U.S. Military Capabilities in the Post-Cold War Era:

Implications for Middle East Allies

by **Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)**

Dec 4, 1998

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michael Eisenstadt (/experts/michael-eisenstadt)
Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of The Washington Institute's Military and Security Studies Program.

Articles & Testimony

The relationships between the United States and its allies in the Middle East are, for the most part, founded on national security considerations. As a result, trends that might affect the readiness and capabilities of the U.S. armed forces or Washington's ability to use force effectively have potentially far-reaching implications for America's allies in the region. Three developments in recent y are of particular concern here. First is the growing gap between civilian and military elites in the United States, resulting in heightened civil-military tensions and flaws in the national security decisionmaking process.

Second, contrary to expectations that the Cold War's end would enable the U.S. armed forces to be less active overseas (producing a "peace dividend"), it instead initiated a period of increased military activism abroad. Since 1991, the U.S. military has taken on an unprecedented number of overseas commitments -- including humanitarian, peacekeeping, and contingency operations -- that have overstretched its forces, creating problems in morale, personnel retention, and readiness whose consequences will be felt for years to come. These have already had an impact on American policy toward Iraq.

Finally, the end of the Cold War has unleashed political forces previously kept in check and loosened national and international constraints on the diffusion of technology to create a new security environment in many ways more complex and less predictable than that prevailing before. This new security environment poses challenges for which the United States currently lacks an adequate response.

HEIGHTENED CIVIL-MILITARY TENSIONS Most military assessments tend to overlook the importance of civil-military relations, focusing rather on weapons, technology, and doctrine. In fact, all these issues are important and interrelated.1 With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the United States has emerged (in the words of President Clinton) as "the indispensable nation" whose involvement overseas is the key to peace and stability in many regions of the world. Presidential leadership is crucial if America is to successfully fill this role, and, here, much depends on the president's ability to fulfill his role as commander-in-chief.

Three trends are relevant here. First, President Clinton represents a generational transition in leadership, from those who served in World War II, to those born during or after the war (the so-called baby boom generation). Many

baby boomers are unfamiliar with things military because they never served in the armed forces, and many are also perhaps a little distrustful of the military as a result of the Vietnam War, which was the defining experience of their generation. Neither the President, nor any of his senior national security advisors have served in the military, and the number of Congressmen with military experience has declined since the end of the draft in 1973 from 77% to 35%.2

Second, President Clinton has generally evinced a degree of ambivalence, if not a clear aversion, to the use of force as an instrument of policy. While embracing the use of the armed forces for humanitarian or peacekeeping missions, he has been very reluctant to use force for coercion, retaliation, or punishment. When he has done so, the use of force has been saddled with all kinds of restrictions -- that civilians not be endangered, that U.S. servicemen not be put in harm's way (hence the frequent reliance on cruise missiles), and that ground forces not be committed. These self-imposed constraints have often precluded the effective use of American military power.3

Third, as a result of the end of the draft, the ethos of the general society and the armed forces have drifted further apart, with the armed forces becoming increasingly conservative in its values and politics. The dwindling numbers of civilian policymakers with military experience has deepened the cultural and political divide between political and military elites, and produced one of the most turbulent periods in civil-military relations in American history. One manifestation of these civil-military tensions was the string of resignations of senior officers over issues ranging from gays in the military to the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia. Another, was the increasingly audible rumblings in the ranks after President Clinton's extramarital affair with Monica Lewinsky became public knowledge.4

It would be a mistake to believe that these problems in civil-military relations are rooted exclusively in the character flaws of key decision makers in the Clinton administration. In fact, such problems are likely to bedevil his successors as well -- not only because none of the likely candidates in the year 2000 presidential race have military experience, but because these tensions are a manifestation of profound, long-term changes in the fabric of American society.5

What are the implications of these civil-military tensions for U.S. national security? First, the civilian leadership's lack of familiarity with things military -- combined with the mutual distrust that has characterized relations between the country's civilian and military leadership under the Clinton Administration -- has resulted in a flawed decisionmaking process in the national security arena.6 There are several ways this problem has manifested itself in recent years:

Ever since the Somalia debacle in 1993, the military has tried to avoid major overseas commitments of ground or air forces that could put Americans at risk and produce another such disaster. As a result, they have been willing to indulge the Administration's preference for limited "no-risk" strikes that rely exclusively on cruise missiles -- even though experience in Iraq and elsewhere raises questions about the utility of such strikes -- if this will enable them to avoid putting troops in harms way on the ground or in the air, and gain Administration support for funding preferred weapons systems and programs.

Moreover, military officials have increasingly tried to influence policy by leaking to the press, or by speaking out publicly for or against Administration policy. Thus, during the 1992 presidential campaign, Gen. Colin Powell spoke out against American military intervention in Bosnia (which was favored by Democratic candidate Bill Clinton), while more recently, Commander of the U.S. Central Command, Gen. Anthony Zinni, spoke out against congressional plans to help the Iraqi opposition overthrow President Saddam Husayn.7

By leaking or speaking out on controversial policy issues, senior officers may inadvertently discourage the objective assessment of alternative policy options by the military, leaving the armed forces unprepared in the event of a policy reversal (this may have explained delays experienced by some U.S. Army units deploying to Bosnia).8 Likewise, such

actions increase the likelihood of friction with the executive branch or Congress, and create a climate in which civilian policy makers may circumvent military officers or bureaucracies deemed unsympathetic to a certain policy, in order to prevent hostile leaks to the press.

Indeed, at least two recent press reports indicate that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Henry Shelton was the only senior military official allowed by the White House to participate in planning meetings for the cruise missile strike against terrorist facilities in Afghanistan and Sudan in August 1998 and strikes planned for Serb forces in October 1998, in order to prevent leaks from the Pentagon. Several disgruntled officers interviewed in one of the articles claimed that the exclusion of the joint staff led to the adoption of flawed and unrealistic planning assumptions, and the selection of inappropriate munitions, weapons, and targets.9 Whether or not the latter claim is true, the exclusion of the joint staff from planning sessions has certainly increased the flow of hostile leaks to the press.

