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Strategic Landpower and the Arabian Gulf

W. Andrew Terrill

ABSTRACT: In recent years, a variety of threats have become more ominous for Gulf nations, and these countries have sought to strengthen ties to the United States in ways that do not appear to compromise their sovereignty. The US Army has responded through a robust series of military exercises and through the development of regionally aligned forces. Consequently, the Army has played a vital role in meeting a variety of training challenges including preparation for conventional war, counterinsurgency, and missile defense. It has also asserted an important landpower presence in ways that reassure local allies and deter potential regional aggressors.

The Middle Eastern strategic environment has been especially dynamic in the last decade due to factors such as the 2003-11 US combat operations in Iraq, the Arab uprisings, and the continuing rise in sectarian tensions and violence throughout a number of regional countries. In the midst of these developments, the stability of the region remains of central importance to the United States according to numerous presidents who have enumerated the American interests in the region.¹ Most recently, President Barack Obama stated that US “core interests” in the Middle East include: (1) safeguarding energy supplies exported to the world, (2) counterterrorism, (3) countering the proliferation of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction, and (4) the defense of Israel and advancement of the Arab-Israeli peace process.² Other US leaders have elaborated on the president’s views by noting the Middle East will remain vital to the United States even if Washington moves closer to energy independence.³ In this regard, America garners tremendous global influence by using its military forces to guarantee freedom of navigation for the transportation of Persian/Arabian Gulf energy supplies.⁴ If the United States relinquished this position, other powers, such as China, could become interested in this role and the global clout it provides.

The next decade will be a particularly important era for defining how Washington can best protect its interests in the Middle East and especially the Gulf region. The legacy of the Iraq war will contribute

1 For an overview of past Presidential priorities and policies toward the Middle East see Patrick Tyler, *A World of Trouble: The White House and the Middle East from the Cold War to the War on Terror* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).

2 Office of the White House Press Secretary, “Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa,” May 19, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov>. In this speech, President Obama also spoke about the advancement of democracy and human rights but did not explicitly name them as core interests.

3 Lalit K. Jha, “Gulf Region Remains Important for US Interest: Dempsey,” *Press Trust of India*, March 19, 2013.

4 On the importance of Gulf oil exports for the world economy and the requirement for military forces, see Kenneth Katzman et al., *Iran’s Threat to the Strait of Hormuz* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2012) 13-15; David Crist, *The Twilight War: America’s Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran* (New York: Penguin Press, 2012) 569-570; Mohammed El-Katiri, *The Future of the Arab Gulf Monarchies in the Age of Uncertainties* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, June 2013), 28-30.

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to this debate since that conflict generated significant US public and policymaker concerns about the future use of military force to fight major ground wars and then engage in long occupations, nation-building efforts, and counterinsurgencies. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates represented this view in a particularly straightforward way when he stated, "In my opinion, any future defense secretary who advises the President to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should have his head examined, as General MacArthur so delicately put it."⁵ President Obama underscored Gates's comment by indicating that he will seek to avoid using massive conventional military force except in cases involving US national survival interest.⁶ This reluctance reflects the current political values of American society and is motivated by the administration's concern about developing open-ended military commitments to support secondary or peripheral interests in ways "that we can no longer afford."⁷ Additionally, according to a variety of polls, the general public is extremely wary of getting involved in new Middle Eastern wars in places such as Syria and Iran.⁸ Likewise, Arab public opinion remains deeply concerned about future American military action in the region, although US favorability ratings improved beginning in 2011 as the United States implemented its withdrawal from Iraq.⁹

Nevertheless, understanding the dangers of military interventions does not allow one to reach the conclusion that conventional war and counterinsurgency actions will never again be required. Some challenges to US interests may not be viewed as immediate threats to national survival, but the long-term consequences such challenges could affect both US global leadership and economic future. If vital American interests are strongly threatened, large segments of the American public may consider future military actions as "wars of necessity." Some interventions may still be required regardless of how conscientiously the United States leadership struggles to avoid them. Moreover, American and allied public opinion may change rapidly in such instances provided these publics view specific future conflicts as wars of necessity.

