

## **Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 258: Time Bomb: The Escalation of U.S. Security Commitments in the Persian Gulf Region**

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### **Executive Summary**

U.S. involvement in the security of the Persian Gulf region has escalated dramatically since the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, at a cost to U.S. taxpayers of some \$40 billion per year. Through a network of formal and informal bilateral relationships with Washington, the southern gulf states have effectively become a U.S. military protectorate.

Guaranteeing southern gulf security, however, is a risky undertaking and may ultimately prove an unsustainable policy. There are numerous disputes between U.S. allies in the region. Although the U.S. military presence in the gulf is ostensibly intended to protect friendly countries from Iran and Iraq, many of the southern gulf countries fear threats from one another more than they fear Tehran's mullahs or Saddam Hussein.

The southern gulf monarchies also face serious internal problems. The fall in oil revenues has severely strained the region's cradle-to-grave welfare states. That economic pressure has tremendous political implications in countries where corrupt and authoritarian rulers have long relied on state largesse to pacify restive populations. Consequently, gulf monarchs face increasingly serious internal security threats--which often have a strong element of anti-Americanism, as recent attacks, such as the bombing of the U.S. military installation in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, have indicated.

The potential for a regional conflagration--which the United States would have little chance of escaping--is great. The United States has no interests to justify the risks and costs of attempting to manage Persian Gulf security. Washington should withdraw U.S. troops and encourage countries in the region to take responsibility for gulf security.

### ***Introduction***

The 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was a watershed in U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf region. The American military response to that invasion was not a foregone conclusion--a fact that is often forgotten in light of the popularity of the gulf war and the widespread support for follow-up operations against Saddam Hussein. There was intense debate about how the United States should respond. Richard Cheney, secretary of defense at the time of the invasion, has recalled that the Bush administration "really needed some time to come to grips with this basic, fundamental question of our strategic assessment of what this meant. Did it matter that [Saddam Hussein had] taken Kuwait?"<sup>1</sup>

The resolution of that debate in favor of military action marked the beginning of an increasingly activist U.S. approach toward the region. Today that approach has evolved into a policy of essentially assuming responsibility for the security of the southern gulf states and acting as the regional hegemon.

Secretary of Defense William Perry has described U.S. policy as follows:

In the broadest terms, the U.S. approach to Middle Eastern security is one of engagement, forward presence, and rapid response. The United States seeks to sustain and adapt security partnerships with key states throughout the region, broaden economic and cultural ties, and promote peaceful settlement of disputes before they widen into open conflict. In the Persian Gulf, we aim to achieve these regional objectives by ensuring that Iran and Iraq adhere to international norms, enhancing U.S. and friendly capabilities to defend our shared interests, and demonstrating our enduring commitment to Gulf security.<sup>2</sup>

Or, as Zalmay Khalilzad, director of the Pentagon's Office of Policy Planning during the Bush administration, has put it, "We are the security managers of that area."<sup>3</sup>

Managing security in the volatile Persian Gulf region, however, is an expensive and high-risk strategy that is not justified by American interests. Current U.S. strategy is based on numerous flawed assumptions, is plagued by internal contradictions, and exhibits a potentially dangerous complacency about the risks associated with high-profile American involvement in the region. Moreover, the very tactics that are intended to safeguard U.S. interests may in the long run jeopardize those interests.

### ***Three-Tiered Approach to Gulf Security***

According to the May 1995 *United States Security Strategy for the Middle East*, the United States has adopted a three-tiered approach to gulf security. The first tier is strengthening national self-defense capabilities to allow each country to bear primary responsibility for its own defense. The second tier is promoting regional collective defense to enable states in the area to cooperate during periods of heightened regional tension. The third tier is enhancing the capabilities of the United States and, nominally, other states outside the region to repel major threats to the southern gulf region.<sup>4</sup>

In reality, however, Washington has made only modest, largely cosmetic, efforts to encourage the southern gulf monarchies to develop national or regional self-defense capabilities, and those meager efforts have had some adverse consequences. The United States has instead focused overwhelmingly on the third tier--enhancing the U.S. capability to respond to contingencies in the region--and in doing so has effectively made the southern gulf a U.S. protectorate.

### ***National Self-Defense***

U.S. efforts to bolster the national self-defense capabilities of the states that are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates) have largely been confined to providing military advice and selling arms. The relatively small economies and tiny populations of those states, together with numerous military, political, and social factors, place great inherent constraints on their national military capabilities. Consequently, U.S. advice and arms sales have made only a marginal difference in their self-defense capabilities. The main result of the first tier of U.S. policy has been increased resentment of the United States in the region due to the erroneous belief that Washington has pressured the cash-strapped southern gulf monarchies to buy large quantities of American weapons since the gulf war.<sup>5</sup>

In fact, the United States is not the only--indeed, it is not even the dominant--supplier of arms to the southern gulf monarchies. The United States makes less than half of all arms sales to the region.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the gulf war did not prompt a weapons-buying binge on the part of the gulf states. Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE concluded more arms purchase agreements in the period from 1991 to 1994--after the gulf war--than from 1987 to 1990. The agreements Saudi Arabia concluded in the earlier period were, however, worth some \$15 billion more than those it concluded in the aftermath of the gulf war. Bahrain also signed more arms transfer agreements from 1987 to 1990 than it did after the war. Despite the three-tiered policy set forth in U.S. national security strategy documents, U.S. arms sales to the region have not increased substantially since the policy was adopted, nor is the U.S. contribution to the national self-defense capabilities of the GCC countries markedly greater than that of other arms producers.

