such as Bab el-Mandab, which connects the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea. Captured al Qaeda manuals reveal sophisticated instructions and advice for conducting maritime attacks on oil and natural gas tankers.[12]

A large U.S. regional military presence is unnecessary and often counterproductive.

The second highly important interest of the United States in the Middle East is to ensure that state and nonstate actors in the region do not develop, obtain, or use weapons of mass destruction (WMD).[13] Although the threats posed by biological and chemical weapons also warrant the attention of policymakers, nuclear weapons are unique in their ability to inflict casualties on a catastrophic scale.[14] In the Middle East today, Iran presents the most serious threat to U.S. efforts to stop nuclear weapons proliferation.[15] At worst, Tehran could use its nuclear weapons to launch a first strike against Israel or could deliberately and covertly give nuclear weapons–related technology or materials to terrorist groups such as Hizballah to strike Israel and U.S. interests while minimizing the obvious fingerprints that would invite retaliation.

Although these concerns should not be prematurely discounted, little evidence exists to suggest that Iran would take such steps that would virtually

guarantee Iran's destruction. Iranian development of nuclear weapons, however, would most likely lead to a more aggressive Iranian foreign policy, could potentially spark a regional nuclear arms race, and would increase the likelihood that nuclear technology or materials could inadvertently end up in the hands of terrorist groups such as Hizballah or al Qaeda. Given the nature of the Iranian political and military establishment, it is entirely plausible that a disenchanted, corrupt, or ideologically motivated group of actors could transfer key nuclear technology, materials, or weapons without the knowledge of the Iranian leaders, similar to A. Q. Khan's behavior in Pakistan. As more states obtain nuclear weapons and as nuclear technology and expertise become increasingly available, the chance that a nuclear transfer could lead to a successful attack against the United States and its friends increases.

The United States' third vital interest is fostering a region that does not spawn, suffer from, or export violent Islamist extremism. Al Qaeda and its associated terrorist movements represent the most serious threat facing the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests in the Middle East. The United States must therefore work with its regional partners to capture or kill violent Islamist extremists who threaten U.S. interests while addressing the causes of radicalization in the Middle East that are creating the next generation of Islamist terrorists.

An Unnecessary Footprint

During the Cold War, the presence of U.S. troops in the region was limited and infrequent. The United States deployed troops to Lebanon for a few months in 1958 and provided international peacekeeping forces in Lebanon (1982–1984) and the Sinai (1981–present). The U.S. Navy also patrolled the waters of the eastern Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, and the Red Sea throughout the Cold War, with the navy's most significant operation consisting of a 1987–1988 reflagging of 11 Kuwaiti oil tankers in order to protect them from Iranian attack.[16] Other than these relatively minor deployments and operations, the U.S. military conducted no major interventions and maintained few permanent bases in the Middle East.

For nearly five decades prior to the Persian Gulf War, the United States worked through regional allies such as Saudi Arabia (1933–present) and Iran (1953–1979) to protect U.S. interests in lieu of maintaining a large, permanent military presence.[17] During this period, the United States attempted to minimize Soviet influence in the region by supporting anti-Soviet governments with military and economic aid. By utilizing this strategy, the United States effectively protected its interests in the Middle East for nearly one-half of a century. As late as 1989, the United States had less than 700 military per-

sonnel in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) combined.[18]

Following Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the United States deployed more than 500,000 military personnel to Saudi Arabia.[19] This introduction of thousands of U.S. troops into Saudi Arabia represented a dramatic turning point in U.S. strategy and military posture in the region. In the wake of the Gulf War, the United States maintained a large military presence in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, despite increasingly vitriolic calls for its departure. In an attempt to decrease the visibility of the U.S. footprint in the country, the military moved most of its forces to more remote locations in Saudi Arabia in 1996. Yet, this did not diminish widespread anger over the U.S. presence, as the Saudi regime saw it as an increasing liability.[20]

The presence of U.S. troops in the region during the Cold War was limited and infrequent.