Preparing for future wars remains vital, but doing so through actions which deter such conflicts is an especially optimal outcome. Shaping the Gulf strategic environment through carefully tailored collaboration with Arab partner nations (including non-Gulf Arab allies) presents one of the best ways to prepare for a potential conflict and deter that conflict through United States and allied defense preparedness. In this environment, it is important that Washington has an array of forces to support and reassure local allies and deter aggression so war can be averted.

American interests will need to be protected in a number of ways, and the Gulf will be particularly important US strategy. Many Gulf Arab states have critical natural resources, a great deal of infrastructure

5 Greg Jaffe, "In one of final addresses to Army, Gates describes vision for military's future," *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2011.

6 David Sanger, *Confront and Conceal: Obama's Secret Wars and the Surprising Use of American Power* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2012), 421.

7 Ibid.

8 Megan Thee Brennan, "Poll Shows Isolationist Streak in Americans," *The New York Times*, May 1, 2013.

9 Shibley Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes: Arab Public Opinion and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 111.

wealth, and are concerned about their limited capacity for self-defense. Gulf leaders also consider their countries vulnerable to military pressure or attacks by larger neighbors as well as insurgencies along the lines of recent problems in Yemen and Iraq.¹⁰ To deal with either type of contingency, friendly states need allied support. Such support should have a landpower dimension while seeking to avoid a large troop presence that may cause resentment.¹¹ Such strategies will need to be strengthened and refined to continue serving the interests identified by President Obama and his predecessors.

Gulf Arab Threat Perceptions

Many US Arab allies in the Gulf believe they have solid reasons to be concerned about their future national security. The potential rise of Iran as a nuclear weapons state is particularly worrisome to a number of Gulf Arab allies.¹² This scenario could develop in a variety of troubling ways. On the basis of publicly available information, Tehran appears to be making the most progress toward a nuclear weapon via the uranium route (in this case using gas centrifuges) rather than the plutonium route. Nuclear weapons using uranium in the physics package for their warheads do not always require testing to assure that they are functional.¹³ Consequently, Iran could become an undeclared nuclear weapons power at some point and take advantage of a policy of nuclear weapons “opacity.” Tehran’s progress in obtaining a nuclear weapons option is not inevitable, but even crippling economic sanctions combined with covert action (such as cyberattacks) cannot guarantee the end of the program. A US or Israeli air campaign against Iran’s hardened and dispersed targets could guarantee severe damage, but such attacks might only delay the Iranian program, and also risk asymmetric escalation and the unraveling of current sanctions.¹⁴ Moreover, Tehran’s regional behavior could become more aggressive even if it only develops an undeclared bomb or a near-nuclear capability.

Complicating matters further, the Gulf states have also experienced a decline in political relations with Tehran along with the rise of the Iranian strategic threat. The near cold war between Iran and some Gulf states became especially intense following the March 2011 Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) military intervention into Bahrain and the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, which also began in the same month.¹⁵ Prior to the GCC move into Bahrain, the Iranians strongly supported the demands of Bahrain’s mostly Shi’ite demonstrators, who demanded a greater public role in the governance of the Sunni-led monarchy. Tehran was subsequently infuriated by the Bahrain intervention which propped up an anti-Iranian monarchy just as it was being challenged by at least

10 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Securing the Gulf: Key Threats and Options for Enhanced Cooperation* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 19, 2013), iii, 1-3.

11 Telhami, *The World Through Arab Eyes*, 123.

12 Trita Parsi, *A Single Roll of the Dice: Obama’s Diplomacy with Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 16, 172, 211.

13 The uranium-based Hiroshima bomb (“Little Boy”) was never tested before its use, although the plutonium-based implosion design for the Nagasaki bomb (“Fat Man”) was tested on the Trinity site on July 16, 1945. See General Leslie M. Groves, *Now it Can be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1962), 288-304.

14 Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 229-230.