Finally, there is reason to believe that a small, professional military committed to ensuring a certain quality of life for its service personnel may not be able to sustain for very long an activist foreign policy. Frequent overseas deployments have led to an increased incidence of "burn-out" among service members. One way to fix this problem while sustaining a high operational tempo and maintaining the quality of life service members have come to expect, is by creating a larger military. However, there is currently no support in Congress for such a step.

A second option would be to attempt to alter the culture of the military by bluntly telling the troops that a stable, satisfying family life is incompatible with service in today's armed forces; in other words, that service members are married, first and foremost, to the military. It is unlikely that the armed forces could retain large numbers of quality people if it were to adopt such a policy.10

The third option, of course, is to reduce the tempo of operations overseas, though this could have implications for American interests and the security of its allies. There are indications, however, that this, in fact, is the route the United States is taking.

AN OVERBURDENED, OVERSTRETCHED MILITARY Seven years after Operation Desert Storm -- perhaps the most successful military operation in the history of the U.S. armed forces -- the U.S. military faces serious problems in the area of morale, retention, and readiness, and the appropriateness of its force structure to deal with the new strategic realities of the post-Cold War world. None of these problems -- which affect America's ability to perform as an ally and in a leadership role on the world stage -- are amenable to a quick fix; as a result, the armed forces will be feeling their consequences for years to come.

The dramatic drawdown following Desert Storm was accompanied by an unprecedented increase in overseas deployments for exercises, and humanitarian, peacekeeping, and contingency operations in Bosnia, the Middle East, and elsewhere. While defense spending has fallen 30% since it peaked in 1989 (from $338 million to $237 million) and forces have been cut by 34% since peaking in 1987 (from 2.1 million to 1.4 million), major overseas deployments increased dramatically during this period (by more than 300% since 1989 according to some sources).11 The decrease in resources available and the increase in operations tempo has forced the military to do more with less, resulting in problems with morale, retention, and readiness, and forced senior officials to acknowledge that the armed forces may no longer be capable of simultaneously fighting two major regional conflicts, as called for by America's national security strategy.

For instance, the Air Force has experienced a hemorrhage of pilots. Frequent deployments to the Middle East and in particular to Saudi Arabia (some personnel have been there on seven or eight tours of duty since 1991) has heralded a major lifestyle change for Air Force personnel and their families. Aircrews often spend their 90-day tour in an isolated desert airbase where they live in tents and fly boredom-filled missions over southern Iraq, where they are

unable to hone their combat skills.

This has put strains on families (resulting in an increase in divorces), undermined morale (resulting in problems retaining experienced mid-career pilots and mechanics who are leaving the service in large numbers for better-paying jobs with civilian airlines), and degraded combat skills. As a result, the Air Force is now short nearly 800 pilots and is expected to be short more than 1,600 pilots by the year 2000. It might take a decade or more to redress this problem.12

The high operational tempo has also proven a hindrance to regular maintenance, thereby degrading readiness. For instance, the mission capable rates for the Air Combat Command's F-15 and F-16 fighter aircraft have fallen from 85% and 90% respectively, in 1989, to 77% today.13

Finally, the U.S. military faces the problem that its force structure still reflects -- far too much -- Cold War planning assumptions and requirements, and is inappropriate for current post-Cold War realities. These realities include: a society that is extremely sensitive to casualties (both friendly and enemy); crises that require units to organize and deploy rapidly as expeditionary forces; and the fact that the military's force structure lacks sufficient quantities of weapons better suited to the new American style of war and for the emerging threat. Thus, the United States continues to buy and maintain incredibly expensive B-2 bombers that it has thus far been unwilling to use in conventional contingency operations while it lacks highly capable missile defenses, special weapons for dealing with Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) related targets, and sufficient numbers of Tomahawk cruise missiles -- the new weapon of choice.14

Steps have been taken to fix some of these problems. For instance, the Air Force decided in 1998 to reorganize its forces into 10 Air Expeditionary Forces (AEF) -- with 250 aircraft each -- by January 2000. This new, more flexible organization will add predictability to the lives of Air Force personnel and spread the burden of overseas deployments more evenly over the total force. Over a 15-month period, each AEF can expect to deploy overseas once for a preplanned 90-day rotation (only a major regional conflict would disrupt this schedule).15

The Navy has likewise adopted various measures to enable it to get the most out of its overstretched forces: personnel in key occupational specialties and certain systems such as special and/or precision guided munitions, Tomahawk cruise missiles, and LANTIRN equipped F-14 fighters (which are capable of attacking ground targets with laser-guided munitions) are increasingly being "cross-decked" -- passed from ships returning from deployments to ships headed overseas.16

The Navy has also experimented with surging carrier-based aircraft to nearly double the amount of strike sorties that can be generated during a 24-hour period, to squeeze more out of the existing force structure and increase the lethality of carrier strike operations. This is particularly important during stand-alone operations (i.e., when the air force cannot participate because allies have denied it access or permission to launch strike sorties, as has happened in successive crises with Iraq in September 1996, November 1997, and February 1998). However, experience has shown that this elevated sortie rate can only be sustained for 4-5 days before crew fatigue and maintenance requirements necessitate that operations be curtailed.17

These factors raise questions about the sustainability of some of America's overseas commitments. In fact, the strain being felt by the navy and air force in particular has probably already had a harmful impact on U.S. policy toward Iraq. The expense (not just in economic terms) of repeatedly deploying large forces to the region probably contributed to the decision not to react to repeated Iraqi obstruction of UN weapons inspections in 1996 and 1997, leading to the protracted crisis of November 1997-February 1998, and the weakening of America's containment policy toward Iraq.