### ***Regional Security Cooperation***

The U.S. contribution to regional collective defense--the second tier of U.S. policy--has been equally insignificant. In fact, U.S. policies probably do more to undermine than to strengthen regional security cooperation.

The primary organ of regional defense cooperation is the GCC, which has sufficient collective economic and human resources to create at least a moderately effective regional military force and could create an even more effective regional security organization if it enlisted the cooperation of other states in the region, particularly contributions of additional manpower.<sup>7</sup> Since its inception in 1981, however, the GCC has failed to play a meaningful role in regional security.

Tension among the southern gulf states is a major reason the GCC has failed to develop into an effective regional security organization. There are countless intra-GCC disputes, ranging from mundane to fairly serious. Economic issues, such as oil production quotas, are frequently matters of disagreement, and there are political rivalries, such as the long-standing animosity between the Qatari and the Bahraini royal families. Territorial disputes--between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, Bahrain and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Oman and the UAE, and others--are an especially significant source of discord. Such tensions are a serious obstacle to regional security cooperation. Despite the friction among the southern gulf states, though, the limitations they face individually with respect to national self-defense capabilities provide a strong incentive to pool their resources for collective security.<sup>8</sup>

Because Washington has made it clear that the United States is prepared to take ultimate responsibility for the security of the region, however, that incentive has been nullified. The southern gulf states have not had to make serious efforts to build the cohesion that would be necessary for an effective alliance or even to form a functioning rapid-reaction corps. At a December 1995 GCC conference, for example, the question of strengthening the GCC rapid-reaction force, Peninsula Shield, "was sidelined before the summit began, when Saudi Arabia, which dominates the alliance, and Kuwait convinced their partners that only a limited expansion of Peninsula Shield is necessary as Western powers are committed to defending them under defence agreements."<sup>9</sup> As Sen. Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) has commented, "As long as the USA acts as if it's going to do it all for them, it's going to do it all for them."<sup>10</sup>

Removing the incentive for the gulf monarchies to work out some of their differences not only hinders regional defense cooperation; it also contributes to a more dangerous environment in the region generally. Genuine defense cooperation among the GCC states would do a great deal to defuse tensions in the region. Because U.S. involvement in gulf security has removed the incentive to defuse those tensions, they not only remain, they threaten to embroil the United States in messy disputes among U.S. allies. The United States will generally have little interest in those disputes, but its allies can be expected to attempt to draw Washington into them. Perry has conceded as much:

A paradoxical risk posed by the United States' position as premier arbiter of Middle Eastern security is the high value Middle Eastern states now place on getting us involved in local conflicts. Meanwhile, the disappearance of the prospect that intervention in regional disputes could provoke a global confrontation with the Soviets may make us more susceptible to such efforts.<sup>11</sup>

The internal contradictions of the three-tiered approach--the third tier of which undermines the second tier--are representative of the faulty logic upon which U.S. policy toward the Persian Gulf region is based.

### ***Extraregional Allies or a U.S. Shield?***

Despite Washington's rhetoric about promoting national and regional self-reliance and occasional gestures to support that rhetoric, there is little question that the third tier--the U.S. commitment to the security of the GCC

states--is at this time the only functioning mechanism for preserving the security of the southern gulf states. Unlike the relatively flimsy efforts to enhance national and regional self-reliance, activities to boost the U.S. ability to respond to regional crises have been backed by considerable economic, military, and political resources. There are, nonetheless, a number of factors that complicate this aspect of U.S. strategy.

Extreme sensitivity to American influence in the region results in constant pressure to minimize the presence of the

American military. The U.S. presence must be sufficient to deter regional aggression or, if deterrence fails, to meet a regional threat; yet it must be unobtrusive to avoid inflaming local populations. The need to balance military requirements with local political considerations has resulted in somewhat unorthodox and awkward arrangements.

The United States has no formal defense treaties with its southern gulf allies; instead, it relies on a series of bilateral security cooperation agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. Saudi Arabia has declined to sign such an agreement, even though U.S.-Saudi military ties are stronger than U.S. ties with any other gulf state. U.S.-Saudi defense cooperation is based instead on long-standing informal arrangements.