15 The GCC includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

some pro-Iranian Shi'ite Bahrainis among the protestors. Although the GCC intervention forces never actually fought with the demonstrators, their presence was highly significant in bolstering Bahrain's government. Additionally, the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in the same month as the intervention in Bahrain further intensified Gulf Arab-Iranian tensions. At this time, Iran helped prop up the Assad regime, while most Gulf states strongly backed anti-government rebels. Adding to this deterioration of relations, older antagonisms were further inflamed when senior Iranian officials visited the disputed islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs as a way of underscoring their physical control over them.¹⁶ The islands are also claimed by the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Gulf nations are concerned about Iran's conventional forces, which are large but have shortcomings. In this regard, a great deal of Iranian military equipment is aging and severely worn by overuse. While the Iranian military should be able to function effectively as a defensive force, these units would have serious problems projecting offensive power.¹⁷ The ability to project conventional military power across the Gulf is also limited by Iran's need to circumvent or neutralize United States, British, French, and Gulf Arab naval forces stationed there. Iran's ability to provide effective logistical support to its forces in hostile territory is especially doubtful even with countries which can be reached without crossing the Gulf (such as Iraq or Kuwait through Iraq). Iran has been under a highly effective United Nations (UN) arms embargo since 2010 and thereby been blocked from receiving conventional weapons from its most important former suppliers including Russia and China.¹⁸ Consequently, Tehran has been forced to rely on its domestic arms industry, which is incapable of compensating for Tehran's inability to import modern weapons. These shortcomings have limited Iran's ability to project conventional military power.

Nonetheless, Tehran maintains a strong capacity for asymmetric warfare with its naval and ground forces. Facets of this approach related to landpower include the use of irregular forces; the use of proxy forces as well as covert arms transfers; and providing training to such groups within a target country. One of Iran's most useful tools in projecting this kind of power is the al Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). The al Quds Force has a long record of working with Shi'ite and other revolutionary groups in a variety of countries including Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁹ In both of these instances, they also supplied highly effective Improvised Exploding Devices (IEDs) to anti-American forces.²⁰

While Iran is the most important national security concern for Gulf Arab allies, it is not their only concern. Many Gulf states also view the future of Iraq as uncertain with considerable potential for developments to harm their security. Some Gulf leaders, especially Saudis and Kuwaitis,

16 "Iran Willing to Talk to UAE on Islands Row," *The Peninsula*, May 8, 2013; "UAE denounces Iran lawmakers' visit to islands," *Khaleej Times*, May 7, 2013.

17 Cordesman, *Securing the Gulf*, 15

18 "UN Arms Embargo on Iran," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, <http://www.SIPRI.org>, October 11, 2012.

19 Anthony H. Cordesman and Martin Kleiber, *Iran's Military Forces and Warfighting Capabilities: The Threat to the Northern Gulf* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), 78-81.

20 "U.S. Blames Iran for New Bombs in Iraq," *USA Today*, January 31, 2007; "IED Attacks Up in Afghanistan, Down in Iraq," *Army Times*, November 15, 2007.

are deeply suspicious of most leading Shi'ite Iraqi politicians including Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, whom many view as an authoritarian leader seeking to marginalize Iraq's Sunni Arabs politically. In addition, Kuwaitis do not feel that all of their problems with Iraq started and stopped with Saddam Hussein. While Saddam was their greatest enemy, he was not the only Iraqi head of state to claim Kuwait was part of Iraq. King Ghazi (reign 1933-39) and Prime Minister Qasim (in office 1958-63) made similar claims, although one was a monarchist and the other an Arab Nationalist revolutionary. Unsurprisingly, many Kuwaitis are uncertain that Iraqis have truly renounced previous beliefs that Kuwait is part of Iraq.²¹

Paradoxically, many Gulf Arabs who are concerned about a strong, overbearing, nationalist Iraq are also worried about an unstable Iraq sliding into sectarian chaos. Gulf Arabs, who are mostly Sunni, often blame the Shi'ite-led Iraqi government for the increase in Iraqi sectarianism, but many are also concerned about the continued rise of al Qaeda-related Sunni groups now that Iraq's Sunni-Shi'ite relations have become polarized. The July 2013 attacks on two Iraqi maximum security prisons by the al-Qaeda affiliate, "The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" suggests a tough, competent enemy. In this professional and well-coordinated operation, over 100 guards were killed and 500 prisoners were freed.²² The danger of simultaneous al Qaeda progress in controlling territory within both Iraq and Syria only adds to the nightmare for Gulf nations that fear widening instability.