THE POST–COLD WAR SECURITY ENVIRONMENT IN THE MIDDLE EAST The end of the Cold War greatly reduced

the likelihood that a superpower confrontation in the Middle East could spark a global nuclear war. In this respect, the world today is a much safer place than it was during the Cold War. However, the end of the Cold War also set loose forces that had previously been kept in check -- such as aggressive nationalism in the Balkans and the jihad-oriented Islam of Muslim Afghan veterans (which was formerly directed at the Soviet Union), and loosed constraints on the transfers of sensitive technologies that had previously been carefully controlled. As a result, American decisionmakers face a security environment that is more complex and unpredictable than during the Cold War, but with dangers of its own, including the proliferation of WMD, terrorism, and the horrible possibility of terrorist use of WMD.

Russian, Chinese, and North Korean involvement in the proliferation of WMD and missiles has emerged as a major concern in the post-Cold War era. The Russian case is particularly alarming, because the Soviet Union had an excellent record of restraint regarding the transfer of WMD technologies during the Cold War (when private firms in the West were the source of much of the problem) and because the massive scale of the infrastructure devoted to WMD production in the former Soviet Union makes the leakage of material and/or know-how almost inevitable. The United States still has not found a solution to this problem; Russia, China, and North Korea have repeatedly demonstrated a disturbing tendency to continue the transfer of sensitive arms and technology to countries such as Iran -- contrary to commitments made to the United States -- if they believe they can get away with it.18

The United States also faces problems with its European allies. The end of the Cold War led to a loss of U.S. leverage and influence over European allies who previously relied on the U.S. security umbrella to protect them from Soviet aggression. This translates to an increased willingness by traditional allies such as France and Germany to part ways with the United States on issues such as policy toward Iraq or Iran.

In the coming years, the United States is likely to enjoy a large and growing conventional military edge over potential adversaries such as Iraq and Iran -- thanks largely to its technological edge and the impact of sanctions which prevent these countries from modernizing their armed forces. However, the United States may not be able to exploit fully this advantage in many circumstances. Moreover, in light of America's conventional military advantage, challenges to the United States are increasingly likely to come from the two extremes of the threat spectrum: terrorism on one end, and WMD on the other. The United States will find both of these threats particularly difficult to counter -- in part, because its military force structure still reflects Cold War requirements rather than post-Cold War realities.

While the possibility that an Arab-Israeli war could spark a superpower confrontation no longer exists, the proliferation of WMD in the Middle East means that a future Arab-Israeli war could involve the use of these weapons on the battlefield or against civilian population centers. Averting this possibility will be a key U.S. interest in the Middle East in the coming years.

The most likely scenario for conflict in the Arab-Israeli arena is the possibility of protracted Israeli-Palestinian violence as a result of the breakdown of the peace process. Other possible, though less likely scenarios, include a Syrian-Israeli clash in Lebanon, acts of terrorism sponsored by Iraq or Iran that might prompt Israeli retaliation, and perhaps even an Israeli preventive strike on WMD-related sites in Iraq or Iran.

There are few situations, however, that would require direct and massive U.S. military intervention or air- and sea-lifts to resupply depleted Israeli equipment inventories. U.S. forces and personnel could be indirectly involved in future conflicts or be targeted by hostile groups or states (personnel at risk might include CIA officers involved in monitoring implementation of the Israeli-Palestinian Wye agreement). As a result, the United States will need to enhance its ability to deal with terrorism and WMD, the threats that pose the greatest danger to its personnel and interests in the Arab-Israeli arena.

In a future Arab-Israeli war, Israel would depend on the United States for both information and materiel. In a conventional scenario (such as war with Syria, which is at present unlikely), this might include target intelligence for counter-Scud operations and strikes on WMD-related facilities, information to aid interdiction of enemy expeditionary forces from outer-ring states (though the abilities of Libya, Iraq, and Iran have been greatly diminished by sanctions and/or war), specialized munitions to deal with hardened or underground facilities, anti-missile systems to supplement Israel's capabilities, and a resupply of tanks and aircraft if combat losses are substantial (which seems unlikely).

In the event of a nonconventional attack on Israel, aid might include the provision of medical supplies and personnel to help treat and care for mass civilian casualties, and personnel and equipment to aid in the decontamination of populated areas struck by WMD. Among the greatest challenges the United States and its allies face (in both the Arab-Israeli and Persian Gulf arenas) are preventing the delivery of WMD by nontraditional means (i.e., trucks, unmanned aircraft, or ships) as well as missiles, destroying mobile missile launchers and hardened and/or buried targets, and protecting allied and U.S. civilian populations against WMD.

In the Persian Gulf, sanctions have greatly degraded Iraq's conventional military capabilities, though the Iraqi military maintains a firm grip on the country and it could retake Kuwait should it wish to do so (though it would again eventually be ejected from Kuwait by the United States). Iraq's retained WMD capabilities remain a greater source of concern for now. These probably include a clandestine chemical and biological weapon production capability, a small operational Scud missile force, and perhaps 3-4 nuclear weapons lacking their fissile material core -- raising the possibility of a nuclear breakout by Iraq in the near future. Another crisis with Iraq is possible over Iraq's decision to halt UN weapons inspections and monitoring or as a result of a more blatant provocation by the Iraqi ruler. This, could revive tensions seen during previous crises between the United States and its Arab Gulf allies over how to respond to such Iraqi challenges.

The United States faces a dilemma in formulating its policy toward Iraq. America's Gulf allies support efforts to contain Baghdad in principle, but seem unwilling to support U.S. military actions that intensify Saddam's desire for revenge without dealing him a severe blow or eliminating him. They fear that the United States will eventually weary of its role as regional balancer and go home, leaving them to deal with Baghdad and Tehran on their own. Moreover, Washington's preference for limited "surgical" strikes and its policy of containing Baghdad, has created the perception among America's Gulf allies that the United States is ultimately unwilling or unable to finish off Saddam. It will be very difficult to alter this perception. Finally, American efforts to relieve the stress in its relations with its allies and reduce the burden to its overextended military by reducing its military presence in the region after the crisis of November 1997-February 1998, will reduce U.S. military options in future crises.

