

Less is More: The Future of the U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf

Five years ago, the total number of U.S. military personnel in the Persian Gulf was over 230,000. Today, that number is well under 50,000. The rapid exit of so many U.S. fighting men and women has caused many observers to fear for the future of the Gulf. As one analyst put it, the regional forecast is bleak with “violence, followed by intermittent violence, and renewed violence.”¹ Beyond the short-term problem of insecurity lies a raft of long-term nightmares, including political instability, oil shocks, and nuclear proliferation. Policymakers and military officials in Washington and the Persian Gulf share these concerns. The belief that a precipitous U.S. drawdown is creating a security vacuum and political breakdown is close to the conventional wisdom.

Officials routinely cite the British withdrawal from the Gulf as a dangerous precedent. The British East India Company established a residency in Persia in 1763, and the government spent the next century building its influence in the region. British hegemony continued even after World War II while much of the rest of the empire was collapsing. In 1968, however, Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that the United Kingdom would end its military commitments “east of Suez,” and in 1971 the Royal Navy officially left the

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The Washington Quarterly • 37:3 pp. 47–60
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.978435>

Persian Gulf. The British had served as the de facto guardians of the Gulf for a quarter century; then they were gone. The decade that followed saw intense regional hostility, the growth of military power in Iran and Iraq, and the first major use of the oil weapon against the West. The absence of an external hegemon, according to this version of events, meant that nothing existed to stop regional powers from jockeying for influence.

But the British analogy is oversimplified, and fears about U.S. withdrawal today are overwrought. The British example actually shows that, in some cases, it is possible to provide stability with a minimal investment. Despite wide recognition of British hegemony in the post-war period, London maintained a surprisingly small force in the Gulf. It did not need much more than that—the Gulf was a very permissive environment for most of the 1950s and 1960s. No regional state had the military capabilities to change the regional balance of power. In addition, oil was abundant and global demand was low, meaning that regional rulers could not use oil as a tool of coercion. These favorable circumstances began to change near the end of the 1960s, right at the time that British leaders were deciding that they had no future in the Gulf. Thus, even if they had wanted to continue to provide hegemonic stability, the British would have had to invest a great deal more force in the region to get it.

Happily, however, the situation for the United States today is more like the 1950s than the 1970s. The major regional powers all suffer from serious

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shortcomings in conventional military power, meaning that none of them will be able to seriously threaten the balance for the foreseeable future. Iran's military has suffered greatly from decades of war and sanctions. Iraq's fledgling security services are almost exclusively focused on internal problems. And Saudi Arabia, the richest country in the region, seems content to rely on a dense network of defenses and proxies rather than pursue any real power projection capabilities.

While there are reasons to worry about internal stability, especially given the ongoing fight against ISIS (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria), there is very little chance of a major interstate war. Moreover, threats to oil shipping in the Gulf are real but not overwhelming. All of this points to a simple and optimistic conclusion: the United States can protect its core interest in the free flow of oil without having to commit to a large and enduring naval or ground presence to the Gulf.

Pax Britannica

To understand why the United States is in such a favorable position today, it helps to look back at the experience of the post-war United Kingdom. Britain's traditional interest in the Persian Gulf was as a trade route to India; but after World War II, its focus shifted to ensuring oil security and enhancing regional stability as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. U.S. officials were happy to delegate the role of regional naval hegemon to London, as they were occupied with the demands of stabilizing Western Europe and East Asia while orchestrating a huge military demobilization. British forces were also stretched, of course, and dire economic circumstances at home constrained British strategy. Nonetheless, Britain was able to provide stability in the Gulf for over two decades.

Regional leaders widely recognized British naval and military dominance, though the actual British presence was quite small. Britain maintained a regional headquarters at Aden, as well as two Army battalions and Royal Air Force Bases. The RAF bases sustained two fighter squadrons each, along with one-and-a-half transport squadrons, one squadron of support helicopters, and one flight of long-range maritime reconnaissance aircraft. About 6,000 British troops made up the entire ground force. Britain's base in Bahrain has been described as a "miniature bastion for the Royal Navy," and miniature is exactly the right word.² No more than a handful of ships were in the Gulf at any given time, and naval officials reasoned that they could send vessels from elsewhere in the event of a crisis. In the 1960s, for instance, the typical deployment was four minesweepers, one frigate, two landing craft, about two dozen fighters, and a handful of patrol aircraft.

Britain believed it could deter with minimal investment as long as it enjoyed good intelligence.

