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## Less is More

### *The Future of U.S.-Arab Military Relations*

Michael Donovan

Since the end of the Cold War, the U.S. military presence has expanded in only one region of the world—the Middle East. Yet, some allies in the region increasingly view the U.S. presence in the Gulf as a political liability, and support has eroded for the mission for which it was originally designed. The expansion of the U.S. military presence in the region resulting from the recent invasion of Iraq has again put U.S. posture in the Middle East in the spotlight. The implications of regime change in Iraq for the future of U.S.-Arab military relations and the U.S. military presence in the Middle East remain far from clear. What is clear, however, is that a new set of problems and challenges will follow the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. Most prominent among them are the risks inherent in a lengthy U.S. military occupation of an Arab state in the heart of the Middle East.

Instabilities in the region will continue to require Washington's attention. A withdrawal to an "over the horizon" military posture would be premature. But while some of the problems will necessitate a continued military presence in the region, others will be aggravated by that very presence. In the post-9/11 world, the old "bargain" Washington made with local regimes in support of the political status quo may no longer be valid.<sup>1</sup> Security in the short term is no substitute for stability in the

**Michael Donovan**  
is a research analyst at  
the Center for Defense  
Information in Wash-  
ington, DC.

long term, and reform in the region may now have to be a U.S. priority. The U.S. military presence in the Middle East may complicate efforts at reform—even more so following the invasion of Iraq—but the departure of Saddam Hussein holds out the possibility of a more secure regional environment that could allow the United States to significantly reduce its footprint in the region. Doing so, in turn, would allow Washington greater latitude to encourage reform among its Arab allies. However, the greatest care must be taken to ensure that a reduced forward deployment does not lead to a reduction in forward engagement.

**Expanding Presence.** The United States's bilateral ties with the southern Gulf states expanded after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, but the U.S. military presence remained largely “over the horizon” with the notable exception of a strong U.S. naval presence in the Gulf itself. The continued containment of Iran and Iraq following the 1990–1991 Gulf War, however, required a sustained presence. To this end, the United States enhanced and expanded military ties with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Today, all of these countries host U.S. airbases and logistics facilities, as well as storage facilities for propositioned equipment.<sup>2</sup> Even prior to the military buildup for the invasion of Iraq, force levels in the region had reached historic levels.<sup>3</sup>

By the standards of U.S. military bases elsewhere in the world, however, few of these facilities are enormous. The five to ten thousand U.S. personnel in Saudi Arabia prior to the Iraq invasion, for instance, hardly compare to the thirty seven thousand in South Korea or the seventy thousand in Germany. In many cases,

nevertheless, the U.S. presence is politically controversial and an increasing source of politico-cultural irritation.<sup>4</sup> In Saudi Arabia, for example, popular displeasure with the U.S. presence requires Central Command (CENTCOM) to sequester its military personnel in isolated complexes seldom seen by the general population. Even in the moderate state of Kuwait, the public is highly ambivalent to the U.S. presence, and the government only grudgingly supports the basing of troops as insurance against Iraqi threats—that exist no longer.<sup>5</sup>

What became clear during the ramp-up for the invasion of Iraq was that, while some Arab governments cooperated quietly with Washington, they were loath to be identified publicly with U.S. military operations on Arab soil due to their continuing quest for legitimacy. The lack of democratic institutions in the Middle East and the rise of new media in the region have exposed the veneer of legitimacy upon which many of these regimes rest. These regimes have become highly sensitive to currents of public opinion, even if they do not always defer to it, and are obsessed with avoiding domestic unrest. Some governments have attempted to mitigate discontent by channeling it towards the Arab-Israeli conflict, which causes problems of its own. Another strategy has been to impose limits on how the United States can use its military assets stationed in the region.

Even before the invasion of Iraq, the utility of the U.S. footprint remained questionable because this political sensitivity often translated into operational constraints. During the last decade, only Kuwait consistently allowed the United States to fly punitive strikes against Iraq in support of the no-fly zones from its soil. Concerned about growing popular

resentment with Washington's Iraq policy, the Saudis placed considerable limits on how the facilities on its soil could be used. The Saudis supported Operation Southern Watch over Iraq. But Riyadh did not

gic outlook of the Middle East in a profound way, at least in the near-term. Iraq will remain under the close supervision of the United States and the international community for the foreseeable future.