The southern gulf states refuse to allow the permanent basing of U.S. troops on their territory. To compensate, U.S. defense planners are currently arranging to preposition a division's worth of equipment in the southern gulf states. Equipment for one mechanized brigade of approximately 5,000 to 6,000 troops is already in place in Kuwait. An agreement has been reached to preposition equipment for another brigade in Qatar, and negotiations are under way to store equipment for a third brigade in the UAE. In addition, Oman allows the United States to use air bases and to maintain intelligence-gathering installations within its borders, and Bahrain serves as the regional headquarters for the U.S. Central Command and for the U.S. Fifth Fleet. Riyadh, the most sensitive of the gulf capitals about the American military presence, has rebuffed Washington's proposals to store equipment in Saudi Arabia but allows U.S. Air Force units on rotational deployment to constitute a virtually permanent presence in the kingdom.

Measuring the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf region is more complicated than quantifying the American military presence in, for example, Western Europe or East Asia, where U.S. troops are stationed in the territory of U.S. allies. Because regional sensitivities prohibit the United States from permanently stationing troops in the southern gulf states, U.S. troops in the gulf region are generally on short-term deployments or military exercises or are with the U.S. Fifth Fleet. The number of troops in the region varies.

U.S. Air Force rotational deployments in Saudi Arabia involve about 5,000 troops. Approximately 1,500 American military personnel staff the headquarters of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. The Fifth Fleet itself, which includes one aircraft carrier, comprises several thousand more troops. Military exercises in the region vary from year to year, but in 1995 there were approximately 60 exercises involving approximately 50,000 U.S. troops.<sup>12</sup> Even without troops officially stationed on the territory of U.S. gulf allies, the American military presence in the region is clearly robust--10,000 to 15,000 people in Saudi Arabia and with the Fifth Fleet, plus troops participating in exercises.

In the event of a crisis (presumably Iraqi or Iranian aggression), U.S. troops in the region are to attempt to reach the prepositioned equipment before the aggressor does and cooperate with the southern gulf militaries to hold off the aggressor until reinforcements arrive. That strategy is both risky and expensive.

The strategy is risky because a regional aggressor can, because of its proximity, launch an offensive against U.S. gulf allies with very little warning. The United States, by contrast, must rely on its prepositioned equipment and strategic lift capability to ensure that its troops get to the region in time to respond to any threatening developments.<sup>13</sup> Once equipment for a full division of 15,000-17,000 troops is in place in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, the United States will have a "blunting capability" to stop aggression, according to CENTCOM commander Gen. Binford Peay, "but whether it would be able to stop a determined Iraqi offensive is another matter."<sup>14</sup> Repelling serious aggression would require the sea- and airlift of additional troops and equipment. In the meantime, the regional aggressor could inflict considerable damage on U.S. forces in the region and on the southern gulf states.

Ideally, the mere threat of U.S. intervention will deter would-be aggressors. That appeared to be the case when the United States launched Operation Vigilant Warrior in 1994 in response to Iraqi maneuvers near the Kuwaiti border. As that operation demonstrated, however, the strategy is expensive even when it is successful. Operation Vigilant Warrior is estimated to have cost several hundred million dollars, the payment of which subsequently became a subject of serious disagreement between the United States and its allies in the gulf region.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Burden Sharing***

Burden sharing is a major--and growing--problem. There is little tolerance in Congress and among the American

public for paying for the security of oil-rich monarchies.<sup>16</sup> Burden-sharing arrangements for Desert Shield and Desert Storm addressed that problem by billing the gulf states (and some U.S. allies outside the region who supported the coalition's aims but did not contribute troops, notably Germany and Japan) for most of the costs of the operations. As Patrick Clawson of the National Defense University observed, "Desert Storm/Shield operated in practice on the principle that the United States provides men but not money."<sup>17</sup>

That approach is not sustainable in the long term, however, in part because it effectively transforms U.S. troops into a mercenary force. Indeed, many people in the region appear to view the U.S. troops as mercenaries, as one candid comment by Commercial Bank of Kuwait official Dalal Ghanim indicates: "We pay the Americans, they do something for us; we paid the Arabs, and they stabbed us in the back. I buy the best for my money."<sup>18</sup> Clawson has warned that Americans will not tolerate such an arrangement indefinitely, that U.S.-GCC security relations "must be bonded in blood not money: GCC citizens must be prepared to die defending their countries before the U.S. public will accept risking its sons' and daughters' lives in defense of GCC states."<sup>19</sup>

Even if the United States could bill the southern gulf states for services rendered, the gulf monarchies could not afford U.S. military protection for long. The price of the gulf war and the tremendous costs associated with southern gulf cradle-to-grave welfare states, together with the fall in oil prices, have thrown the once-wealthy gulf states into a serious economic crisis, which is expected to get much worse before it gets better. Moreover, because the generous welfare state is one of the primary means by which the repressive gulf regimes stifle dissent among their citizenry, making the necessary cuts in social spending carries immense political risk for the regimes in power. The southern gulf states simply cannot afford to pay the United States to defend them.