Britain based its light presence on the belief that it could deter hostile action with a minimal investment as long as it enjoyed good intelligence. Upon receiving warning of a looming crisis, it would quickly send a small military contingent as a show of force, while mobilizing larger follow-on forces if needed. Such actions were designed to reassure nervous regional allies while deterring anyone with dreams of upsetting the status quo. Britain's commitment to allied defense relied on moving warships and troops into the Gulf quickly, not stationing a large and expensive presence there.

The British approach was put to the test more than once. In the 1950s, British officials feared that fledgling regimes in the Middle East were vulnerable to growing Arab nationalism, which in turn might open the door to Soviet

encroachment. In July 1958, a coup in Iraq cost London its military bases there and took a major oil supplier out of the western orbit. Later that month, reports came in that Jordan's King Hussein was coming under attack from Arab nationalists and pro-republican forces. In response, the British rapidly deployed 2,200 paratroopers to Amman in order to bolster the government and deter challengers to the throne. The Hashemite regime survived.³

A potentially more serious crisis occurred in 1961, after Kuwait formally declared independence. Some British officials feared that Baghdad would use this as a pretext to invade and make good on its historical claims that Kuwait and its resources belonged to Iraq. In late June, the British ambassador reported that Iraq was already revising its budget in anticipation of incorporating Kuwait, and that it had been making preparations for moving armored units to Basra. While none of these reports were confirmed, London quickly began sending forces to Kuwait. Less than a week later, Kuwait formally requested British assistance, and about 8,000 personnel arrived. No Iraqi attack materialized, causing some to speculate that Iraq never seriously intended to invade Kuwait. Nonetheless, British officials viewed the episode as a successful case of deterrence. The ambassador believed that no Iraqi tanks appeared because they had turned around in the face of British power.⁴

As in all cases of deterrence, it is hard to draw a straight line between British actions and the preservation of the status quo. Nonetheless, the Gulf region remained comparatively stable during this period, while aggression and war convulsed other areas. Fledgling regimes consolidated power, international borders held, and oil continued to flow. The Gulf states certainly believed Britain was playing the role of benevolent hegemon. When the British announced in 1968 that they would no longer honor defense commitments east of Suez, Gulf leaders reacted with sadness, not relief. "Britain is weak now where she was once so strong," lamented the Amir of Bahrain. "You know we and everybody else would have welcomed her staying."⁵ Leaders of Abu Dhabi, Dubai, and Saudi Arabia even offered to continue to pay for the British military presence, to no avail.

How was Britain able to play such an important role with such a minimal force? Mainly because the regional security environment was stable and benign for most of that period. None of the regional powers had the military wherewithal to do the kind of things that Western leaders feared. They could not destroy the oil infrastructure of regional rivals, nor could they disrupt oil transportation or shipping. Most importantly, they could not go to war in order to seize a significant portion of the region's resources. As a result, Gulf states faced relatively few external threats, and the light British presence was more than adequate to help protect them from internal threats.

Countries that would later grow into formidable military powers suffered from acute military weakness and domestic upheaval that forced them to look inward. Despite ambitions to transform Iran into a formidable regional power, for example, the Shah was unable to develop any serious power projection capabilities for most of the 1950s–1960s. Post-war Iran struggled to maintain a small army, and the situation worsened as a result of a power struggle that led the prime minister to slash the defense budget and purge the officer corps. The army recovered in fits and starts over the next decade, but it could not think about seriously projecting power. Iran’s air force focused on air defense and close air support rather than long-range strikes, and the navy remained a paltry coastal force.

Iraq similarly lacked meaningful power projection capabilities. The Hashemite regime had a tiny army and could send only two infantry brigades and one armored brigade to the Arab–Israeli War in 1948. The army and air force grew slowly and enjoyed limited access to British weapons over the next decade, but the coup in 1958 ended that relationship. While the new Iraqi regime sought to make up the difference by opening the doors to Soviet arms, these were of lower quality. At the same time, Iraq also was forced to maintain a large garrison at home to deal with the intermittent threat of Kurdish rebellion, which sharply constrained its ability to act outside its borders.

In sum, the would-be military powers of the Gulf lacked the resources to seriously challenge the regional status quo, meaning that Britain could safely maintain the peace through a combination of intelligence and a skeletal infrastructure that could accommodate surge forces as needed. Iraq and Iran both aspired to more regional influence, but during this period, demand for oil was low and supplies were abundant so they could not translate their oil reserves into cash for military spending. And while Iraqi and Iranian leaders dreamed of expanding their power beyond their borders, ongoing domestic turmoil forced them both to devote their attention to internal affairs.