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allow U.S. planes to carry out strikes on Iraq, and imposed similar limits during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Though it is probably safe to assume that the royal family quietly acquiesced to the invasion of Iraq, cooperation was never overt. Although, access to Saudi facilities and territory would have been an enormous advantage in the invasion, the Pentagon was forced to transplant much of its command and control capability to the Al Udeid Airbase in Qatar.

**Changing Missions.** The missions the U.S. forward presence in the Middle East is designed to perform have also changed. "Dual Containment," the Clinton administration policy developed to deal with Iran and Iraq, largely drove U.S. strategy after the first Gulf War. But the days of "Dual Containment" were probably numbered even before the United States invaded Iraq. The containment of Iraq was becoming increasingly ineffectual and politically costly, and Washington's efforts to isolate Iran were—and are—in some ways having the reverse effect. By the end of the decade, critics were charging that "Dual Containment" was more rhetoric than a viable policy.<sup>6</sup>

Looking forward, the conventional military threat to U.S. interests in the Middle East is likely to abate. The successful invasion of Iraq has altered the strate-

Though traditional grievances between Baghdad and its neighbors and regional rivals will outlive Saddam Hussein, Iraq is unlikely to pose the kind of egregious threat to regional stability it once did.

Despite its inclusion in the "axis of evil," Iran poses challenges to U.S. interests in the Middle East that require responses beyond military containment. Economic factors, rather than revolutionary imperatives, now drive Iran's foreign policy. Tehran has moved to improve its relations with the European Union and countries throughout the Middle East, with the notable exceptions of Iraq and Israel. Iran does not have the conventional force projection capabilities to threaten its neighbors significantly. The Iranian navy is facing near-total obsolescence and is unlikely to pose a challenge to the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>7</sup> Iran is not capable of fielding a conventional challenge in the Gulf region with which a combination of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and U.S. assets cannot cope. Nevertheless, Iran, like many other countries in the Middle East, has an acute sense of its own vulnerability, which has been compounded by the invasion of Iraq. U.S. military forces are currently stationed in or have some relationship with Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Georgia, Turkey, and Kuwait, and the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet patrols the

Persian Gulf—the addition of Iraq to the list just about completes Iran’s encirclement. As a result, Iranian decision-makers have undertaken a complex cost-benefit analysis regarding the development of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Unfortunately, despite a perfect inspection record with the International Atomic Energy Agency, there is some evidence suggesting that Tehran may take steps to cross the nuclear threshold in the next few years.<sup>8</sup>

There are, nonetheless, some reasons to be encouraged. The disarmament of Iraq removes one strategic rationale for Iranian WMD programs. And a nascent, but meaningful, democratic experiment is yielding a generation of leaders who have less interest in the confrontational policies of Iran’s Islamic hardliners. It remains far from clear that bellicose rhetoric and military intervention are the best approaches to the challenges Iran poses. Rather, as General Anthony Zinni, former commander in chief of CENTCOM, argues, the key to nonproliferation in Iran is domestic political reform.<sup>9</sup> Iran’s support for hard-line Palestinian groups and its WMD programs will continue to menace U.S. interests in the region, but tying the U.S. military presence in the region to an exaggerated perception of the Iranian threat will unsettle allies and may undermine the moderate political forces that will eventually bring Iran back into the international mainstream.

Other challenges confronting security and stability in the Middle East will endure. The region is likely to remain as troubled as it is strategically and economically significant. A number of national and sub-national conflicts will continue to drive the proliferation of conventional arms and WMD. Each state perceives

itself to be surrounded by enemies, and many of the regional rivalries and conflicts overlap, linking other regions to the Middle East in one broad political-military theater.<sup>10</sup> The many problems endemic to the Arab world that garnered so much attention after 9/11 remain fixed in place. Political oppression and economic marginalization have nurtured Islamic radicalism, while U.S. support for many of these regimes and Israel has led to a hardening of anti-American sentiment.<sup>11</sup> The specter of Islamist terrorism has added a new dimension to the traditional threats emanating from “rogue states,” with potentially profound implications for the existing political order in the region.

