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Russell, James; Brovo, Illiana

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Strategic Insight

U.S. Security Architecture in the Gulf: Elements and Challenges

by [James Russell](#) and [Iliana Bravo](#)

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Introduction

The United States has vital national interests throughout the Middle East and Persian Gulf, including the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the international economy, the security of Israel and other key regional partners, a durable Arab-Israeli peace, and the availability of the major air and sea lanes connecting Europe and the Mediterranean with Asia, Africa, and the Indian Ocean. In support of these interests, U.S. military forces are actively engaged in the containment of Iraq and in working to construct a more stable international environment in the region. The United States maintains active and robust security relationships with all the countries in the Gulf. Since the end of the Gulf War, the United States, together with its regional partners, has constructed a regional security architecture composed of the following main elements: forward U.S. military presence; prepositioned military equipment and access to host nation facilities; working with regional partners to boost host nation defense capabilities and U.S.-coalition interoperability through foreign military sales and training; and regional engagement through joint military exercises. One reflection of the strength and depth of the U.S. military commitment in the region: Dubai is now the busiest port of call for the United States Navy outside the continental United States.

U.S. Military Presence

U.S. military forces in the Gulf are actively engaged in the defense of vital U.S. interests and the enforcement of U.N. Security Council resolutions relating to Iraq. More generally, these forces help preserve regional stability by deterring aggression and by providing a credible threat of force should deterrence fail. Coalition forces enforce the trade embargo through Maritime Interception Operations in the Persian Gulf, and U.S. and U.K. aircraft enforce the no-fly zones under operations Northern and Southern Watch.

On any given day, there are 17,000-25,000 personnel, 30 naval vessels, and 175 aircraft deployed in the Persian Gulf region. Air Force aircraft deployed are Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia and Ali al-Salem and Al-Jaber Air Bases in Kuwait. Together with carrier-based aircraft, these forces fly Operation Southern Watch missions to enforce the southern no-fly zone in Iraq, which is designed to prevent Iraq from using aviation assets to suppress the civilian population and from strengthening its forces in southern Iraq in violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 949. Aircraft operating from Incirlik air base in Turkey enforce the northern no-fly zone. An aerial refueling squadron based at Al Dhafra in the United Arab Emirates supports carrier-based aviation. Bahrain-headquartered NAVCENT forces and coalition partners enforce U.N. sanctions as part of the Maritime Interception Force.

Each country in the Gulf handles the continuous presence of these forces differently, and each has its own particular motivations for supporting the U.S. military presence. While "public" support for this presence has always been uncertain, the start of the Al Aqsa intifada in September 2000 resulted in an unusual public protests throughout the Gulf, signaling a general disapproval of U.S. policies in the region related to Israel and Iraq. There was speculation following these protests that the regimes in the region

would be seeking to modify and/or change the nature of the U.S. military presence. With this as a backdrop, however, the region has provided active and ongoing support to U.S. operations in the theater in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, suggesting that some of the regimes remain comfortable with the ongoing U.S. military presence.

U.S.-Saudi Relations

U.S.-Saudi relations have been publicly strained in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, with attention paid to alleged tepid Saudi support and cooperation for the war on terrorism and restrictions on operations conducted by U.S. military forces out of Saudi military facilities. Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Senator Carl Levin recently suggested that the United States pull its forces out of Prince Sultan Air Base and relocate these forces elsewhere in the region. Other commentators have questioned the internal stability of the Kingdom, suggesting that the United States faces the prospect of an Islamic revolution in Riyadh. There is no evidence to suggest that Saudi Arabia is unstable internally, and the House of Saud appears as firmly entrenched and in control as ever. It is an abiding truism of the U.S.-Saudi relationship that the Saudis would rather its support for the United States and its policies remain off the front pages of the world's newspapers. The current situation in the war on terrorism is no exception: the Saudis have not gone to any lengths to publicize the fact that U.S. air operations in the theater during the campaign in Afghanistan are and were commanded out of a U.S.-manned command center at Prince Sultan Air Base.

However, the Saudis remain unhappy with what they perceive as unconditional U.S. support for Israel in the ongoing violence on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and they have grown weary of supporting the continued containment of Iraq via U.S. military forces performing Operation Southern Watch missions out of Prince Sultan Air Base. Press reporting indicates that Crown Prince Abdullah wants to start discussions about a reduction in the forces deployed at Prince Sultan Air Base. A reduction of operational forces in Saudi Arabia would have a profound impact on Iraq policy by complicating the continued enforcement of the southern no-fly zone and would more generally affect a U.S. military response in the event of a major regional contingency. The issue for U.S. policy-makers is to prevent this draw down (if it occurs) from turning into a watershed event that presages a change in the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

Iraq

Momentum appeared to be building in December 2001 for military actions against Iraq on the basis of the threat posed by its unmonitored WMD programs and due to alleged support that Iraq provided for the September 11 attackers. While justification for military action based on the latter issue appears to have failed, President Bush continues to state that Iraq must allow the return of United Nations weapons inspectors and has promised unspecified consequences if Iraq does not accede. Iraq's proscribed WMD programs have been unmonitored since U.N. weapons inspectors left Iraq in December 1998, when the U.S. launched OPERATION DESERT FOX. The Clinton Administration decided during this period that no arms inspections were better than sham arms inspections, since UNSCOM access to Iraqi facilities had been increasingly restricted during the preceding nine months. Iraq has shown no willingness to allow the return of U.N. inspectors, though it recently allowed an IAEA team to travel to Baghdad.

Iran

The U.S.-Iranian relationship remains dogged by mistrust and shows no sign of thawing, despite the congruence of U.S. and Iranian interests in Afghanistan. While the United States has actively encouraged and sought Iran's support in the war on terrorism, conservative elements in the Iranian government have thwarted any open rapprochement. Iran has a long history of involvement in terrorist attacks on United States military and civilian personnel in the region, and it continues to actively undermine the Middle East peace process by funneling arms and money to terrorist groups in the Bekka Valley. In early January 2002, Israel seized a ship carrying arms destined for Palestinian groups (if not the Palestinian Authority)

that is said to have originated in Iran, which, if true, is only the latest example of Iran's continued support for extremist groups in the region.

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