All of these conditions changed in the 1970s. The dramatic rise in global oil demand led to skyrocketing prices. Gulf exporters were suddenly flush with cash. This allowed them to transform their militaries and develop genuine power projection capabilities. Iran, which had spent \$1.5 billion on procurement from 1950–1972, more than doubled that total in 1973 alone. Its defense budget went from \$900 million in 1970 to \$9.4 billion in 1977. It spent lavishly on British tanks and U.S. fighters, and it acquired a fleet of tankers for in-flight refueling, which extended the range of its fighters and fighter-bombers. It also purchased dozens of naval combatants and made a serious investment in naval aviation in an attempt to dominate the Gulf littoral.

Iraq went on its own spending spree during this period. Rather than sitting idle as its neighbor built an offensive military machine, the Ba’ath government

pursued a vast military expansion. Total defense spending in current dollars rose from \$252 million to \$1.66 billion from 1969–1979, and total military manpower tripled over the same period. A four-fold rise in oil prices after 1973 led to a four-fold increase in arms imports, and it was able to develop a network of suppliers from both the Soviet Union and Western Europe. The army doubled in size and added six divisions, which it equipped with over a thousand of the Soviet Union's most modern tanks and armored personnel carriers. The air force purchased hundreds of new combat aircraft, including modern Soviet and French fighters.

As both countries bought military power, their leaders indulged their regional ambitions. The Shah showed flashes of revisionism during the 1970s, though they were somewhat tempered by the constraints of the Cold War. He exploited the British exit to occupy Gulf islands and to challenge Iraq over the boundary of the Shatt al-Arab river, but he remained staunchly pro-U.S., willing to balance against a Soviet-sponsored Iraq, and basically satisfied with the politics of the new Gulf states. Saddam Hussein, on the other hand, became increasingly aggressive as he consolidated his rule, especially after successfully dealing with the Kurds in the middle of the decade. His grandiose dreams of serving as the face of pan-Arabism made him willing to take risks outside Iraq's borders, culminating in the invasion of Iran in 1980.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Britain was able to exercise hegemony with a light military presence because the Persian Gulf was a relatively safe place. The situation became radically different in the 1970s, as the oil market changed, the Gulf powers developed real military power, and regional leaders began to look beyond their own borders. Even if Great Britain had decided to stay, it would not have been able to exercise effective hegemony without a massive increase in its military presence in the Gulf. Hegemony on the cheap was no longer possible.

Back to the Future

What does the Persian Gulf look like today? Does it resemble the benign 1950s or the dangerous 1970s? The answer has large implications for the future of U.S. military presence in the region. If conditions resemble the earlier period, then the United States can safely draw down its posture while providing a modicum of political stability and ensuring the free flow of oil to market. If conditions resemble the latter, however, then Washington faces a much more difficult choice, because playing the role of external hegemon would require an open-ended commitment of substantial military force, unless the United States chose to scale back its regional objectives.

Although no analogy is perfect, the situation today is much closer to the calmer 1950s. No regional power possesses the military capabilities needed to seize and hold territory, meaning that none can capture so much oil that it threatens to manipulate international markets. Moreover, the diversification of supply, including the rapid expansion of new drilling techniques outside the region, may ultimately reduce the political leverage and long-term revenue of Gulf oil exporters in general.

Some threats to political stability and oil security remain, of course. Gulf leaders were startled by the Arab Spring uprisings, and some reacted quickly to defuse any similar protests in the region. Indeed, the chief threat in the region may be internal upheavals, though it is important not to exaggerate this danger. Civil conflict within the major oil-producing states could threaten the flow of affordable oil. The world has had a taste of this problem with the wars in Iraq and Libya, both of which disrupted oil production—but other suppliers, especially Saudi Arabia, were able to compensate for those losses. Even recent gains by ISIS have not seriously threatened oil production or shipping. ISIS attacks on the major refining plant at Baiji in Iraq concerned some analysts, but that facility is exclusively for domestic refining and is not part of the export infrastructure. Moreover, ISIS has made gains in relatively friendly Sunni-dominated territory, but it has pulled back when confronted by organized resistance. This suggests that it would have a very difficult time threatening the Kurdish and Shi'a heartlands, which sit atop the vast majority of Iraq's proven oil reserves.