The U.S. military posture in the Middle East must adapt to this evolving strategic environment. Few of the United States’s allies, especially the GCC states, have made substantive progress toward integrating their defense capabilities. Economic constraints and political differences are likely to keep them dependent on the U.S. security guarantee for some time. Stability and counter-terrorism missions in Central Asia and, potentially, in Iraq will continue to require an U.S. commitment for the indefinite future. Washington, nevertheless, will have to balance the requirements of short term security with the imperatives of long term stability. In the wake of the invasion of Iraq, the United States may now find that its military posture in the region undermines the ability of its Arab allies to cope with the political, economic, and social changes the lie ahead.

**And Iraq?** Undoubtedly, the most dramatic change facing the U.S. military posture in the region will be the occupation of Iraq. Securing Iraq after the con-

flict may require a force equal to that which originally invaded the country, and a mission to guarantee long term stability could require as many as 100,000 personnel for an indefinite period of time.<sup>12</sup> The future remains unclear, and several contingencies are possible. Some media reports assert that strategists in the Pentagon are contemplating retaining a U.S. military presence in Iraq over the long term.<sup>13</sup> These reports have been vigorously denied by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. A robust and prolonged military presence in Iraq might reassure Iraqis that their neighbors will not meddle and create an environment that fosters stability and political liberalization. It might also reassure Iraq's neighbors that Baghdad's territorial ambitions are permanently defunct.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, a sizable military presence could also prove to be, in the words of General Zinni, "a magnet for problems."<sup>15</sup> In the post-Saddam era, reducing troops levels elsewhere in the region only to garrison Iraq would likely substitute one set of political problems for another.

Efforts to develop political pluralism in Iraq could have their own security implications. A government in Baghdad that reflects the will of the Iraqi people may not pursue policies that Washington favors. Anti-Zionism and territorial claims on Kuwait are facets of Iraqi nationalism that Saddam Hussein may have exploited, but did not create. Conversely, if Baghdad identifies closely with Washington's interests in the Middle East, it may not pursue policies supported by the Iraqi population, calling into question the government's potential for stability and broad-based legitimacy. An Iraq shorn of its conventional military capabilities and its WMD will require a security guarantee that will, in one form

or another, have a substantial U.S. component. What is less clear is how long a democratic Iraq would wish to retain a U.S. presence.

Iraq will continue to pose problems both for Washington and its allies in the region. Leaving Iraq before the country is stable and reconstructed could probably lead to a return to the internal and external violence that has been such a prominent feature of Iraqi political culture. But local outrage over a prolonged U.S. occupation of Iraq could lead to political retrenchment and fatigue elsewhere in the region as domestic pressure to dissociate from Washington mounts. This pressure will increase even further if the situation in Israel and Palestine continues to deteriorate. Under these circumstances, U.S.-Arab military relations could suffer substantially, with potentially profound implications for bilateral ties, joint exercises, and base access.

### **The Future of the U.S.-Arab Military Relations.**

A sustained military presence comparable to pre-"Operation Iraqi Freedom" levels is likely to be a source of growing political discontent. The United States should minimize its profile in the region, while working to enhance the defense capabilities of its allies through a robust forward engagement and improved regional cooperation. With the departure of Saddam Hussein, a reduced U.S. footprint would be capable of coping with the residual conventional threats in the region without testing the political tolerances that have made that presence so controversial.

In the Gulf, Bahrain and Qatar will probably be eager to retain U.S. bases, as they are more concerned with the potential threat from Iran than from Iraq.

Bahrain and Qatar also hope that a U.S. presence will balance the dominant influence of Saudi Arabia. Consequently, even though their populations are subject to the same anti-American currents that flow through the rest of the region, the U.S. presence in these two countries is less controversial than elsewhere. Recent political reforms in both countries, lim-

economic, social, and political challenges on the horizon.

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ited as they may be, also demonstrate that the U.S. presence there is designed to support regional stability rather than the political status quo.

Elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, the United States may have little choice but to reduce the profile of its military presence. Even before the invasion of Iraq, there were indications that Riyadh might ask Washington to remove its troops for Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> The apparently mutual decision to do so came in late April, not long after the cessation of hostilities in Iraq. Speculation that the decision reflects a deepening rift between the two countries is premature. The United States and Saudi Arabia will continue to need each other and their long-standing security relationship, though troubled since 9/11, needs to be rehabilitated. A reduction in the U.S. presence in the kingdom will remove a major source of tension in the relationship, allow the two governments to cooperate more effectively on a range of issues including terrorism, and better position the Saudi government to manage the breadth of

the same direction as the Saudis. Even Kuwait may eventually follow suit as that government attempts to dissociate itself from unpopular U.S. policies and actions. Nevertheless, a withdrawal from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, or any other state in the region must be accomplished in a way that will avoid the false impression that the United States is abandoning the country.