Without the credible threat and occasional use of force, no inspection or weapons-monitoring regime in Iraq can be effective. Under these circumstances, Washington is increasingly looking to sanctions as the main pillar of its increasingly ragged containment policy.

However, controlling Iraq's oil revenues addresses only half the problem. America's ability to prevent smuggling of equipment and technology into Iraq to rebuild its conventional military and its WMD infrastructure is limited, and will become more so as the amount of Iraqi imports grows under the "oil for food'" program. Barring a major misstep by Saddam, the containment regime on Iraq is likely to become increasingly ineffective. Iraq is likely to use the opportunities created by the easing of sanctions to strengthen its internal security forces and WMD capabilities -- with particular emphasis on acquiring fissile material on the black market from the former Soviet Union for its nuclear program.

Iran, by contrast, offers both challenges and opportunities. The election of President Muhammad Khatami in May 1998, has raised the possibility of more normal relations with the United States, though Iran continues with an

aggressive naval exercise program and its efforts to develop and acquire WMD and missiles. In light of Khatami's desire for more normal ties with the United States and the West, and Iran's desire for stability in the Gulf, the most likely source of tension is the possibility that domestic opponents of Khatami could resort to various means, including terrorism against Americans, to embarrass and discredit him and scuttle new attempts at a political opening between the two countries.

This could in turn, generate pressure for retaliation by the United States, leading to renewed tensions with its Arab allies in the Gulf, who have no desire to be caught in the middle of an Iranian-American confrontation. (In fact, the recent Saudi-Iran rapprochement was probably motivated in large part by a Saudi desire to distance itself from the United States following the Khobar Towers bombing, in order to avoid being caught in the middle of an Iranian-American clash.) Efforts to reduce tensions with Tehran would therefore reassure some of America's Gulf allies that Washington and Tehran are not heading toward confrontation, and thereby address one of their major concerns.

Tensions over policy toward Iraq and Iran will not be the only source of problems for relations with the Arab Gulf states. Low oil prices are likely to result in declining incomes, increased unemployment, and heightened social discontent in the Gulf monarchies. One possible outlet for such discontent is increased popular support for radical Islamist groups. This will create new opportunities for Iran to stir up troubles among the Shi'ites in the Gulf should it desire to do so. Such activities are hard to counter because Tehran tends to use surrogates for such operations, which makes it hard to prove Iranian involvement.

Moreover, the United States has to consider the possibility that tensions between Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan could spill over into the Gulf and affect the stability of Arab Gulf states, such as the UAE, with large expatriate Iranian, Indian, and Pakistani populations. (There is a precedent here: the destruction of a Mosque by Hindu militants in Ayodha, India in 1992, led to clashes between Indians and Pakistanis in Dubai.

This heightened potential for unrest will cause many of America's Gulf allies to fend off domestic criticism by further distancing themselves politically and militarily from the United States. This will mean a reduction in burden-sharing, reduced access, and perhaps greater pressure for a return to an over-the-horizon military presence by the United States.19

One possible solution to this problem may be provided by mobile offshore bases (MOBs), floating structures derived from offshore oil drilling platforms. A MOB could be used to store equipment; as a logistics base, repair depot, or hospital; or to house combat or support personnel. Several MOBs linked together could support aircraft operations. This concept, if proven viable, could provide a way to reduce the American presence ashore without forcing the U.S. to retreat over-the-horizon. However, the MOB concept is still in its infancy and, even if funded, is more than a decade away from deployment.20 Strains on the force structure and growing regional sensitivities concerning the U.S. presence will probably result in a reduction of the American presence before then.21

In the near term, the United States will remain in the Persian Gulf to preserve the flow of oil and prevent the emergence of a hegemonic power there. The main conventional military challenges the U.S. faces relate to an Iraqi ground threat to Kuwait, and Iran's naval mine, submarine warfare, and antiship missile capabilities.

The main challenges the United States and its allies in the Persian Gulf face in the nonconventional arena are similar to those in the Arab-Israeli arena: destroying mobile missile launchers and hardened and/or buried targets, preventing the delivery of WMD by traditional means (such as missiles and aircraft) and nontraditional means (such as small boats or dhows and unmanned aircraft), and protecting allied and U.S. forward forces and civilian populations against WMD.

The United States will probably be deeply involved in augmenting the nuclear, biological, and chemical defense capabilities of its allies in the Gulf and managing the consequences of a WMD attack, by providing medical supplies

and personnel, treating mass civilian casualties, and decontaminating population centers.

Finally, in the political-military arena, the United States will face the challenge of managing the possibility of a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran in the coming years. In the long term, however, the eventual transformation of the Persian Gulf as a primary supplier of petroleum for Europe and the United States toward East Asia; the military strain of maintaining a significant forward military presence in the Gulf; and the growing risk associated with maintaining a large forward presence in a proliferated world, could eventually force a rethinking of U.S. strategy toward the Gulf.22

THE LIMITS OF AMERICAN CONVENTIONAL MILITARY POWER On the conventional level, the United States maintains a significant advantage over any regional challenger. Thanks to the degradation of the Iraqi army due to sanctions, enhanced early warning of an Iraqi threat to Kuwait due to no-fly and no-drive zones in southern Iraq, and a beefed-up forward military presence, the United States should be able to handle any conventional Iraqi threat for the foreseeable future. Likewise, the U.S. navy is more than a match for Iran's navy, though the Iranians have done a good job building an "asymmetric" force that could cause problems for and inflict substantial damage on the U.S. navy in the Gulf in the event of a conflict.

Numerical and qualitative measures of military power, however, only tell part of the story. The fact is that the United States is operating in a new security environment which often constrains the exercise of its military power. This point is best illustrated by two scenarios, one notional, the other real.