Basing and Military Exercises

In addressing current threats, Gulf states must balance domestic public opinion with defense needs. Many Arab states have endured long and problematic histories with Western military bases on their territory, and this background influences current Gulf Arab decisionmaking on how to organize military cooperation with the United States. Until at least the 1950s, great powers often maintained that their bases were designed to defend regional nations against foreign invaders, although the presence of such facilities was sometimes used to pressure and influence local client governments. In response to these concerns, as well as changing Western military requirements and economic pressures, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East steadily declined, and a number of major Western bases were evacuated in response to nationalist demands. By the early 1970s, Western military presence in the area had been dramatically scaled down. Western combat forces currently retain an ongoing presence at military facilities only in some smaller Gulf Arab states including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The US Army also stationed significant forces in Saudi Arabia during and after Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm in 1990-91, but these forces were withdrawn in 2003.

In general, the Gulf Arab countries do not favor large numbers of ground forces permanently stationed on their territory, and they have

21 Ahmad al-Khaled, "Maliki Digs Up the Hatchet," *Kuwait Times*, July 7, 2006; W. Andrew Terrill, *Kuwaiti National Security and the U.S.-Kuwaiti Strategic Relationship After Saddam* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2007), 41-49.

22 Jabbar Yaseen and Liz Sly, "Iraq Jailbreak Highlights al-Qaeda Affiliate's Ascendancy," *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2013.

shown a preference for air or naval bases. Western facilities in Bahrain support the US Fifth Fleet, while Qatar and the UAE allow the United States Air Force to utilize key air bases, although only a limited number of US aircraft regularly use these facilities.²³ Most of the US combat aircraft currently used to protect the Gulf are naval aircraft stationed on aircraft carriers, although the US Air Force presence in the region can be expanded in emergency situations. Conversely, Kuwait has a much more extensive history with hosting both US ground and air forces, with many US troops stationed at Camp Arifjan, south of Kuwait city. Currently, Camp Arifjan is an important transit point for equipment being returned to the United States from Afghanistan.²⁴ At this time, around 13,500 US troops are stationed in Kuwait, down from 25,000 during the last stages of the US military presence in Iraq.²⁵

Yet, if some Gulf Arab countries display reticence about large numbers of foreign ground troops stationed permanently on their soil, this does not mean they fail to recognize the importance of landpower or they only seek cooperation with US air and naval forces. A number of Arab Gulf states are concerned that negative experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan will cause the United States to lose interest in the Middle East, especially as America becomes more energy self-sufficient.²⁶ The decision to reduce US Army forces in Europe from four to two brigade combat teams and supporting units also complicated US power projection into the Middle East.²⁷ Within the Gulf region, many Arab countries are extremely interested in working with the US Army to help them continue professionalizing their armed forces and raising their standards for conventional defense, joint operations, ground intelligence operations, counterinsurgency, and other capabilities.²⁸ US commitment to support these activities through both training and exercises is deeply reassuring to Gulf Arab states.

In this environment, many Gulf political and military leaders, as well as other Arabs, have found US-led bilateral or multinational military exercises to be an exceptionally valuable tool for their security. Exercises, unlike basing rights, do not involve a long-term military presence that can grate on domestic public opinion and provide the appearance of excessive US influence. Rather, military exercises can more easily be portrayed as a collaboration, in which the United States is showing its support for local militaries by working with them. Another advantage is that during times of domestic Arab political tension, exercises can be rescheduled in accordance with the wishes of the host government. Conversely, at times of regional tension, regularly scheduled exercises can be expanded and the number of US troops participating in the exercise can be increased to show support for the host government. Such expansions are generally seen in the region as a show of force, although their linkage to previously planned exercises allows the United States

23 Michael O'Hanlon and Bruce Riedel, "Land Warriors," *Foreign Affairs.com*, July 2, 2013.

24 "US Reducing Military Presence in Kuwait," *Kuwait Times*, December 20, 2012.