The real nightmare would be civil war in Saudi Arabia, which plays a special role in the international market because of its ability to increase production in response to crises. Of particular concern is that many of Saudi Arabia's most unhappy citizens, the Shia minority, live in the Eastern Province where so much of the oil production network is located. Were sectarian conflict in Iraq and Syria to ignite a region-wide hot war between proxies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, one could imagine Iran seeking to foment instability in Saudi Arabia by supporting Shia uprisings there. ISIS also has made known its desire to conduct attacks in Saudi Arabia. It is possible that such developments could hinder the flow of Saudi oil, though this danger is certainly not news to the Saudi regime, which already orients much of its internal defense efforts toward oil security. Regardless, civil conflict in Saudi Arabia is not a problem that U.S. boots on the ground can do much to solve; in fact, a heavy U.S. presence in the region likely would heighten rather than reduce this sort of instability.

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The good news is that a modest investment of U.S. force should be enough to stop the other important military threats to oil security in the Gulf. For example, some observers fear that Iranian strikes on critical oil infrastructure in the region, such as the Saudi stabilization plant at Abqaiq or ports at Ras Tanura and Ras al-Juaymah, could have severe consequences for global oil production. Others worry about Iranian attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz, through which about 20 percent of the world's oil flows every day. Iran periodically threatens to take this step, has directed naval procurement to acquire capabilities relevant to such operations, and regularly exercises these capabilities. Nonetheless, a smart and economical force posture should allow the United States to deter and frustrate Iranian efforts indefinitely.⁶

An Affordable Force

Because the regional security environment is still relatively favorable for oil security, a small U.S. force can replicate the spirit of the British approach that proved so effective during the 1950s and 1960s. A careful military drawdown can leave in place a set of capabilities that would allow Washington to monitor events in the Gulf and spot signs of mischief that might be a prelude to attacks against oil facilities or shipping. Intelligence warnings can trigger the decision to surge forces into the Gulf quickly, again following the British model. A residual presence should include a skeletal base infrastructure that can accommodate follow-on forces. This combination of intelligence capabilities and a basing network can be relatively inconspicuous, which will reduce the political and diplomatic consequences of an enduring U.S. presence. When it comes to U.S. military force in the Gulf, less is often more.

Today, the United States maintains substantial land-based airpower in the Gulf, for example, in part to support ongoing operations in Afghanistan. But many of the strike aircraft used in that war likely will not be necessary for future Gulf missions and can be sent elsewhere. Some assets will remain critical, however, both to provide intelligence and to deter major challenges to the regional status quo. Interestingly, the most valuable aircraft to forward deploy in peacetime are not bombers and fighters, because combat aircraft can always flow rapidly to the theater in a crisis—as, in fact, they have done recently to strike ISIS. Rather, aircraft that provide persistent, high-altitude surveillance are key, because they make it less likely that combat aircraft will ever be needed. Stationing intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets in the region reminds potential aggressors that any offensives will be detected quickly, reducing the temptation to try. Keeping a residual force of tankers as well as airborne command and control assets in the region would also be important to hedge against the possibility of deterrence failures. These land-based helpers

would greatly extend the range, sortie rate, and survivability of U.S. combat aircraft that could return to the region in the event of a crisis or war.

Concentrating on ISR and support craft would limit the Air Force's regional profile, which is already surprisingly low. Air bases are deliberately located well outside of populated areas. The one exception, Al Udeid, is located on the outskirts of Doha, but it still is not easily visible from the main roads out of the city. Furthermore, the Qataris still own the base, control all access to it, and use it extensively for their own training and operations, so little about it appears American from the outside. Indeed, it is not a coincidence that Al Udeid houses mostly "enabling" aircraft (tankers, reconnaissance, and airborne command-and-control) rather than the potentially more controversial combat platforms (such as drones or fighter-bombers). Predators, Reapers, and the F-22s do not operate out of Al Udeid, only out of the more remote Al Dhafra in the UAE.