Iraq expert Phebe Marr has observed, "Looming far larger than either the Iranian or Iraqi threat is 'sticker shock' from the costs of defense."<sup>20</sup> The United States, then, if it is determined to defend the southern gulf, must plan on covering much--probably most--of the costs. U.S. taxpayers currently spend at least \$40 billion a year on defense of the gulf monarchies. That is an expense U.S. taxpayers cannot afford.<sup>21</sup>

### *Threats in the Gulf Region*

U.S. strategy reflects a misreading of the threats in the region, both to U.S. interests and to the GCC states. The United States is primarily concerned with the threats posed by Iran and Iraq. The regimes in Tehran and Baghdad are indeed cause for concern--both have made clear their hostility to the United States, and both have some ability to threaten the security of the gulf region.

Nonetheless, Washington both overestimates and misunderstands the threats posed by Iran and Iraq--a problem that is enshrined in the "dual containment" policy of the Clinton administration. As the policy's many critics have pointed out, dual containment is seriously flawed.<sup>22</sup> F. Gregory Gause III of the University of Vermont has criticized it as "shot through with logical flaws and practical inconsistencies and . . . based on faulty geopolitical premises."<sup>23</sup> The policy also institutionalizes overkill. One "former high-ranking Pentagon strategist" quoted in the *Washington Post* pointed out that dual containment "prolongs the current situation and might cause us to continue to spend a lot of money and energy maintaining this forward presence for a good deal longer than is necessary."<sup>24</sup>

### *Iran*

The United States has been preoccupied with, if not paranoid about, Tehran's mullahs since the 1979 hostage crisis. U.S. assistance to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War was in large part a response to that crisis. Preoccupation with the Iranian threat was also one of the reasons Washington took pains to maintain congenial relations with Baghdad, despite clear indications of the nature of the regime, after the war ended. The gulf war itself, to the extent that U.S. miscalculations in the weeks leading up to it inadvertently encouraged Saddam to invade Kuwait, could also be viewed at least in part as an unintended consequence of Washington's overemphasis on the Iranian threat.

Since the gulf war, the United States has recognized that Iran is not the only threat in the gulf. Washington continues to vilify Iran, however, and to overestimate Tehran's ability to threaten the security of the region. Congressional

testimony by Joseph Nye when he was assistant secretary of defense for international affairs is representative:

It is quite clear that Iran harbors ambitions of establishing Iranian hegemony over the Persian Gulf and exporting its unique brand of radical Shi'ism. Iran has not hesitated to pursue these twin objectives through every means at its disposal, including subversion and terrorism. We see such tactics applied toward the realization of Iranian ambitions not only within the Gulf but far beyond it, in places as distant as Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon, the former Yugoslavia, and the newly independent Caucasian and Central Asian republics. Tehran has been the most vocal and active opponent of the Middle East peace process and is the sponsor of several of the groups most vehemently and violently opposed to it.<sup>25</sup>

As numerous Middle East experts have pointed out, however, Islamic extremism is a diffuse and largely decentralized phenomenon. Although some cross-border cooperation occurs, it is far from a Tehran-directed movement. Rosemary Hollis of London's Royal Institute of Foreign Affairs has commented,

It is beyond dispute that Iran has connections with Islamist groups across the Middle East and Central Asia, but this does not mean that Tehran is the mastermind behind an expansive and carefully orchestrated plot to dominate both regions. . . . Iran is unlikely to miss out on the opportunity to spread some influence at limited cost. Ideologically, meanwhile, Iran is virtually bound to give moral support and encouragement to causes in tune with its own. More than this, however, Iran is not in a position to do.<sup>26</sup>

That assessment was published in 1993. Given Iran's mounting economic and political problems, Iranian influence over Islamists throughout the region is almost certainly weaker today.

International terrorism is another area in which the United States probably overestimates Iranian activities. American officials tend to hold Tehran responsible for any act of terror throughout the Middle East--and sometimes throughout the rest of the world--unless there is decisive evidence that Iran was not involved. In many cases, however, the Iranian connection is either tenuous or nonexistent.

Overestimating the Iranian threat and incorrectly blaming Iran for terrorism and Islamic extremism not only aggravate the already antagonistic relationship between Washington and Tehran; they may also obscure the true causes of those phenomena. Without an understanding of the causes of developments that are inimical to American interests, U.S. policymakers are unlikely to be able to formulate effective policies to counter those developments. The United States may inadvertently adopt policies that exacerbate, rather than alleviate, the problem.

### ***Iraq***

The United States also overestimates the Iraqi threat. Saddam's ill-will toward the United States is obvious. Still, it is unlikely that he could pose a threat to the United States of a magnitude that would justify the resources Washington devotes to countering him.