25 Kenneth Katzman, *Kuwait: Security, Reform and U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, 2013), 16; Donna Casseta, "US Plans Significant Military Presence in Kuwait," *Associated Press*, July 19, 2012.

26 See "US Looks to Allies to Secure Arabian Gulf," *The National* (UAE), April 24, 2013.

27 Michelle Tan, "Bradley Fighting Vehicles Set to Leave Europe by Next Year," *Army Times*, August 3, 2013.

28 Sanger, *Confront and Conceal*, 178-179. Cordesman, *Securing the Gulf*, 41-46.

and its allies to deny they are being provocative. Exercise Eager Lion, which is based in Jordan, and involves the United States and a number of Gulf Arab allies is an example of this approach.²⁹

Eager Lion has an especially robust landpower component, and many observers felt the enhanced 2013 exercise could have sent a message of solidarity with Jordan to the Syrian government, which believed Amman was too sympathetic to some rebel forces in the Syrian civil war. The message might have been reinforced by the US decision to leave a Patriot missile battery and a limited number of F-16 fighter aircraft behind for use in future exercises.³⁰ About 700 US Army and Air Force personnel remained in Jordan to support these systems following Eager Lion 2013, along with approximately 100 already there as a forward headquarters of the 1st Armored Division.³¹ Although Jordan is not a Gulf state, it is an Arab monarchy which works closely with both the Gulf Arabs and the United States on regional security matters. Gulf participation in a large multinational Eager Lion exercise may send an important message of US-Gulf solidarity. The Gulf states are also involved in numerous smaller bilateral exercises with the United States within their own territory as well as the GCC's Peninsula Shield exercises.³²

It is vital for Eager Lion to retain its strong landpower component and for the Gulf states to expand their participation in these exercises due to the uncertain status of future Egyptian-based Bright Star exercises.³³ In many Arab states, including those within the Gulf, the army is the dominant service; in all Arab countries it is an important military service. In only a few wealthy Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, has the air force been more favored historically (primarily because air force requires fewer human resources and armies can more effectively conduct anti-government coups). Consequently, military-to-military contacts and relationships are most often going to be built with Gulf army officers and to some extent with air force officers. All Gulf states have small navies that function primarily as coastal defense forces. US Navy joint exercises with Arab navies are important and must be continued, but they will probably never involve the level of US-Arab coordination and cooperation as exercises involving landpower.³⁴

Another reason for a vigorous US-Gulf exercise program with a strong landpower component is Iranian actions. The Iranians frequently engage in large-scale joint exercises, which they use for both training and propaganda purposes. The land component of these exercises is usually defensive, focusing on responding to a US-led invasion of the Iranian homeland, which is, of course, unlikely to occur. The Iranians

29 GCC participants in Eager Lion exercises have included Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. See Combined Joint Task Force Spartan Public Affairs, "Eager Lion Commanders Hold Press Conference," *US Central Command Press Release*, May 15, 2012.

30 Michael R. Gordon and Thom Shanker, "U.S. to Keep Warplanes in Jordan, Pressing Syria," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2013.

31 Donna Miles, "Advance Headquarters Elements Operating in Jordan," *United States Department of Defense Press Release*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.defense.gov>.

32 Cordesman, *Securing the Gulf*, 2.

33 Bright Star has been repeatedly delayed or cancelled as a result of the political turmoil in Egypt, but planning for the exercise continues. See Phil Steward, "U.S. to Go Ahead with Joint Military Exercise in Egypt," *Reuters*, July 31, 2013.

34 When the author visited Iraq in 2008, he was somewhat amused by Iraqi officers who continually addressed US Navy captains serving as staff officers as "colonel" despite ongoing efforts to correct them.

usually proclaim these exercises to be resounding successes and routinely exaggerate the number of forces involved, but the exercises remain meaningful as political theater.³⁵

Regionally Aligned Forces

In addition to military exercises, one of the most effective ways of improving US military coordination with its Gulf allies is through regionally aligned forces. Regionally aligned forces are a Department of the Army initiative based on the lessons of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The initiative is still in its early phases and may be subject to considerable modification on a trial-and-error process as it is implemented. The concept involves US Army maneuver combat units and support forces focused on a specific Geographical Combatant Command as part of their normal training program.³⁶ This concept was initially tested with a program to prepare the first such brigade for service with Africa Command (AFRICOM), where it was successful enough to be considered a model for the Army component of the other Geographic Combatant Commands.