Similarly, the U.S. naval presence, centered on the 5th Fleet based at Manama, Bahrain, is also already relatively low-profile. Even amidst the domestic political upheaval in Bahrain during the past three years, the United States seems likely to stay and has not paid a significant political price for its continuing presence. U.S. ships are not visible to the region's publics unless the United States wants them to be. The U.S. naval presence in Bahrain is so long-standing and accepted that the base is located quite centrally in Manama. Unlike in Kuwait or Qatar, where the Army and Air Force have taken pains to remain out of sight, any Bahraini cab driver can drop his passenger right at the front gate of the Navy's headquarters without needing directions. U.S. personnel live among Bahrainis, shop at their markets, and eat at their homes. Bahrainis know that the real combat power is afloat, so they do not seem allergic to U.S. presence ashore. Likewise, the ruling al-Khalifa family seems more concerned about U.S. attempts to communicate with the opposition than with the presence of warships. Indeed, in the same week that the regime expelled a U.S. diplomat for meeting with the Shi'a opposition, it welcomed two additional U.S. Navy patrol craft to increase the overall size of the 5th Fleet.⁷

Keeping some naval assets in the region is critical to an effective residual U.S. posture. Continuing the forward deployment of mine-countermeasure ships is especially important in the event that Iran attempts to close the Strait of Hormuz, and given the ships' slow speed, it makes little sense to station them outside the Gulf. The same is true for other ships whose main mission is intelligence. Rotating in smaller surface vessels—coastal patrol craft, destroyers, cruisers, and frigates—would also be helpful for deterrence. But there is little reason to regularly sail aircraft carriers through Gulf waters when virtually all of their deterrent and combat power would remain intact were they to operate from the Indian Ocean. Carriers are designed for blue waters, not shallow enclosed environments like the Gulf. Despite their immense firepower, carriers

have few organic defenses and must rely on the other components of their strike group in order to travel safely through contested areas.

Finally, given the regional powers' inability to project conventional power, the United States can continue to reduce its forward-deployed land forces. The U.S. presence on the ground is least relevant for maintaining oil security, and U.S. land forces in the Gulf are already smaller than they have been at any time in the last 20 years. The Army maintains what is sometimes called a "brigade plus" in the region, which varies from 7,000–13,500 soldiers, stationed mostly in Kuwait. These forces conduct a wide variety of missions for Central Command, which is responsible for territory from Egypt to Pakistan, but many of these missions are irrelevant to Gulf oil security (though they might be relevant to other U.S. objectives such as counterterrorism). The Third Army in Kuwait essentially serves as a "lily pad" for operations throughout the Middle East by maintaining bases, training ranges, and large stocks of pre-positioned supplies. U.S. leaders may want to continue to maintain a ground presence for that reason, but they should not be bound to the idea it is necessary to ensure the flow of affordable oil.

That said, the Army's enduring presence is largely uncontroversial in Kuwait, where the U.S. military still wears the halo of 1991. Many Kuwaitis view the Third Army as a bulwark against the violence and chaos of southern Iraq and a hedge against long-term Iranian coercion. The U.S. presence in Kuwait reassures the Saudis for the same reasons, while conveniently keeping U.S. forces off their soil. In short, U.S. presence in Kuwait may have minimal

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benefits, but it also has minimal costs, especially given that Kuwait covers basing expenses. For these reasons, it makes sense to keep pre-positioned equipment and something like a "brigade minus" in Kuwait, amounting to a few thousand ground troops, but no more. In total, U.S. forces in the Gulf could hover in the low tens of thousands, well below the 50,000 present there today.

Preparing to Pivot

The United States had practically no military force in the Persian Gulf in the 1970s. It expanded its force in the 1980s as U.S. leaders increasingly worried about the security of Gulf oil. It sent a very large army to fight Iraq in 1991, and it kept a very large presence there after the war. Now, more than twenty years later, U.S. forces are withdrawing almost as fast as they arrived. To many observers, the withdrawal foreshadows an ominous shift in the regional balance of power and increased uncertainty about the future of the Gulf. Indeed,

echoing regional pleas for a continued British presence in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the GCC countries today generally want the United States to remain in the region, not only as a bulwark against Iran, but also to tamp down rivalries amongst themselves. They privately acknowledge the security and economic benefits that U.S. hegemony provides.⁸

But a U.S. drawdown is unlikely to have dire consequences, if it is managed properly. The civil wars in Syria and Iraq obscure the generally favorable conditions for core U.S. interests. While we do not mean to downplay the horror and tragedy of the ongoing violence, it is primarily the result of local disputes having little to do with U.S. foreign policy and is not especially amenable to the sort of solutions the U.S. military can deliver. Furthermore, political turmoil has been commonplace in the region for decades; domestic instability, coups, and ethnic rebellions all happened even in the benign period of the 1950s-1960s. As long as U.S. leaders keep key residual assets in place, much like the British in the post-war era, they will be able to monitor events, foreseeing and forestalling contemporary threats to oil security.