Eventually, the September 11 attacks, the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, and the subsequent overthrow of Saddam led to a significant reduction in U.S. military forces in Saudi Arabia. Currently, the United States maintains more than 220,000 soldiers, sailors, and marines in Iraq and the GCC states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The bulk of these forces reside in Iraq and Kuwait as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As of September 2007, the United States maintained more than three times as many military personnel in Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE than it did in 1989.[21]

Despite the U.S. military presence's dramatic growth in the Middle East since 1989, the United States needs only a minimal military footprint to counter threats to its three key interests. First, to guarantee a reliable flow of oil from the Persian Gulf region, the United States must promote domestic stability and protect land-based infrastructure as well as maritime assets. With respect to domestic instability or revolution, the U.S. military plays a limited role. If domestic instability or revolution threatens an oil-producing government, this is most effectively confronted by the respective government. Although U.S. Special Forces and intelligence services may assist covertly, in nearly every conceivable scenario, existing U.S. bases and conventional military forces offer little assistance and may actually exacerbate conditions by fomenting radicalism and popular unrest against the U.S. military presence and the host government that condones it. The United States should take nonmilitary steps in advance of such crises. By significantly reducing the U.S. military footprint that often fuels radicalization and by using U.S. political and economic power to encourage oil-producing governments to diversify their

economies, invest in their people, and progress gradually toward constitutional liberalism, the United States can reduce the likelihood of domestic instability or revolution that would threaten an oil-producing ally.

The U.S. military also has only a minor role to play in the protection of land-based oil infrastructure in friendly oil-producing nations. Other than the short-term circumstances in Iraq, it is unnecessary and politically impractical for U.S. troops to guard oil wells, pipelines, or processing plants in Middle Eastern countries. As the failed February 2006 al Qaeda attack on the Saudi Abqaiq plant demonstrates, most oil-producing governments have already secured their oil infrastructure themselves by implementing comprehensive and effective security measures to protect this wellspring of their economies. Even though the February 2006 attack failed due to existing security measures, the Saudis decided to augment existing security dramatically by building a new 35,000-strong rapid reaction force to protect its energy installations from terrorist attacks. This new force already has around 9,000 personnel in training or already active and will likely reach its full strength in the next three to four years.[22] This example demonstrates that the oil-producing governments of the Middle East have the means and the will to protect their land-based oil infrastructure without a U.S. military presence.

The U.S. needs only a minimal military footprint to counter threats to its three key interests.

Regarding assaults on maritime assets, if al Qaeda or Iran targeted offshore oil platforms or oil tankers, the U.S. military response would be naval. The U.S. Navy could either conduct these operations without bases in the Persian Gulf or utilize a single naval base in Bahrain or the UAE. Additional bases or ground troops would not be necessary to protect land-based infrastructure or maritime assets. If the United States believed more resources were needed, it could quickly and temporarily move naval or other assets to the region.

The second vital U.S. interest in the Middle East is to ensure that regional state and nonstate actors do not develop, obtain, or utilize weapons of mass destruction. As previously discussed, Iran's nuclear program represents the greatest current threat to this U.S. interest. The opaque and fragmented nature of Iranian politics and decisionmaking make it difficult to identify the motivations for the Iranian nuclear program definitively. Yet, an Iranian sense of insecurity fueled by the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, the U.S. invasion of Iraq of 2003, and U.S. regime change rhetoric since September 11, 2001, appear to figure prominently in Iranian thinking. After the March 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, then-President Muhammad Khatami of Iran publicly worried, "They tell us that Syria is the next target, but according to our reports, Iran could well follow."[23]

To the degree that the Iranian nuclear program is motivated by insecurity, the consistent U.S. unwillingness to engage in ongoing, unconditional talks with Iran on issues beyond Iraq, as well as excessive U.S. saber-rattling and regime-change rhetoric and a suffocating military posture, may only serve to validate the perceived necessity of Iran's long-term quest for nuclear weapons. Such a U.S. approach substantiates the arguments of Iranian hard-liners who assert a nuclear weapon is necessary to deter a U.S. attack, while undercutting the arguments of moderates or conservative pragmatists who quietly argue for compromise with the United States and cautiously question the wisdom of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's aggressive approach.

Some may attempt to justify an expansion of the U.S. military presence in the GCC states by arguing that a large network of U.S. bases manned by large quantities of U.S. troops would be necessary if the United States decided to attack Iran to prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons.[24] If Washington were to take this risky step, the most likely tactic would consist of precision strikes and limited incursions designed to eliminate Iranian nuclear facilities and retaliatory capabilities. The existing U.S. military infrastructure in the GCC is more than adequate to conduct and support such operations. Thus, even in the case of an ill-advised U.S. attack on Iran, an expansion of the U.S. military presence in the GCC states is not necessary.[25] The U.S. military could launch these attacks from vessels in adjacent waters and from one or two air force bases on the periphery of the Middle East. If additional troops were required, the United States could quickly move them into the region from Europe or other locations, taking advantage of the increasing mobility and expeditionary nature of the U.S. military. These ground troops could arrive in a matter of hours or days and could quickly put into operation prepositioned equipment discretely stored throughout the region.