The importance of maintaining and enhancing forward engagement cannot be overstated. A reduced footprint will require contingency access to a diverse and redundant array of logistical, headquarters, and deep-water transit facilities to accommodate a rapid deployment should the need arise. Wherever possible, propositioning arrangements should be preserved or even expanded. Every effort should also be made to preserve and enhance security assistance as well as advisory and training activities throughout the region. These arrangements will depend upon constant consultation with friends and allies and the rehabilitation of relationships that have, in some instances, been neglected or strained.

Other factors will play important roles in compensating for a footprint that could be reduced by as much as 40–50 percent in next few years.<sup>17</sup> Over the long term, technological advances will improve U.S. force projection capabilities. In the meantime, alternative-basing concepts, including maritime pre-positioning, should be explored. Rotating forces throughout the region rather than permanently deploying them at fixed locations would help to reduce visibility and minimize political costs.<sup>18</sup> Carefully coordinating the deployment of land-based airpower with the carrier presence in the Gulf will help to preserve capabilities while relieving the currently over-worked naval presence.

Where the U.S. military remains, business as usual will no longer suffice. The United States should make a concerted effort to educate local populations about the necessity and value of the U.S. presence or aid. More importantly, local governments will have to stand up and be counted when it comes to their own military ties with the United States. Too often, these regimes have relied on silence and authority rather than explaining the value and purpose of U.S. commitments to their countries.<sup>19</sup> Doing otherwise encourages the belief that the true purpose of U.S. military ties is to support an elite few.

Washington also needs to amend its approach to the Arab Middle East to include political, economic, and social reform as a strategic priority. A reduced military profile in the Middle East will allow Washington to achieve this reform more effectively.<sup>20</sup> It is clear that these authoritarian and ossified political systems are ill-equipped to foster long term stability. Poor governance, dubious human rights records, and questionable

claims of legitimacy will aggravate the looming political, economic, demographic, and environmental pressures that will increasingly challenge these regimes. Just as the U.S. military presence in the region has been associated with the maintenance of the political status quo, the reduction of that presence could be associated with the measured expectation of reform.

Finally, the Arab-Israeli conflict will continue to be the core issue affecting U.S.-Arab military relations.<sup>21</sup> Washington's efforts there, and the degree to which it is perceived to be an honest broker, will largely determine the extent to which relations with the United States are a political liability for Arab governments. U.S.-Arab military relations will continue to be negatively influenced by Washington's inability or unwillingness to exert pressure to halt the construction of settlements or limit Israeli incursions.<sup>22</sup> Arab governments do not require that the United States terminate its security relationship with Israel, but they do want evidence that Washington does not value it above all else. All of these governments hoped that Washington would have attempted to mitigate potential domestic backlash from "Operation Iraqi Freedom" by reinvesting its energy in the peace process prior to the invasion. The failure to do so has raised the stakes surrounding meaningful progress in the future.

Many in Washington will be loath to give up hard-won access in the region. But, in the end, U.S. policymakers and military strategists may find that less is more when it comes to the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. With the departure of Saddam Hussein, short term security in the region will be enhanced. But threats to the long term

stability of the region remain and military assets are of limited utility in addressing them. Much will depend on Washington's success in rebuilding Iraq and the timeliness of the United States's departure from that country. Circumstances could change quickly if Arab governments become convinced that the invasion of Iraq was not a one-time contingency, but, on the other hand, the first step in a plan to reshape the Middle East through military activism. In the meantime, a reduced presence in the region will allow Washington the latitude

it needs to encourage the kind of economic and political change that will foster legitimacy and better equip these governments to cope with the challenges that lie ahead. The United States cannot afford to completely withdraw from the region. But Arab populations and governments have become well acquainted with U.S. military capabilities. By replacing forward deployments with forward engagement, Washington can continue to ensure the security of its Arab allies while better acquainting them with American political values.