How would the United States have responded had it obtained evidence of Iranian involvement in the Khobar Towers bombing? It is unlikely that America would obtain the kind of proof of Iranian involvement that its allies -- not to mention the UN -- would demand, for tough new economic sanctions on Tehran. This leaves the military option. Military action, however, could spawn further acts of terror by Iranian officials who might believe they could better cover their tracks next time; further strain America's relations with Arab Gulf allies who feared getting caught in an Iranian-American confrontation; and undercut those Iranians who seek to normalize ties with the United States. The cumulative weight of potential negatives associated with military action are such that even given evidence of an Iranian role in Khobar Towers, U.S. decisionmakers would have good reason to eschew the military option.

The United States faced a different set of problems during the protracted stand-off with Iraq that ended in February 1998 -- though they drew the same conclusion. While recognizing that the threat or use of force was a necessary condition for inspections and monitoring, the United States faced a dilemma. It feared that military action could prompt a political backlash in the Arab world; further strain ties with France, Russia, and China; result in the death or capture of U.S. airmen; cause significant civilian casualties; hasten the collapse of sanctions; and fail to inflict sufficient pain to cause Saddam to back down, prompting him to expel UN weapons inspectors from Iraq.

In the end, the United States opted for a diplomatic solution, avoiding the problems of military action -- but setting the stage for Iraq's August and October 1998 decisions to halt UN weapons inspections and monitoring activities, and the November 1998 crisis which produced an ambiguous outcome at best. Despite the risks and potential drawbacks that military action against Iraq entails, there is no way, in the long run, for the United States to contain Iraq, and avert repeated challenges from it, without a willingness to resort to the military option, unilaterally if necessary. On the other hand, there is no assurance that the use of force would gain no more than a few extra months for UN weapons inspectors to do their job before Iraq resumed obstruction and the United States has to strike again. A policy predicated on periodic military strikes on Baghdad may be the only way to contain Iraq, though it may not be politically sustainable over time.

While U.S. difficulties exploiting its growing conventional military edge are likely to continue, the United States and its allies face even more difficult challenges coming from the two extremes of the threat spectrum: terrorism and

WMD.

THE CHALLENGES OF ANTI-AMERICAN TERRORISM The recent growth in anti-American terrorism is in part a backlash against the post-Desert Storm decision to maintain a substantial onshore forward military presence in the Gulf region. The anti-American ideology of extremist groups such as the Bin Laden Organization (BLO) has its roots in mainstream ideological currents in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, and is a fringe phenomenon only in the degree to which it fervently embraces violence. Because the anti-American ideology of this violent fringe is rooted in the mainstream, it could be around for years to come.23

Moreover, because this movement is international in scope, it is not susceptible to a decapitating knock-out blow and will therefore be difficult to counter (though the United States has chalked up an impressive series of arrests of its members which seems to have disrupted operations). If the precedent established by terrorist groups of the 1960s and 1970s is valid, operatives of radical anti-American Islamic groups such as the BLO will be active for years to come, until they retire (Abu Abbas comes to mind), are placed under house arrest (as happened to Abu Nidal), are handed over to their pursuers (in the case of "Carlos the Jackal"), or are killed or die of natural causes.

At any rate, fighting the new transnational Islamic terrorism will require, more than ever before, an international effort, and the United States will need the help of numerous foreign countries. Moreover, the World Trade Center bombing highlights America's vulnerability to foreign terrorism. Future attacks might strengthen calls for the United States to disengage from foreign entanglements that contribute to such terrorism, though it is more likely that such acts of terrorism will only stiffen American resolve to remain engaged overseas.

WMD AND MISSILE PROLIFERATION Developing an effective response to the threat posed by missiles and WMD will likewise require a high degree of cooperation between the United States and its allies. Few if any countries have the knowledge and technology base needed to deal on their own with the full spectrum of challenges posed by WMD and missiles. Even the United States had to rely on Czech chemical defense teams and German Fox chemical reconnaissance vehicles to fill gaps in its own nuclear, biological, and chemical defense capabilities during the 1991 Gulf War. Conversely, a series of unsuccessful tests of the American THAAD antimissile system has caused some in the United States Congress to call for the evaluation of the Israeli Arrow missile as a stop-gap measure (though this is not likely to happen, since the Arrow does not meet American requirements for a small, deployable, highly capable system). And America's allies -- in both the Arab- Israeli and Persian Gulf arenas -- will continue to depend on the United States for missile-launch warning data for missile defense purposes.

There is a potential for greater cooperation between America and its allies, and among these Middle East allies, in the area of missile defense. The United States is already working with Israel to enhance battlefield interoperability between Israel's Patriot and Arrow systems, and between these systems and America's Aegis naval radar and Patriot missile defense system. This capability will be tested in an exercise involving the United States and Israel slated for May 1999.24

Furthermore, Israel, Jordan, and Turkey are natural candidates for cooperation among themselves. Jordan is concerned that Israeli missile defenses would knock down incoming missiles from Iraq or Iran over the populated western half of the country, producing casualties if chemical or biological agents scattered from destroyed missiles reach the ground. Deployment of the Arrow in Jordan would obviate this problem and Israel has already offered to deploy the Arrow to Jordan and/or Turkey during a crisis.25

Likewise, in the event of a war between Syria, and either Israel or Turkey, the latter two would benefit greatly if Scud-hunting teams or armed UAVs could stage attacks on missile launchers from the territory of the other, or from Jordan. This would make it difficult for Syria to exploit its territorial depth as a means of protecting its missile force.

In the Persian Gulf, there are also grounds for cooperation among the United States and its allies. Kuwait and Saudi

Arabia could conceivably provide early warning and detection and tracking data for missile launches from Iraq against the states of the lower Gulf: Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman. Likewise, American Aegis-equipped cruisers and destroyers in the Persian Gulf could provide early warning and a first line of defense against missile attacks from both Iraq and Iran, once the Standard SM2 Block IV-A missile is deployed in 2002. Secretary of Defense William Cohen reportedly broached this topic during a trip to the Gulf in October 1998, though it is unclear how his proposals for greater cost-sharing and operational coordination in this area were received.26 The main problem will be to convince the Arab Gulf states to allocate funds for missile defenses at a time of financial belt-tightening, and to transcend the petty rivalries that have in the past hindered cooperation among the Arab Gulf states in the conventional military arena.