Units assigned to regionally aligned forces are expected to receive cultural training and language familiarization for areas where they might be expected to operate. By working more closely with regional militaries on a recurring basis, US personnel will more quickly interface with their counterparts during an escalating crisis. Cooperation with local forces has also been strongly enhanced by the presence of numerous officers from allied nations who have received training and military education in the United States. It is also useful that English is widely spoken by officers in most Gulf militaries as well as some other militaries within the larger Middle East.

The 1st Armored Division, based in Fort Bliss, Texas, has been aligned with US Central Command and has played an important role in the Eager Lion exercises previously discussed. During Eager Lion 2013, the 1st Armored Division provided the bulk of the US Army ground forces assigned to the exercise. As part of the alignment with CENTCOM, 1st Armored Division assisted the Jordanians with integrated missile defense, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief.³⁷ A strong working relationship with Jordan is particularly useful since forces operating out of Jordan can move into the Gulf area quickly if they are needed. The presence of such forces at times of crisis in the Gulf could be a restraining influence on potential aggressors. Adding to these advantages, the King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC), about 20 kilometers northeast of Amman, has also proven to be an excellent command and control site for combined US-Jordanian operations.³⁸

35 Crist, *The Twilight War*, 569-570.

36 General Raymond Odierno, "Regionally Aligned Forces: A New Model for Building Partnerships," *Army Live, The Official Blog of the U.S. Army*, March 22, 2012.

37 C. Todd Lopez, "1st Armored Division Troops Aligned With CENTCOM Ready for Eager Lion Kick-Off," <http://www.army.mil>, *Official Homepage of the United States Army*, <http://www.army.mil>, June 3, 2013.

38 See "King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center", <http://www.kasotc.com>.

Sharing the Lessons of Counterinsurgency

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have reinforced the lesson that counterinsurgencies can take years if not decades to resolve. These operations require time, public patience, and significant numbers of troops trained in counterinsurgency tactics. Ideally, these troops should be provided by the government being threatened rather than an outside power. Air and naval forces also play important supporting roles in counterinsurgencies, but ground forces almost always have to take the lead. Armed drones have played an important role in countries such as Yemen, but strike weapons can only address certain aspects of the insurgent problem. They can kill insurgents but cannot reassert government authority in contested areas. Therefore, it is important for US Army forces continue to provide practical advice and assistance to friendly nations, while maintaining as light a footprint as possible.³⁹

Insurgencies currently exist in a number of Middle Eastern countries including US allies such as Iraq and Yemen. While the GCC states view both of these insurgencies as dangerous, they are especially concerned about the future of Yemen.⁴⁰ In Yemen, the insurgent group al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was able to occupy and administer significant tracts of three major provinces including most of Abyan province until a Yemeni government offensive, heavily funded by the GCC, liberated the territory in May-June 2012.⁴¹ Although AQAP was defeated and lost overt control of the contested territory, it remains a strong terrorist and insurgent force and has not relinquished the idea of creating an al Qaeda emirate in southern Yemen, which could become a threat to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states.⁴² In the long term, this insurgency can, in all likelihood, be eradicated only by a reformed Yemeni army that fights effectively and avoids large-scale corruption. Moreover, Yemeni troops that are inadequately trained for counterinsurgency can take significant casualties and make serious mistakes that harm the struggle against AQAP. Currently, US Army trainers are working with Yemen's military to advance their level of professionalization.⁴³ Fortunately for them, at least some Yemeni senior officers are also deeply committed to improving the quality of the force.⁴⁴

Iraq faces some of the same problems as Yemen. The al Qaeda affiliate in Iraq, the "Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant" is directing acts of terrorism against government facilities and institutions as well as Shi'ite citizens in partial response to Sunni grievances but also to

39 For an excellent discussion of how US troops became increasingly effective at counterinsurgency operations over time in Iraq see James A. Russell, *Innovation, Transformation and War: Counterinsurgency Operations in Anbar and Ninewa Provinces, Iraq, 2005-2007* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Security Studies, 2011).