## NOTES

1 Martin Indyk, "Back to the Bazaar," *Foreign Affairs* 18, no. 1 (January/February 2002): 77. Indyk describes the bargain as follows: "Moderate Arab allies would provide the U.S. military with access to bases and facilities to help contain the 'rogues' and would support Washington's efforts to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict; in return, Washington would not exert significant pressure for domestic reform."

2 The U.S. Navy's 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet has been headquartered in Bahrain since 1995. Bahrain also hosts the Sheik Isa air base. Kuwait hosts the al Salem and al Jaber airbases, and Army camps Doha and Arifjan. In Oman, the U.S. maintains the Masnaah, Masirah, Seeb, and Thumrait airbases. In the UAE, there is a limited presence including an Air Force and Navy facility at al Dhafra and Jebel Ali, respectively. Qatar now hosts al Udeid air base and CENTCOM's theater command center at al Sayliyah. There is a combined air operations center at Prince Sultan airbase and other facilities at Eskan, Saudi Arabia. The United States Air Force also maintains Incirlik airbase, Diyarbakir, and Batman airbase in Turkey.

3 Following the events of September 11, the United States expanded its military presence elsewhere in the CENTCOM region. In the early 1990s, Washington established a series of quiet training and advisory relationships with the newly independent states of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. These relationships were quickly capitalized on and a series of more permanent bases were established in preparation for operations to overthrow the Taliban in Afghanistan. Beyond the several thousand troops now stationed in Afghanistan, "enhanced engagement" has led to a modest U.S. military footprint that includes four out of the five Central Asian countries.

4 The case of Saudi Arabia is the most extreme example, but it is nevertheless instructive. The presence of thousands of Western, non-Muslim troops in close proximity to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina is seen as heretical by some Saudis, including Osama

bin Laden. Critics charge that a reliance on foreign troops highlights the vulnerability of the monarchy and suggests that the defense of the Kingdom has been mismanaged in view of the billions spent on weapons. In the eyes of the religious opposition, the U.S. presence calls into question the Islamic credentials of the monarchy. Consequently the western troops that remained in the Kingdom after the Gulf conflict did so in order to prop up an illegitimate government.

5 Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2002), 191.

6 See Gary Sick, "Rethinking Dual Containment," *Survival* 40, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 5-32.

7 Hussein Aryan, "Iranian Naval Modernization: The Strategic Implications," *Jane's Intelligence Review* 12, no. 9 (September 2000): 17.

8 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "Iran's Nuclear Ambition's," *Strategic Comments* 9, no. 2 (March 2003).

9 General Anthony Zinni, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

10 For a discussion of the dynamics that drive conflicts in the Middle East, see Geoffrey Kemp, *The Control of the Middle East Arms Race* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1991), ch. 2.

11 P.W. Singer, *Time for the Hard Choices: The Dilemmas Facing U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World*, The Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World, Working Paper No. 1 (September 2002), 4.

12 Michael O'Hanlon, "Shinseki Vs. Wolfowitz," *Washington Times* (4 March 2003), 19.

13 Thom Shanker and Eric Schmitt, "Pentagon Expects Long-Term Access to Four Key Bases in Iraq," *New York Times* (20 April 2003), 1.

14 Kenneth Pollack, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

15 General Anthony Zinni, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

16 Patrick E. Tyler, "Saudis Plan To End U.S. Presence," *New York Times* (9 February 2003).



17 The International Institute for Strategic Studies, "U.S. Forces in the Persian Gulf," *Strategic Comments* 9, no. 3 (May 2003).

18 General Anthony Zinni, interview with author, 11 March 2003. For an excellent discussion of these factors, see Richard D. Sokolsky, "Beyond Containment: Defending U.S. Interests in the Persian Gulf," Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University (September 2002), accessible at

[http://www.ndu.edu/inss/press/Spelrepts/SR\\_03.html](http://www.ndu.edu/inss/press/Spelrepts/SR_03.html).

19 Anthony H. Cordesman, "The U.S. Military and the Evolving Challenges in the Middle East," *Naval War College Review* 40, no. 3 (Summer 2002): 83.

20 Ibid.

21 General Anthony Zinni, interview with author, 11 March 2003.

22 Cordesman, "The U.S. Military and the Evolving Challenges in the Middle East."