Princeton University's Richard Falk has commented that "a weakened, shattered, defeated Iraq is somehow seen as a much greater threat to the United States and its interests in the region than this very vibrant, robust Iraq that we covertly encouraged . . . in the 1980s."<sup>27</sup> Falk asked whether Washington was perhaps exhibiting "the nostalgia that people speak about for not having an enemy and rediscovering new enemies and then endowing them with greater-than-real-life properties."<sup>28</sup> Indeed, it is worth remembering the Bush administration's initial hesitation when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and Congress's less than enthusiastic consent to Operation Desert Storm, even though American prestige was at stake after months of admonitions that Saddam's aggression would not be allowed to stand. If it was not considered a mortal threat in 1990-91, it is a bit strange that Iraq is viewed with such alarm today after five years of sanctions that have degraded its military capabilities.

Even stranger, much evidence suggests that Washington is more alarmed about the Iraqi threat than are the countries in the region that are directly at risk. The GCC states differ in their assessments of the threat posed by Iraq, but recent history would indicate that Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have the most to fear from Iraq.

Kuwaitis, by most accounts, are still quite concerned about Iraq.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, fear of Saddam has not yet prompted educated, middle-class Kuwaitis--those who are best prepared to operate the sophisticated military technology that would to some extent compensate for Kuwait's deficiencies in manpower--to take up arms in defense of their country.<sup>30</sup> And even in Kuwait there are segments of the elite that oppose the U.S. hard line on sanctions on the grounds that the sanctions strengthen Saddam and prolong his rule while turning the Iraqi population against states that support the sanctions.<sup>31</sup>

Saudis seem even less concerned about Iraq. Many Saudis reportedly did not view the Iraqi maneuvers in October 1994 that prompted the United States to mount Operation Vigilant Warrior as a threat, and news reports have cited Saudi officials' skepticism regarding U.S. estimates of the Iraqi threat in the context of U.S. efforts to preposition war materiel in Saudi Arabia.<sup>32</sup> In fact, some people in Saudi Arabia view the alleged Iraqi threat as little more than an excuse for Washington to escalate its involvement in the region. Cornell University's Shibley Telhami has noted, "One prevalent conspiracy theory in the Gulf, even among policy elites, holds that the United States assured the survival of Saddam Hussein after the Gulf War in order to justify an increased military presence in the region."<sup>33</sup>

### ***GCC Security Concerns***

While the United States focuses on Baghdad and Tehran, the GCC states generally are equally or more concerned with threats to their internal security or, in some cases, intra-GCC threats. As a report from one meeting of Middle East experts on U.S. strategy toward the Persian Gulf noted,

Threat perceptions in the region are at odds with those discerned in Washington. Although the United States emphasizes Iran and Iraq as the greatest threats, the internal security situation in the GCC states, and relations among them, may be of greater concern to some of their rulers. One participant noted that some of the smaller GCC states invoked the Iranian threat mainly to please Washington, whereas their real object was U.S. protection against Saudi hegemony.<sup>34</sup>

U.S. policy does not take into account such differences between Washington's view of threats and the views of leaders in the region. Yet certain elements of American strategy designed to counter an Iranian or Iraqi threat may exacerbate the threats that concern gulf states.

For example, U.S. strategists consider the American military presence in the Persian Gulf region indispensable for meeting any challenge from Tehran or Baghdad. However, gulf leaders are well aware that the U.S. presence can inflame resentful populations. Fragile regimes that are more concerned with internal security than with aggression from the northern gulf region may well conclude that the U.S. military presence entails risks to internal security that outweigh the security that presence provides against external aggression. As Telhami has observed, "The Dhahran bombing, the second attack on U.S. citizens in the Gulf in seven months, highlights the internal threats to Gulf security against which the American military presence is helpless--possibly even counterproductive."<sup>35</sup>

### ***Turning Point in the Persian Gulf***

There is compelling evidence that suggests that the most important challenges to southern gulf security in the relatively near future lie within gulf societies themselves. After a 20-year "holiday" from politics and economics (in the words of Vahan Zanoian of the Petroleum Finance Company), the gulf monarchies must deal with profound economic, political, and social problems that have the potential not only to destroy the ruling regimes but to throw society itself into chaos.<sup>36</sup>

### ***Economic Crisis***

The "holiday" began in the 1970s with a fivefold increase in oil prices and the subsequent flood of revenue from the nationalized oil industries to gulf governments.<sup>37</sup> That influx of money reduced, and sometimes even eliminated, the need to prioritize spending or observe budgetary constraints, which, Zanoian noted, "led the way to a parallel escape from politics, in which the ruling elites rarely faced the need to share power, renew their legitimacy and credibility, or

tolerate any meaningful public debate over major economic, social, or political issues."<sup>38</sup> In other words, gulf regimes had the resources to either co-opt or destroy opposition. Although oil prices began to fall in the mid-1980s, the gulf monarchies maintained spending at the levels to which their citizenry had become accustomed, which required chronic deficit spending. Such spending is no longer sustainable, however, so the "holiday" from politics is over.