It should be kept in mind, however, that missiles are not the only means of delivering WMD, and that attention must also be focused on developing countermeasures for nontraditional delivery means for WMD such as suitcase bombs, trucks, boats, and small unmanned aircraft. In a region where people move across the Gulf with relative ease, and where much of the population is concentrated along the coast, such threats will be difficult to counter.

The recent crisis with Iraq that ended in February 1998 showed that neither the United State nor its allies are adequately prepared to deal with the WMD threat -- particularly in the area of civil defense. Despite the fact that Israel has perhaps one of the most comprehensive civil defense programs in the world, it was caught woefully unprepared. Israel lacked stockpiles of vaccines and antidotes and chemical or biological agent warning devices, guest laborers lacked protective masks altogether, and many civilians had failed to trade in their old (in some cases defective) masks for newer, better models. As a result, Jerusalem reportedly asked Washington to defer military action against Iraq until Israel received emergency shipments of such items from the United States and elsewhere.27 The civil defense capabilities of America's Gulf allies are much more rudimentary. Accordingly, the problem there is even more acute. Moreover, the United States has only recently begun stockpiling anthrax vaccines for use in an emergency, and these may not be available for use by allies in an emergency. The vulnerability of America's allies is a source of vulnerability for the United States, for if its allies can be held hostage to the threat of WMD attacks, Washington's options could be constrained during a crisis. Much more needs to be done in this area.

Likewise, more planning needs to be done among America's allies in the area of consequence management. A chemical or biological attack in some of the smaller Arab Gulf states could produce mass casualties that would quickly overwhelm the medical care system of these countries. The U.S. navy's two hospital ships, with 1,000 beds each, would provide only a modest increase in total hospital bed capacity and could take three weeks to reach the region, though American military medical staff would bring to bear crucial expertise. While small numbers of casualties could be evacuated to U.S. military hospitals in Europe, the local medical infrastructure would have a crucial role in caring for the victims of a chemical or biological warfare incident. Saudi Arabia -- which has two-thirds of the 66,000 beds in the region -- could make a particularly important contribution in the aftermath of a chemical or biological attack.28

The United States also has to ensure that assistance it provides to the Arab Gulf allies before or after a chemical or biological attack is made available to foreign guest workers, who comprise a majority of the population in some of the Gulf states. Most of these guest workers are from India, Pakistan, and the Philippines, and inequities in the distribution of emergency assistance could produce an anti-American backlash in their home countries.

The nature and scope of nonconventional weapons proliferation in the Middle East will become increasingly difficult to ascertain in the coming years, as proliferators further improve their ability to conceal their activities by dispersing and hiding production and storage sites -- based on lessons learned in Iraq. This will make it more difficult to discover new programs, identify production and storage facilities, and assess the scope and maturity of programs once underway. This will also make preventive and preemptive strikes against WMD infrastructures more difficult to

undertake than in the past.

This fact, plus the embarrassment that accompanied the recent American cruise missile strike on a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan alleged (perhaps incorrectly) to have been involved in the production of chemical weapons, will prompt policymakers to set a very high bar for preventive action in the future. This will increase the relative importance of deterrence and defense in dealing with the threat. And as already shown, much remains to be done in the latter area.

Finally, access to foreign assistance will allow proliferators to make more rapid progress toward achieving their goals than was thought likely in the past.29 In this regard, the United States has to consider the impact of unexpected breakthroughs in Iran's missile program (exemplified by the testing of the Shehab-3 medium range missile in July 1998) on its ties with its allies. Believing that a threat from Iranian missiles was evolving faster than U.S. ability to provide antimissile defenses could make Washington's Gulf allies more eager to pursue accomodationist policies toward Iran (and perhaps also Iraq).

Similarly, what impact would a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran have on the United States and its allies in the region? America's Gulf allies are generally more concerned about possible domestic instability caused by economic problems, American military action, or foreign (i.e., Iranian) mischief-making, than by the implications of WMD proliferation. They generally regard chemical and biological weapon proliferation as an unpleasant but accomplished fact and an "American problem," because it is too difficult for them to deal with on their own, and because, in the last instance, they look to the United States to deter the use of such weapons. Regarding a nuclear breakout by either Iraq or Iran, neither the United States nor its allies have figured out how they would respond, and they would probably prefer not to think about it at present. This, however, would be a mistake.

If Iraq or Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, how would this affect relations between the United States and its allies in the region? First, would Washington know about it when it happened? For various reasons, Iraq or Iran might not necessarily announce the acquisition of such a capability. And if they did, its implications would initially depend upon the timing of such an event (whether it occurs during peacetime or a crisis), and on domestic conditions in Iraq and Iran (Is Iraq still under sanctions? Which political faction is on top in Tehran?).

In such circumstances, America's allies have four options: 1) tension reduction and confidence building measures; 2) accommodation; 3) forging alliances with nuclear powers to gain the benefits of extended deterrence, and; 4) acquiring an independent retaliatory capability (not necessarily nuclear).30

When tensions between Israel and Iraq rose in 1989-90 due to Baghdad's fear of an Israeli attack on Iraqi WMD facilities, Israel sent reassuring messages to the Iraqis via third parties. It would probably resort to such measures again in the event of an Iraqi or Iranian nuclear breakout. Israel would probably also take steps to further reduce the increasingly thin veneer of ambiguity surrounding its own nuclear capabilities, while seeking to deepen and strengthen coordination with the United States regarding policy toward Iraq or Iran.