The third and final vital U.S. interest in the Middle East is the creation of a region that does not spawn, suffer from, or export violent Islamist extremism. Ironically, a robust U.S. ground troop presence in the region undercuts this interest, serving as a major impetus for radicalization. Yet, a large U.S. military presence is by no means the only source of radicalization and terrorism directed against the United States. Polling data and anecdotal evidence suggest that other factors, such as the Arab-Israeli crisis and the authoritarian nature of most Middle Eastern regimes, also play a role.[26] Moreover, U.S. ground forces do have a constructive role to play in the region. The U.S. military can help train allied military forces to secure their borders, reduce "ungoverned areas," and confront insurgents or terrorist cells. The vast majority of this training, however, can occur out of the public eye using small, low-visibility U.S. military and CIA teams temporarily deployed to the region. Although a dramatic reduction in the number of permanently based U.S. troops in the Middle East

would not immediately eliminate the threat from Islamist terrorist groups, it would significantly reduce the radicalization of future generations.

The Counterproductive Presence

Not only is a large U.S. military presence in the Middle East unnecessary, but it is also frequently counterproductive. A look at the rise of al Qaeda as a threat to the United States in the 1990s illustrates the radicalizing effect that often accompanies a U.S. military presence. The U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia represents the primary reason Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda began to target the United States in the 1990s. As early as 1994, bin Laden publicly decried the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia.[27] He followed these initial public condemnations with a message in 1996 entitled "Declaration of Jihad," stating that "the greatest disaster to befall the Muslims since the death of the Prophet Muhammad—is the occupation of Saudi Arabia, which is the cornerstone of the Islamic world, place of revelation, source of the Prophetic mission, and home of the Noble Ka'ba where Muslims direct their prayers. Despite this, it was occupied by the armies of the Christians, the Americans, and their allies."[28]

Two years later, in February 1998, bin Laden joined Ayman al Zawahiri and three other Islamist leaders from Bangladesh, Egypt, and Pakistan in issuing a formal declaration regarding the religious duty of Muslims to wage jihad against U.S. military personnel and civilians. After a paragraph of the requisite salutations and religious formalities, the authors immediately cite the preeminent reason for the jihad against the Americans: "Firstly, for over seven years America has occupied the holiest part of the Islamic lands, the Arabian peninsula, plundering its wealth, dictating to its leaders, humiliating its people, terrorizing its neighbors, and turning its bases there into a spearhead with which to fight the neighboring Muslim peoples."[29]

The U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia certainly did not justify al Qaeda's tragic and immoral slaughter of nearly 3,000 innocent Americans, but it did largely explain it. From the perspective of bin Laden and a large segment of the Arab world, the United States was an occupying power in Saudi Arabia, and the only way to compel it to leave was for al Qaeda to use the only effective tool at its disposal: terrorism. Not only did bin Laden consistently cite the U.S. presence in Saudi Arabia as the paramount justification for jihad in the years leading up to the September 11 attacks, but 15 of 19 hijackers were from Saudi Arabia, two from the UAE, one from Egypt, and one from Lebanon. In a poll of Saudis taken after the September 11 attacks, 95 percent of Saudis agreed with bin Laden's objection to U.S. forces in the region.[30] The centrality of the *Hejaz*, the area encompassing Mecca, Medina, and its surrounding areas, in the Muslim faith makes the presence of foreign troops in Saudi Ara-

bia significantly more offensive compared to a troop presence in countries on Saudi Arabia's periphery.[31] Consequently, the 2003 reduction of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia represented a step in the right direction for the United States to address this source of radicalization.

The 2006 U.S. "National Strategy for Combating Terrorism" largely neglects the role of the U.S. military presence in al Qaeda's emergence or in the continuing radicalization that fuels terrorism, pointing instead to social, political, and ideological maladies endemic to the Arab world, as well as past U.S. support for authoritarian regimes.[32] Admittedly, there is rarely a single explanation for any phenomenon, and it would be extremely difficult to definitively and quantifiably rank the causes for al Qaeda's emergence and its attacks on the United States. Yet, for purposes of developing the future U.S. strategy and force posture in the region, one only needs to establish that the U.S. military presence was and continues to be one of a handful of major catalysts for anti-Americanism and radicalization.