There are reasons to believe that intelligence on these issues is already quite good. Minesweepers stationed at Bahrain regularly update their hydrographic maps of the seabed in the Gulf, which allows them to quickly spot and identify new objects that might be mines. In addition, the United States has spent decades refining technologies that could be used to locate and track mobile missiles in the event that Iran attempted to attack oil facilities and shipping from onshore. These technologies can come in the form of unattended ground sensors or more exotic devices attached to vehicles themselves. The fact that the intelligence community reportedly used human agents to deliver the Stuxnet virus in Iran by infiltrating the Natanz uranium enrichment facility also suggests that boots on the ground are not necessarily key to keeping an eye on regional developments, or to influencing them.⁹ Extraordinary gains in signals intelligence collection and processing also now allow analysts to rapidly combine information from ground, airborne, and space-based sensors.¹⁰

Finally, the United States can make good use of the growing number of drones, especially the RQ-170, that are capable of loitering at high altitudes for long stretches. The RQ-170 has been operating undetected over Iran for years,

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though one crashed there in 2011.¹¹ Stealthy drones are perfectly suited to watch for preparations of a significant campaign against Gulf oil, and they require a comparatively small and inconspicuous support structure.

In sum, despite facing a region that often seems unstable and conflict-prone, the United States actually is in a position to take advantage of favorable circumstances in the Gulf, at least when it comes to the question of oil security. For many years, officials worried that if a single land power was able to dominate the oil-rich Gulf, it would possess extraordinary leverage over the international economy, ultimately putting U.S. prosperity in doubt. That nightmare scenario is no longer a concern. The major Gulf states have little to no ability to project power, and in any case, they are necessarily focused on internal problems. Thus, the old problems of deterring large-scale conventional aggression, and responding to it if it arose, are likely to prove irrelevant for many years to come. Internal conflict and instability will likely persist, but a large U.S. military presence is not the right tool for preventing or solving these dangers. After all, the worst period of sectarian bloodshed in the last decade occurred while the United States had hundreds of thousands of boots on the ground. Traditional threats to Gulf oil production and shipping will not disappear, but the United States can deal with these dangers via a much leaner presence. Following the British example, it can provide the benefits of hegemony without paying an exorbitant cost.

A light military presence also will send the right signal to U.S. allies in the region. Some modest assistance may help local actors fend off militant groups such as ISIS, but the outcome ultimately depends on these local actors' willingness to fight, and the return of a large U.S. force may turn out to be counterproductive if it convinces them that they can offload their security requirements to the United States—or if it appears to give unconditional U.S. endorsement to repressive and exclusionary regimes. Indeed, there is little evidence that a large U.S. military presence can ameliorate the underlying political conditions that give rise to groups such as ISIS or other forms of regional instability, and it might exacerbate them. There are already troubling reports that some Iraqis are using U.S. support to settle scores against their ethnic and sectarian rivals.¹² This problem will intensify the more deeply the United States involves itself in the current conflict. To avoid inspiring irresponsible and reckless behavior, U.S. leaders must resist the temptation to return large forces to Iraq and throw the full weight of U.S. military power against ISIS.

A light presence will also reinforce the purposes and limits of U.S. involvement to the major oil exporters. By retaining intelligence capabilities and a skeletal base infrastructure, Washington can reassure the Gulf states that it is committed to the free flow of oil and that it will counter any Iranian

mischief in the Strait of Hormuz. At the same time, a limited investment will serve as a reminder that the United States does not have grandiose ambitions, and that it has largely abandoned its prior rhetoric about exporting U.S.-style democracy to the region. Finally, by keeping U.S. assets largely invisible to most observers in the region, the light footprint will reduce the political problem for Gulf leaders who may face domestic criticism for cooperating with the United States.

The coming end of the war in Afghanistan offers an ideal time for the United States to re-assess its commitments in the region and further reduce the U.S. presence. Although both U.S. policymakers and their Gulf counterparts have grown accustomed to the highly visible, heavy U.S. regional footprint of the last twenty-plus years, this force posture is no longer necessary. In fact, it is anomalous when viewed in historical context. The ideal military posture will benefit the Gulf exporters by safeguarding the flow of oil while remaining relatively inconspicuous. Such a force will provide reassurance without encouraging moral hazard, and stability without entanglement or local irritation. Now is the time to begin conveying these realities to regional allies and working to convince them that returning to a smaller and smarter U.S. regional presence is the most politically and financially sustainable way of maintaining the U.S. commitment to the region, even as U.S. grand strategy shifts resources and attention to the Pacific.

Notes

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