### ***Political Instability***

The political challenges are daunting. The authoritarian southern gulf regimes are increasingly under fire from both Islamic radicals and liberals. As Judith Yaphe of the Institute for National Strategic Studies has noted, "Political radicals using Islam as 'the answer' are gaining support and influence in the Arabian Peninsula states. They demand the establishment of truly Islamic government, an end to rule by unjust, corrupt, 'unislamic' leaders, and the elimination of foreign--especially U.S.--influence and interests."<sup>39</sup> Would-be liberalizers, on the other hand, are pressuring southern gulf governments for greater participation in the political system, protection of civil liberties, and other reforms.

The extent to which dissent from either Islamic radical or liberal quarters threatens the ruling regime (and, by extension, U.S. policy) varies by country. By most accounts, the situation in Bahrain is currently the most unstable. Civil unrest has plagued the island intermittently since December 1994, most seriously since early 1996. The Bahraini opposition--represented by four major groups, two of which are Shi'ite Islamist and two of which are mixed Shi'ite-Sunni liberal organizations--seeks the restoration of the constitution and parliament, which were suspended in 1975.<sup>40</sup> In addition to protests, hotel bombings, and arson attacks, Bahraini officials have reported a coup attempt.

### ***"Iran All Over Again"?***

Such instability could have serious implications for the United States. Because Washington is identified with the current rulers, protests directed against the government may well target symbols of the American presence in the region as well, as recent attacks in Saudi Arabia indicate.

Georgetown University scholar Mamoun Fandy has cautioned, "If the U.S. does not support democracy and human rights in Bahrain, it will be exposed to charges of hypocrisy. On a more practical level, continued U.S. support for the regime could drive the Bahraini opposition to target U.S. Navy installations."<sup>41</sup> Lora Lumpe of the Federation of American Scientists has issued an even more ominous warning: "This is Iran all over again. The parallels are striking."<sup>42</sup>

The Iranian comparison is invoked frequently, with respect not only to Bahrain but to the other gulf monarchies, especially Saudi Arabia, as well. Saudi Arabia faces pressures similar to those that are causing the current disturbances in Bahrain. Palestinian-American writer Said Aburish has described the "convergence of problems":

We have an economic problem, we have a social problem--Saudi Arabia executed 140 drug traffickers last year. We have a succession problem, we have a political problem that people feel they're not represented. These problems are coming together now for the first time ever, and each of them is stronger than anything that happened in the past.<sup>43</sup>

Tensions in Saudi Arabia have not yet spawned large-scale unrest, but the element of anti-Americanism is stronger than in Bahrain. That became tragically clear after the November 1995 car bombing of a U.S. military training facility in Riyadh killed five Americans and, especially, after the June 1996 truck bomb near Dhahran killed 19 U.S. soldiers. U.S. officials had long downplayed both instability in Saudi Arabia and the extent of hostility to the U.S. presence. In the aftermath of the Dhahran bombing, Perry admitted the dangers U.S. troops face, saying, "I believe we have to be prepared for more attacks on our forces," not only in Saudi Arabia, but throughout the Persian Gulf region.<sup>44</sup> Former U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia Richard Murphy characterized the "great" probability of further terrorism as "an inescapable consequence of the role we have assigned to ourselves as the principal guarantor of security and stability in the region."<sup>45</sup>

Nonetheless, neither the gulf regimes nor the United States has taken serious steps to address the underlying causes of

unrest in the area, preferring instead to blame outside agitation rather than domestic factors for political turmoil. After the June 1996 announcement of a coup attempt in Manama, for example, the Bahraini embassy in Washington issued a press release that stated,

A serious conspiracy has been uncovered which reveals that an organization known as "the Military Wing of Hizbollah"-Bahrain, together with Iranian authorities, have been plotting together since early 1993--some 18 months before the current disorder began--to undermine Bahrain's security and stability. The movement's main aim is to stage an armed revolution to overthrow the Bahraini Government by force and replace it with a pro-Iranian regime.<sup>46</sup>

Other gulf regimes, especially Saudi Arabia, also blame foreign forces, especially Iranian ones, rather than domestic factors for much of their political turmoil. As Yaphe has pointed out, however, "The charges do not entirely hold up to close scrutiny."<sup>47</sup> Iranian and other foreign elements may appreciate opportunities to exploit unrest when it is feasible to do so, but the impact of such outside agitators is probably vastly overestimated.

As long as the United States and its allies in the region ignore the explosive combination of profound economic, political, and social pressures within southern gulf societies and the nearly total absence of legal channels for dissent, the potential for more attacks against Americans or even another Iran remains strong. In light of the acute national trauma the Iranian hostage crisis caused in the United States and the continuing U.S.-Iranian animosity, the threat of a similar scenario in another southern gulf state should not be dismissed lightly.