A robust regional U.S. ground troop often serves as a major impetus for radicalization.

Both the private words and the public actions of al Qaeda support this less sweeping yet equally important assertion. In July 2005, U.S. forces in Iraq intercepted a confidential letter from Zawahiri to Zarqawi, the leader of al Qaeda in Iraq. In this private letter presumably not intended for public dissemination, Zawahiri wrote, "The Muslim masses … do not rally except against an outside occupying enemy, especially if the enemy is firstly Jewish, and secondly American."[33] Analysis of al Qaeda–connected terrorist attacks corroborates this revealing insight provided by al Qaeda's second-most senior leader. According to one study, the 71 al Qaeda operatives who committed suicide terrorism between 1995 and 2003 were 10 times more likely to come from Muslim countries where a U.S. military presence for combat operations existed than from other Muslim countries. Furthermore, when the U.S. military presence occupies a country with a larger proportion of Islamist radicals, al Qaeda suicide terrorists are 20 times more likely to come from that country.[34] Although this evidence does not irrefutably demonstrate that the U.S. military presence in the Middle East is the leading source of radicalization, it suggests a U.S. military presence is strongly correlated with the recruitment and motivation of al Qaeda's most radicalized members.

Yet, the unique conditions in Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE make these five countries less susceptible to radicalization sparked by a U.S. military presence, thus allowing a minimal U.S. posture to continue. In Kuwait,

the distance between the primary population center of Kuwait City and the bulk of U.S. military forces largely places U.S. forces "out of sight, out of mind." Prudent adjustments by Central Command in recent years have further reduced the visibility and footprint of U.S. military operations in Kuwait. Furthermore, despite the strong disapproval of U.S. foreign policy by the average Kuwaiti, the United States still enjoys a significant reservoir of goodwill thanks to the U.S. military's 1991 liberation of Kuwait from Saddam. Instability in southern Iraq and the increasingly assertive Iranian regime only serve to increase the desire of Kuwait to maintain a significant long-term U.S. military presence.

In Qatar and the UAE, the small native population, large number of foreign nationals, low visibility of U.S. bases, thriving economies of Doha and Dubai, and distrust of Iran among most Sunnis living there make the current U.S. military posture in these two countries sustainable at least in the short to medium term. In Bahrain, despite the U.S. naval base's central location in Manama, little evidence exists to suggest the U.S. naval base is promoting radicalization. This absence of a radicalizing effect may be partially explained by the tremendous economic boost the navy base provides to the energy-deficient island nation. In Oman, the discreet nature of the U.S. military presence, combined with the traditional Omani opposition to radical Islamist ideology, suggests that the current U.S. military posture in Oman is sustainable for the short to medium term as well.

A Better Way to Assure Friends and Deter Enemies

As the bulk of U.S. military forces depart Iraq, some U.S. policymakers and military planners may seek to accomplish U.S. objectives by expanding the U.S. military presence in the GCC states. Yet even in the case of a U.S. failure in Iraq, expanding the U.S. military footprint in the GCC states would be unnecessary and unwise. The United States can deter Iran and restore the confidence of its GCC allies without expanding military bases by taking five steps: reassuring the GCC states; following through on arms sales commitments; maintaining low-profile, pre-positioned equipment stocks; conducting carefully planned military exercises; and working to develop a security architecture for the region.

First, U.S. political leaders and diplomats must explicitly and repeatedly reiterate to the governments of the six GCC states that Washington will not abandon its friends in the region, regardless of the outcome in Iraq. The United States should emphasize its long-term commitment to the security and independence of the GCC states and its eagerness to provide the security assistance required to address any future threats that may emerge, including those from Iran. These assurances, however, should not take the form of an

anti-Iranian alliance. Such an approach would increase Iranian desires for a nuclear weapon and the long-term need for a costly and unsustainable U.S. security presence in the Middle East. Careful diplomacy can simultaneously reassure Arab allies without increasing Iranian insecurity.

Second, the United States should demonstrate the sincerity of these reassurances by following through on arms sales commitments to these states. As part of the Gulf Security Dialogue, the Bush administration has sought to sell approximately $20 billion worth of weapons to Arab states in order to bolster their defenses in the face of Iranian assertiveness. Some members of Congress have expressed legitimate concerns regarding the qualitative military advantage of Israel and some of the weapons included in proposed arms packages. These representatives worry that Arab states such as Saudi Arabia that seek technological advanced U.S. weapons to protect against Iran might actually use these weapons against Israel. Those concerned subsequently seek to sell some weapons to states like Saudi Arabia while denying them any weapons that would give them a military advantage over Israel.[35] Yet, if Congress stalls or rejects the Bush administration's efforts to sell select U.S. military systems to Arab allies, it will confirm growing perceptions that Washington is an unreliable security partner. This is especially true in the case of missile defense systems.