Most of the Arab Gulf states would probably opt for a mix of approaches: confidence-building through increased official contact; some degree of accommodation in order to reduce the potential for conflict or aggression by Iraq or Iran; maintaining or strengthening security ties with the United States (in fact one can argue that the Gulf states are free to pursue accomodationist approaches toward Iraq and/or Iran because of the United States security umbrella); and the acquisition of an independent retaliatory capability. Indeed, some have already tread down this path.

Already, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have acquired ballistic missiles (Chinese CSS-2s and Soviet Scud-Bs, respectively) and it may be that the UAE is interested in the Anglo-French Black Shahine air launched cruise missile in order to augment its retaliatory capability. Furthermore, some states might develop a rudimentary chemical or biological warfare capability in response to a nuclear breakout by Iraq or Iran -- if they are not pursuing such a

capability already.

The bottom line is that an Iraqi or Iranian nuclear breakout would probably deepen American involvement in the security of the region, while challenging it to find ways to strengthen its deterrent capability and reassure allies, without raising fears that it might respond in a way that aggravates regional tensions and increases the likelihood of war.

CONCLUSIONS Whatever its limitations, America remains "the indispensable nation" in the eyes of many of its citizens, and of many of its allies. It is the only country with the ability to ensure stability and deter aggression in many parts of the world, and thereby reassure allies who might otherwise acquire WMD, including nuclear weapons, for deterrence and defense. America's effort to fulfill this role since the end of the Cold War, however, has resulted in strategic overreach and cracks in the foundation of America's national security system. It is clear that a reassessment of fundamental assumptions in a number of areas is in order.

First, there is a need to redefine civil-military relations in the United States. The problem here is rooted in both personalities and long-term socio-economic processes that are not easily altered. A first step, however, would be to acknowledge that there is a problem, and that it is harming American interests in the Middle East and elsewhere. This has not yet occurred. While America's allies have little if any role to play in this debate, they have much at stake in its outcome.

Second, there is a need to reevaluate, once again, America's national security strategy, in order to create a force structure and a national security strategy that is better suited to today's strategic realities. America cannot secure its interests and meet obligations to allies around the world with its current force structure. Several key factors have to be considered: the inherent contradiction between a small, professional military with a "family friendly" organizational culture and an activist foreign policy requiring frequent unplanned overseas deployments; the contradiction between a society which is increasingly casualty sensitive and a force structure which still relies heavily on manned platforms (implying a need to procure more cruise missiles and similar stand-off systems); and the implications of an environment where allies are increasingly unwilling to provide access for land-base air power, at a time when America has made dramatic cuts to its naval aviation assets.

Third, greater emphasis should be placed on developing the means to deal with the dangers posed by terrorism and the proliferation of WMD (i.e., special weapons, missile defenses, and robust civil defenses) to fill gaps in America's capabilities and to reduce ally vulnerabilities. Moreover, nuclear proliferation is likely to involve the United States more deeply in safeguarding the security of the region in the coming years. Accordingly, the United States needs to start thinking and talking to its allies about how they are going to deal with nuclear proliferation and WMD use in the future.

Fourth, the United States must be ready to act with allies if possible, but alone if necessary, to secure its interests around the globe. To do so will require a reordering of American defense priorities, procuring more naval land-attack cruise missiles, strengthening naval aviation, and developing a mindset that would allow for the use of B-2 stealth bombers in conventional military scenarios.

Finally, while some of the emerging threats will require novel military solutions, many cannot be solved by military-technical means alone. As a result, more than ever before, the United States and its allies will need to integrate political, economic, and military policy instruments in order to achieve their objectives in the Middle East. This means, for instance, that the economic problems of America's Gulf allies are an American national security problem. It also means that efforts to deal with Iranian proliferation should not only rely on traditional tools such as export and arms control arrangements, but also on efforts to encourage the evolution of the political system there toward moderation and pragmatism. All of this will require a major change in the way the United States thinks about

security in the region, and in the way that the United States plans for military operations there.

NOTES

1. A. J. Bacevich, "Tradition Abandoned: America's Military in a New Era," National Interest, Summer 1997, p. 24.

2. James Kitfield, "A Few Good Men," National Journal, June 13, 1998, pp. 1350-1351.

3. Andrew J. Bacevich and Lawrence F. Kaplan, "Battle Wary: America's Flawed New Military Doctrine," New Republic, May 25, 1998, pp. 19-21.

4. Kitfield, op. cit., pp. 1350-1358. 5. Thomas E. Ricks, "On American Soil: The Widening Gap Between the U.S. Military and U.S. Society," Harvard University, John M. Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Project on U.S. Post Cold-War Civil-Military Relations, p. 3; Kitfield, op cit., p. 1358.

6. It would be a mistake, though, to make too much of the lack of military experience of America's senior civilian leaders; two of America's greatest wartime commanders-in-chief -- Abraham Lincoln and Franklin Roosevelt -- had virtually no practical military experience.

7. One journalist has wondered aloud whether "opposition (to intervention) interfered with the Army's planning for Bosnia." Recalling a conversation with a U.S. army engineer involved in the delay-plagued construction of a bridge over the Sava River in December 1995 in which he asked "Didn't your guys realize you'd have to do this?" The army engineer replied, "Sir, until five weeks ago, we never thought we were coming here." Thomas Ricks, "Is American Military Professionalism Declining?" talk given to the U.S. Naval Institute's Annual Meeting and Eighth Annapolis Seminar, April 23, 1998, located on the internet at: http://usni.usni.org/Proceedings/Articles98/PROricks.htm. For Zinni's comments, see: Bradley Graham, "U.S. General Attacks Aid for Groups Seeking to Topple Iraqi Leader," Washington Post, October 22, 1998, p. A32.

8. Ricks, ibid.

9. David A. Fulghum, "Military Chief Miffed by Lack of Oversight," Aviation Week & Space Technology, October 12, 1998, p. 22; Seymour M. Hersh, '"The Missiles of August,'" New Yorker, October 12, 1998, pp. 34-41.