A repeat of the "Iran scenario"--a revolution or coup in any of the southern gulf states that brought to power a regime hostile to the United States--would put the United States in a serious policy dilemma. Washington would be faced with the choice of "losing" the country in question or intervening militarily to ensure the survival of a government hospitable to the U.S. presence. Both options have serious pitfalls.

"Losing" a gulf ally would pose problems because each of the southern gulf states hosts U.S. troops or equipment, or both. American personnel, as potential hostages, would be at best bargaining chips or at worst actual hostages (or dead). Sophisticated U.S. military equipment could fall into the hands of regimes that might well use it to threaten the security of the region or U.S. interests. Moreover, the likelihood of U.S. involvement in a war in the region would increase. In the immediate term, the United States might have to mount a military operation to recover U.S. citizens or critical military assets; in the long term, the United States would have another enemy in the region.

Military intervention to prop up or restore a pro-American southern gulf regime would pose different but equally grave problems. (Using the U.S. military to keep in power authoritarian, corrupt, and incompetent regimes that are resented by the people is highly questionable from moral and policy standpoints as well). The intervention would be difficult and dangerous. The U.S. military is not suited for internal security operations, and the danger would be made much greater by anti-Americanism. Considering that the United States has already become a target of resentment in the region, there is little question that Americans would be targeted if Washington were actively propping up a faltering regime and policing a gulf state internally.

Furthermore, U.S. policy depends on a network of cooperative regimes. The transformation of any of the six southern gulf states from ally to enemy would disrupt the network and call into question U.S. policy as a whole. One immediate implication would be military--the United States would have to revise its military strategy to compensate for the loss of prepositioned equipment, air bases, intelligence-gathering installations, or other assets. The policy implications would be more profound. If a hostile regime were in power in a key gulf country--especially Saudi Arabia--it is difficult to see how U.S. management of regional security could remain a viable strategy.

### ***Reconsidering U.S. Strategy***

Current U.S. strategy toward the Persian Gulf region has a number of pitfalls. Washington's differences with the GCC states with respect to threat perception, burden sharing, terrorism, and other things call into question the viability of the policy. National security sometimes demands that the United States pursue somewhat precarious policies; in such cases, it is important that the risks and costs of doing do be consistent with the U.S. interests at stake.

The U.S. interests at stake in the Persian Gulf region, however, do not justify the costs and risks of current strategy. U.S. officials understandably want to prevent nuclear proliferation (especially the acquisition of nuclear weapons by hostile, unpredictable regimes) and to preserve access to reliable supplies of oil at low prices. Neverthe-

less, neither nuclear nonproliferation nor reduced access to gulf oil (assuming that a hostile local power would be able to reduce access) poses an intolerable threat to U.S. national security.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, such challenges can and should be addressed at the international level, with those countries most at risk--the European countries and Japan--playing a leading role.

Instead of devoting tremendous resources to a policy that may well be ultimately unsustainable, the United States should rethink its Persian Gulf strategy. No policy will be risk free, but a lower profile and a more realistic strategy would probably be less risky and would certainly be less costly.

Instead of acting as the guarantor of Persian Gulf security, the United States should make clear to the southern gulf monarchies that they, not outside allies, are primarily responsible for their own security. Doing so would restore the incentive for the GCC states to think seriously about security cooperation--not only with one another but perhaps with other Middle Eastern powers as well. The United States would still have the option to intervene in the region in the event of a threat to U.S. vital security interests, but U.S. involvement in regional crises would not be automatic. Unraveling the current tangle of U.S. security commitments to the southern gulf states would restore the full range of policy options instead of steering the United States into regional wars.

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### *Notes*

1. Quoted on Frontline, January 9, 1996, Journal Graphics transcript, p. 2.
2. United States Security Strategy for the Middle East (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, May 1995), p. 2.
3. Quoted in Dana Priest and John Lancaster, "Slimming Elsewhere, U.S. Builds Muscle in Gulf," Washington Post, November 18, 1995, p. A1.
4. The three-tiered approach is set forth in United States Security Strategy for the Middle East, pp. 21-22, and in J. H. Binford Peay III, "The Five Pillars of Peace in the Central Region," Joint Forces Quarterly 9 (Autumn 1995): 34. It is important to note that although the third tier officially calls for enhancing the capabilities of the United States and other countries outside the region to respond to regional crises, strategists focus overwhelmingly on bolstering the U.S. military capabilities in the region. There is little effort to build the capabilities of other countries to intervene even in support of U.S. missions, and there are no substantive provisions for the intervention of other countries without U.S. participation.
5. See, for example, Stanley Foundation, "The Future of U.S. Persian Gulf Strategy: Report of the 36th Strategy for Peace, U.S. Foreign Policy Conference," Warrenton, Virginia, October 26-28, 1995, p. 7.
6. France, Great Britain, Germany, and Italy collectively sell roughly the same number of arms to the GCC states as does the United States. Other European countries, Russia, and China sell arms to the region as well. Richard F. Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 1987-1994," Congressional Research Service Report for Congress no. 95-862F, August 4, 1995.
7. The so-called GCC + 2 initiative, for example, envisioned personnel from Egypt and Syria joining with GCC personnel to create a regional military force that could be used as a deterrent against or to meet challenges from Iraq or Iran.
8. Anthony H. Cordesman, *After the Storm* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1993), pp. 555-56.
9. James Bruce, "GCC Leaves Collective Defence to the West," Jane's Defence Weekly, January 3, 1996, p. 14.