Expanding the U.S. military footprint in the GCC states would be unnecessary and unwise.

A failure in Iraq, combined with an unwillingness to sell GCC states the military hardware necessary to protect themselves from a growing Iranian threat, could have serious consequences for U.S. interests as well as for U.S. bilateral relations with the GCC countries. Yet, the United States should go about these arms sales in a judicious manner. If these arms sales are not accompanied by a genuine offer to Iran to resolve competing interests through diplomacy, arming the Arab states will only exacerbate cross-gulf tensions.

Third, the United States should maintain and perhaps expand in a few instances stocks of pre-positioned equipment in various GCC states. In order to maintain the lowest profile possible, these stocks should be maintained and secured by U.S. civilian contractors and located far from population centers. Eventually, pre-positioned stocks should replace, not augment, the permanent basing of ground troops in the region.

Fourth, the United States can assure its friends and deter Iran without increasing its military presence in the region by periodically conducting large-scale, well-publicized naval and air force exercises with GCC militaries away from population centers. Without increasing the U.S. military presence, these

periodic exercises would remind Iran that the United States can quickly bring military capabilities to the region that would make Iranian aggression unwise.

Finally, the United States should use its influence in the region to develop a Gulf security architecture. A formal security architecture would improve security in the region and further reduce the need for a U.S. military presence that often serves as a source of radicalization. This architecture should seek to include the GCC states and Iraq, as well as Iran. Major powers or oil importers such as China, the European Union, Japan, Russia, and the United States could participate in a formal observer status. Rather than serving as an alliance against Iran, this security architecture would include Iran and represent a forum to address issues of common concern.

The U.S. can deter Iran and reassure GCC allies without expanding military bases by taking five steps.

Some might argue that including Iran would represent a mistake, but any regional security architecture that excluded Iran would only heighten tensions and validate the perception of many Iranians that Iran's security requires nuclear weapons.[36] A Gulf security architecture that included Tehran would represent an essential component of any "grand bargain" with Washington and would promote long-term peace and stability in the region. Iran's quest for a nuclear weapons capability will never be fully eliminated until Iran feels secure, as it seeks to be a regional power whose territorial borders and regional influence are respected. The integration of Iran as a full member of a Gulf security architecture could go a long way toward meeting these reasonable Iranian goals.

In order to build confidence, this forum could begin by addressing noncontroversial issues, such as piracy in the Persian Gulf, and progressively address more difficult issues, such as the dispute between the UAE and Iran over the islands of Greater and Lesser Tunb and Abu Musa. It could eventually evolve into a collective security arrangement with the potential for seriously addressing Iran's long-term sense of insecurity.

Admittedly, developing a Gulf security architecture would represent a long-term project. As a general rule, the GCC states are far less cohesive and trusting of one another than U.S. policymakers realize, not to mention the distrust that exists between Arab states and Iran. The internal dynamics and cohesion of the GCC would have to improve significantly before establishing a serious Gulf security architecture would be possible. Yet, if the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq came to see such an organization as a vehicle to ameliorate long-standing sources of war and instability, it may be possible to garner the support necessary to launch such an organization.

Shortening the Long War

Not only is a robust U.S. military presence in the Middle East unnecessary, but it is also often counterproductive. If the United States can achieve rapprochement with Iran and stability in Iraq, the United States can reduce its military footprint in the GCC states while still protecting U.S. interests. Although current developments in Iraq and Iran make a short-term reduction in the U.S. military presence in the GCC states unwise, U.S. decisionmakers should not lose sight of the fact that U.S. vital interests—unimpeded access to Persian Gulf oil, counterproliferation, and counterterrorism—do not require a large network of bases or a large quantity of troops.

By taking some of the steps detailed above, Washington can facilitate an eventual reduction in the U.S. footprint without endangering friendly Arab regimes or undercutting U.S. interests. Finding the optimal military posture in the Middle East going forward will better protect U.S. interests and will weaken the resonance of al Qaeda's message to prospective recruits, potentially making the Long War surprisingly short.

Notes

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