40 The GCC has taken the lead in providing support and financial help for Yemen's transition to a more stable government including brokering the departure from power of longtime strongman President Ali Abdullah Saleh.

41 "Al Qaeda in Yemen on the Run as Military Regains Control over 2 of Its Strongholds," *The Washington Post*, June 12, 2012.

42 "Yemen Army Retakes al Qaeda Bastions," *Jordan Times*, June 12, 2012.

43 Casey L. Coombs, "Yemen to Get UAVs From the U.S." *Aerospace Daily & Defense Report*, September 26, 2012; Anthony H. Cordesman, Robert M. Shelala II, and Omar Mohamed, *U.S. and Iranian Strategic Competition: Yemen and U.S. Security* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 8, 2013), 10-15.

44 The author has been consistently impressed by the seriousness, commitment, and integrity of Yemeni officers he has met at the US Army War College and elsewhere.

advance the al Qaeda agenda. The US leadership will, therefore, have to make decisions on how to help the Iraqi government with advice and military equipment while pushing it to be more inclusive.⁴⁵ A key to any successful counterinsurgency is to place distance between the insurgents and the population where they operate. The Iraqi government cannot do this if it only serves the interest of its Shi'ite citizens. US Army training and other support must be closely linked to political reform, but military aid is vital once the Iraqi government begins a serious effort at reform and Sunni inclusion.

In imparting the lessons of counterinsurgency, the US Army will also need to work with Gulf Arab air forces as well as armies because many of the former own their nation's military helicopters. Only a few Arab armies possess attack helicopters like the United States Army. The most important exception in the Gulf region is the Royal Saudi Land Forces (RSLF) which has an army aviation branch which contains helicopters.⁴⁶ Regardless of service affiliation, all Arab rotary-wing forces can benefit from interface with US Army units. The United States Army made extensive use of helicopters during the counterinsurgency wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have internalized a variety of useful lessons that can be passed along to friendly states.

Air and Missile Defense

Surface-to-surface missiles (such as Scuds) have been used extensively in some Middle Eastern wars, though never with unconventional (chemical, biological, or nuclear) warheads. In the Gulf area, conflicts involving surface-to-surface missiles include attacks made by both sides during the Iran-Iraq war and missile strikes against Saudi targets during Operation Desert Storm.⁴⁷ Saddam Hussein also reached outside of the Gulf area and fired 39 extended-range Scud missiles at Israel during the 1991 conflict. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Scud missiles were used by secessionist forces in Yemen during the 1994 civil war, and there have been some reports of Syrian government forces occasionally firing Scuds at rebel forces in the current civil war in that country.⁴⁸

Friendly Gulf military forces are extremely interested in systems to defend their airspace against air and missile strikes for a number of reasons including the significant resources that Iran has applied to its ballistic missile program and the fear that Iranian missiles will eventually be armed with unconventional warheads.⁴⁹ In any scenario where Iranian missiles are fired at a Gulf state, one might reasonably expect that US and Gulf air forces will seek to destroy as many of these systems

45 "Iraqi Official: Baghdad would welcome U.S. military help as Pentagon Considers Sending Trainers," *Washington Post*, June 27, 2013.

46 Tim Ripley, *Middle East Airpower in the 21st Century* (South Yorkshire, UK: Pen and Sword, 2010), 173, 188.

47 Thomas L. McNaugher, "Ballistic Missiles and Chemical Weapons: The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War," *International Security* 15, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 5-34; W Andrew Terrill, "The Gulf War and Ballistic Missile Proliferation," *Comparative Strategy* (April-June 1992): 163-176.

48 Max Fisher, "What Syria's Scud Missile Launches Tell Us About the Regime's Thinking," *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2012.; Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "Syrian Government Blamed for Ballistic Missile Attack," *The New York Times*, July 28, 2013.