10. Quoted in "Gulf Pre-positioning Plans Make Slow Progress in Shifting Sands," Jane's Defence Weekly, July 22, 1995, p. 19.
11. United States National Security Strategy for the Middle East, p. 18.
12. Priest and Lancaster, p. A1.
13. Phebe Marr, "U.S.-GCC Security Relations, I: Differing Threat Perceptions," National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum no. 39, August 1995, p. 2.
14. "U.S. Pushes Gulf States to Allow Big Arms Dumps," Compass Newswire, May 1, 1995.
15. Clay Chandler, "Saudis Face Cost of Deterring Saddam's Forces," Washington Post, October 12, 1994, p. A25; and David Eisenstadt, "U.S. Force in Gulf Could Cost Billions," Washington Times, October 16, 1994, p. A4.
16. Richard W. Murphy, "The Mixed Blessing of Desert Storm," Washington Post, January 28, 1996, p. A15.
17. Patrick Clawson, "U.S.-GCC Relations, II: Growing Domestic Economic and Political Problems," National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum no. 40, August 1995, p. 3.
18. Quoted in Nora Boustany, "Peace Has Sour Taste for Many Kuwaitis," Washington Post, May 25, 1995, p. A38.
19. Clawson, p. 3.
20. Marr, p. 2.
21. "The Military Budget," in *The Cato Handbook for Congress: 104th Congress* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1995), p. 102. See also Earl C. Ravenal, *Designing Defense for a New World Order: The Military Budget in 1992 and Beyond* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1991), pp. 43-57.
22. For a detailed critique of the dual containment policy, see Barbara Conry, "America's Misguided Policy of Dual Containment in the Persian Gulf," *Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing* no. 33, November 10, 1994.
23. F. Gregory Gause III, "The Illogic of Dual Containment," *Foreign Affairs* 73, no. 2 (March-April 1994): 56.
24. Quoted in Priest and Lancaster, p. A1.
25. Joseph S. Nye Jr., Statement before the Subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, March 2, 1995, Federal Document Clearing House.
26. Rosemary Hollis, "Gulf Security: No Consensus," Royal United Services Institute for Defence, London, Whitehall Paper, 1993, p. 15.
27. Richard Falk, Remarks delivered at conference sponsored by the Middle East Policy Council, September 23, 1994, Washington.
28. Ibid.
29. See Martin Sieff, "5 Years after War, Kuwait Can't Rest Easy," *Washington Times*, February 28, 1996, p. A17, for statements by Kuwaiti officials on the Iraqi threat.
30. Boustany.
31. Marr, pp. 2-3.
32. Ibid., p. 1; and "U.S. Pushes Gulf States to Allow Big Arms Dumps," *Compass Newswire*, May 1, 1995.

33. Shibley Telhami, "Uneasy in Arabia," Washington Post, June 30, 1996, p. C2.
34. Stanley Foundation, p. 5.
35. Telhami.
36. Vahan Zanoian, "After the Oil Boom," Foreign Affairs 74, no. 2 (March-April 1995): 4.
37. Anne Reifenberg and Daniel Pearl, "Oil-Rich Gulf Nations Fall Deeper in Red," Wall Street Journal, June 4, 1996, p. A14.
38. Zanoian, p. 2.
39. Judith S. Yaphe, "Islamic Radicalism in the Arabian Peninsula: Growing Risks," National Defense University, Institute for National Strategic Studies, Strategic Forum no. 67, March 1996, p. 1.
40. Mamoun Fandy, "Civil Unrest in Bahrain May Have Serious Implications for the Gulf--and US," Christian Science Monitor, April 23, 1996, p. 19.
41. Ibid.
42. Quoted in Priest and Lancaster, p. A1.
43. Quoted in Peter Waldman, Daniel Pearl, and Robert Greenberger, "Terrorist Bombing Is Only the Latest Crisis Facing Saudi Arabia," Wall Street Journal, June 27, 1996, p. A1.
44. Quoted in Philip Shenon, "U.S. to Transfer Most of Its Force in Saudi Arabia," New York Times, July 18, 1996, p. A1.
45. Richard Murphy, "No Time to Run," New York Times, June 27, 1996, p. A22.
46. Embassy of the State of Bahrain, Press release, Washington, June 1996.
47. Yaphe, p. 7.
48. For additional discussion of U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf, see Conry.