A New Security Structure for the Persian Gulf:

What Does the United States Have in Mind?

by John Hannah **(/experts/john-hannah)**

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Brief Analysis

Secretary of State Baker's idea of developing "a new security structure" for the Middle East has been the subject of much attention. What specifically does the U.S. have in mind? The most honest answer is not much. It appears that, in raising the idea, Secretary Baker was for the most part merely thinking out loud. Nevertheless, by raising the issue, Baker has set U.S. policy on the right track. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has made new security arrangements in the Gulf both more necessary and more feasible. More necessary because the U.S. would prefer not to have to repeat this massive diplomatic and military effort again, when -- because of potential cuts in the defense budget -- it may no longer have the capabilities to do so successfully. More feasible because the crisis destroyed all the old assumptions and structures on which Gulf security had been based. An extremely fluid situation now exists in which ideas once viewed as non-starters are suddenly worth exploring.

Realistically, what elements might be included in a new security structure? What certainly will not be included is the Gulf equivalent of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The necessary political preconditions -- in terms of stability and shared values -- simply do not exist in the Gulf to sustain a formal, long-term military alliance. When Secretary Baker compared the post-crisis Gulf situation with NATO's successful containment of Stalin, the relevant parallel he probably wished to draw was not between the Gulf and NATO, but between Stalin and Saddam Hussein, two ruthless dictators possessing weapons of mass destruction.

The central feature of any new security arrangements in the Gulf will have to be a significantly higher level of American military presence than existed before August 2, though much scaled down from the current massive deployment. For more than ten years, Saudi strategists believed that Gulf stability might be adequately secured by maintaining a balance of power between the region's three major actors: Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. In this structure, the U.S. was supposed to have a minimal "over the horizon" presence, while insuring that Saudi Arabia had enough sophisticated military hardware to, at best, deter and, at worst, impede an Iraqi or Iranian invasion of the Gulf sheikdoms.

Iraq's devastation of Kuwait and the necessity of dispatching U.S. troops to defend Saudi Arabia against a similar fate has laid this strategy to waste. Despite importing more than $30 billion worth of U.S. arms since 1974, the Saudi military proved absolutely incapable of defending itself against an Iraqi onslaught. If the Saudis and the rest of the GCC states are not able to play the crucial role of balancer in the Gulf, even with massive U.S. arms purchases, then

obviously this task will have to be filled by an outside power; that power will, by necessity, be the United States.

A similar situation existed up until 1971 when a small contingent of British forces was stationed in the Gulf precisely for the purpose of deterring Iraq or Iran from bullying the oil rich states of the lower Arabian Peninsula. In 1961, the last time Iraq threatened to settle its territorial claims with Kuwait by force, the prospect of having to cross this British trip wire successfully deterred an Iraqi attack.

The size and composition of the U.S. presence will of course depend on how the current crisis is resolved and the level of threat the Iraqi military continues to pose to its neighbors. It will almost certainly include leaving behind some U.S. ground forces at least in Saudi Arabia if not Kuwait as well. These should be complemented by an Arab contingent made up of Egyptian, Moroccan and perhaps Syrian troops. Britain and France might also make a contribution, giving the presence a truly multinational appearance. The post-crisis security structure will probably also need to include an expanded U.S. air and naval presence in the Gulf that includes greater access to the facilities of the littoral states. Until now, these states have felt politically vulnerable to charges of working too closely with the American military. But confronting a mortal danger from Iraq and having crossed the Rubicon of inviting in thousands of U.S. forces, the GCC countries should be more amenable to cooperating openly with the United States.

The U.S. should also seek pre-positioning sites for military equipment in the Gulf. While the local states -- for reasons of political sensitivity -- might portray this as an arms purchase arrangement, there would be no misunderstanding between U.S. and local planners about the real reason why this hardware was there: not for use by the local militaries, but by American forces in an emergency. Other arrangements that may be more difficult to achieve must also be considered as part of a strategy to enhance the stability of a post-crisis Gulf:

• If the Iraqi military emerges from the crisis unscathed, the U.S. must seek an agreement among Iraq's major arms suppliers to strictly limit the quantity and quality of weapons sold to Iraq. In addition, the U.S. must seek a worldwide embargo on the proliferation to Iraq of technologies or materials that might further contribute to the development of its programs in chemical, biological,and nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

• The U.S. must work to develop an informal regional coalition to contain Iraqi expansionism. The coalition would include those states facing the common Iraqi threat: Egypt, Israel, Syria, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. The coalition's focus, would be on each state's bilateral security cooperation with the U.S., while Washington would seek to coordinate their actions into a coherent strategy behind the scenes. For example, Egypt could provide manpower for defending the Gulf; Syria and Turkey could make troop deployments to their borders with Iraq; and Israel could deter Iraqi aggression westward into Jordan, as well Iraq's use of strategic weapons.

• Tacit security arrangements between Israel and Syria should be sought. Especially if Syria seeks to take forces out of Lebanon or the Golan Heights and move them to the Iraqi border, it may require assurances from Israel that it will not take advantage of the situation.

• Region-wide arms control talks should be pushed that focus on limiting the race in unconventional weapons and developing confidence building measure between Israel and the Arab states -- e.g., hotlines, advance notice of military exercises, "red lines" regarding where troops and weapons can be deployed, etc. While by no means exhaustive, even this partial list will pose daunting diplomatic and political challenges for U.S. foreign policy. The chances for achieving success in any of the areas cannot be considered good. But the fact that new opportunities may now be available to enhance interests in a region as vital as the Gulf, requires that they be explored.

John P. Hannah, a member of the State Department's Policy Planning Staff, was the deputy director of research at The Washington Institute until March 1991. He was the visiting Bronfman Fellow at the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Moscow, from September 18-October 12, 1990, and is the author of the 1989 Institute Policy Paper **At Arms Length: Soviet-Syrian Relations in the Gorbachev Era**

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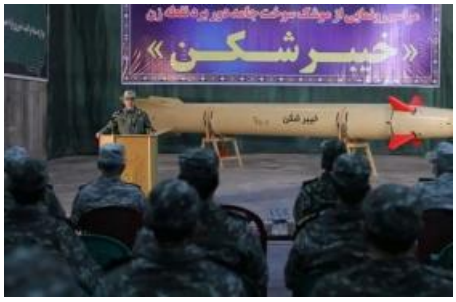

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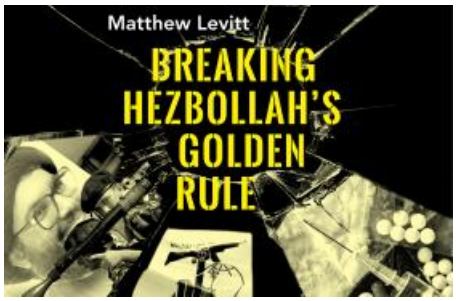

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