49 Kenneth Katzman, *The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Issues for U.S. Policy* (Washington DC: Congressional Research Service, March 18, 2013), 11-12. Suzanne Maloney, "Thinking the Unthinkable: The Gulf States and the Prospect of a Nuclear Iran," *Middle East Memo of the Saban Center at Brookings*, January 27, 2013, 11.

on the ground as possible. Such actions are indispensable, but there are continuing questions about how long this will take. The last US war against an enemy which was well-armed with missiles occurred in 1991 in Iraq. At that time, Saddam Hussein's forces were able to fire a number of Scuds and modified Scuds at coalition military forces and at Israel despite a substantial air campaign to destroy these assets.

While US capabilities for hunting missiles have undoubtedly improved since 1991, Iran has a larger and more diverse weapons arsenal than Iraq did. It is also a much larger country than Iraq. Many of Iran's longer-range missiles can be located in remote parts of the country and still strike the Gulf Arab countries. The Gulf Arab states, therefore, have an ongoing interest in a strong, layered defense for protecting their territory including land and sea-based systems. The most important components of this layered defense are the Patriot air and missile defense system and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD).⁵⁰ Many partner countries within the region already have Patriot systems, and are now acquiring PAC-3 anti-missile capabilities for those systems.⁵¹ With so much at stake, they are tremendously interested in working with the United States on missile defense.⁵²

Conclusions

US landpower will remain profoundly relevant to defending the Gulf and deterring recklessness by regional powers. Landpower can be especially valuable by asserting a US presence and helping local partners. While US national leadership can be expected to avoid large conventional wars, it will also be required to safeguard other vital national interests. These interests will need to be protected in creative and flexible ways that include landpower to underscore US commitment to deterrence and defense.

A useful approach to the application of landpower in the post-Iraq era has also been evolving in a way that reflects the lessons of that conflict. Rather than rotating significant military forces into bases throughout the region and thus establishing a permanent ground presence, the US Army leadership has chosen to emphasize a vigorous military exercise program and extensive collaboration with partner nations through regionally aligned forces. Organizing the timing, scope, and mix of forces for these exercises can be calibrated to meet regional threats while showing appropriate respect for the equality and sovereignty of US partners in the region. It is also possible, if not likely, that US regional partners will need greater reassurance if unfavorable political developments occur in Iran, Iraq, or elsewhere in the region. The development of an Iranian near-nuclear capability would be an especially serious threat requiring US reassurance of Gulf allies, beyond the stationing of air and naval forces.

The future of regionally aligned forces will be determined by senior US military leaders, but it currently looks very promising. In the face of growing threats, many partner nations are almost certain to welcome US support in providing regionally aligned forces to help improve their

50 Tom Vanden Brook, "Oil-Rich Emirates: A Key Part of Defense Against Iran," *USA Today*, April 25, 2013.

51 Cordesman, *Securing the Gulf*, 56.

52 Aaron Mehta, "Qatar, UAE Request THAAD Purchases," *Defense News*, November 5, 2012; Jim Wolf, "U.S. in 3.5 Billion Arms Sale to UAE and Iran Tension," *Reuters*, December 31, 2011.

military performance in such skills as air and missile defense, chemical and biological protection, counterinsurgency operations, intelligence, and other important aspects of modern warfare. Nevertheless, there are some issues of concern that bear watching. In particular, regionally aligned forces working with Middle Eastern and Gulf militaries will need to be properly supported with personnel, material resources, and funding for the ongoing training with counterpart militaries. If these units receive less than units aligned to the Pacific, this will be noticed by both Gulf allies and potential adversaries. The US government emphasis on the Pacific is important but cannot be allowed to seriously weaken other commands.

In sum, the long, difficult, and expensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have soured many American opinion leaders and large elements of the public on the idea of ever again using US ground forces for large-scale warfare in the Middle East. The sacrifices of the Iraq war, in particular, can also be contrasted with many of the early projections that the conflict would be quick and easy and not require a long occupation to prevent post-war chaos. Yet, to respond to the legacy of these conflicts by minimizing the potential contribution of ground troops in defense of the Gulf states risks a possible failure to deter precisely the type of war that both policymakers and public would largely like to avoid.