10. In fact, Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Carl E. Mundy, Jr. tried in 1993 to ban the recruiting of married men and women by the corps, because of the low retention rate and high incidence of divorces among young married personnel. Secretary of Defense Aspin, however, blocked implementation of this policy. Eric Schmitt, "Military Marriage Seen as No Threat,'94" New York Times, December 16, 1993, p. A23.

11. Richard J. Newman, "Can Peacekeepers Make War?" U.S. News and World Report, January 19, 1998, p. 38; Kitfield, op cit., p. 1354.

12. Bryant Jordan, "Pilot Shortage May Not Be Fixed For 20 Years," Air Force Times, October 5, 1998, p. 6.

13. Richard J. Newman, "Can Peacekeepers Make War?" U.S. News & World Report, January 19, 1998, p. 38. See also, Ed Offley, "Navy Hit by Shortage of People, Planes and Pilots," Seattle Post-Intelligencer, October 26, 1998, p. 1.

14. John Mintz, "A $2 Billion Bomber Sits in the Wings," Washington Post, February 18, 1998, p. A1. U.S. Navy officials are concerned about the shortfall of Tomahawk cruise missiles in Navy stocks. Inventories currently stand at 2,900 Tomahawk missiles, but only 1,500 are the most capable Block III versions, the one in greatest demand. Tomahawks have been used six times since the 1991 Gulf War, with between 35-75 fired each time. Moreover, every newly commissioned Tomahawk-capable destroyer must fire 18-20 missiles to ensure all systems are operating correctly, resulting in a constant attrition of weapons stocks. Robert Holzer, "U.S. Navy Strives to Boost Inventory of Tomahawks," Defense News, September 28-October 4, 1998, p. 4; John Donnelly, "Navy Worries Tomahawks Running Low," Defense Week, October 13, 1998, p. 1.

15. Thomas E. Ricks, "Air Force to Reorganize Into 10 Units, Marking Post-Cold War Strategy Shift," Wall Street Journal, August 3, 1998, p. 6. 16. John Donnelly, "Navy Worries Tomahawks Running Low," Defense News, October 13, 1998, p. 1.

17. Barbara Starr, "USN Seeks 24-Hour 200-Strike Carrier," Jane's Defence Weekly, July 23, 1997, pp. 22-23.

18. Bill Gertz, "U.S. Hasn't Stemmed Flow of Missile Technology to Iran," Washington Times, November 18, 1998, p. A3.

19. Patrick Clawson, "Cheap Sheikh: Hard Times in the Persian Gulf," New Republic, October 26, 1998, pp. 13-14.

20. Robert Holzer, "Gulf Crisis Renews U.S. Mobile Base Interest," Defense News, February 9-15, 1998, pp. 4, 42.

21. Interview with commander of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) General Anthony Zinni, "Avoid a Military Showdown with Iraq," Middle East Quarterly, September 1998, p. 62.

22. Robert Manning, "Caspian Oil: How Vital is it to U.S. Energy Security?" PolicyWatch No. 348, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 28, 1998.

23. Nawaf Obaid, "Understanding bin Laden," Financial Times Middle East Energy, September 3, 1998, p. 16.

24. Scott Gourley, "USA and Israel to Trial Missile Interoperability," Jane's Defence Weekly, October 21, 1998, p. 4.

25. Ha'aretz, October 20, 1998, p. 4.

26. Deutsche Presse-Agentur, "U.S. Wants Gulf Nations to Share R&D Cost of Anti-Missile System," October 12, 1998.

27. Steve Rodan, "Israel Spends Millions to Gird for Chem-Bio Attack," Defense News, February 9-15, 1998, p. 30.

28. Qatar has about 1,050 hospital beds, Bahrain 1,700, Oman 4,400, Kuwait 6,500, the UAE 7,500, and Saudi Arabia 44,500. World Bank, World Development Report 1996, p. 283; World Bank, World Development Indicators 1998, pp. 88-90, and; Health Statistics 1995, Bahrain Ministry of Health Website at www.batelco.com.bh/mhealth/cgi-bin/MoH/stat95.htm.

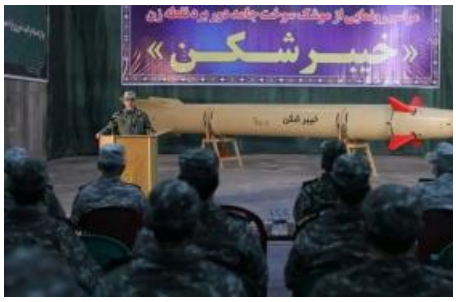
29. Michael Eisenstadt, "Missiles and Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) in Iraq and Iran: Current Developments and Potential for Future Surprises," in Report of the Commission to Assess the Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States, Appendix III (Unclassified Working Papers), July 15, 1998, pp. 105-122.

30. See, for example, Stephen Peter Rosen, "Nuclear Proliferation and Alliance Relations," Unpublished Paper, Olin Institute for Strategic Studies, Harvard University, November 1995; Barry Posen, "United States Security Policy in a Nuclear-Armed World," Security Studies, Spring 1997, pp. 1-31.

Paper prepared for conference on "America's Allies in a Changing World" November 9-10, BESA, Bar-Ilan University, Tel Aviv, sponsored by the BESA Center for Strategic Studies and the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and made possible by the generous support of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation.

Middle East Review of International Affairs (vol. 2, no. 4)

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

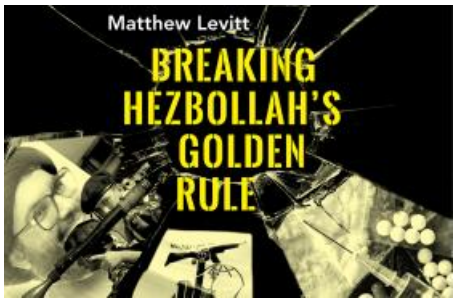
Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)