

NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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MILITARY PRESENCE AND THEATER STRATEGY: RECOGNIZING MOOTW
RESTRAINTS IN CENTCOM

by

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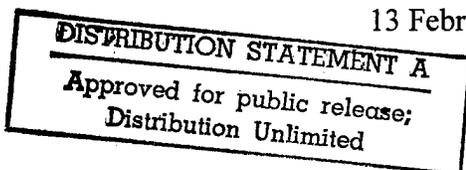
A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature



13 February 1998



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19980709 043

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

1. Report Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
2. Security Classification Authority:			
3. Declassification/Downgrading Schedule:			
4. Distribution/Availability of Report: DISTRIBUTION STATEMENT A: APPROVED FOR PUBLIC RELEASE; DISTRIBUTION IS UNLIMITED.			
5. Name of Performing Organization: JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
6. Office Symbol: C		7. Address: NAVAL WAR COLLEGE 686 CUSHING ROAD NEWPORT, RI 02841-1207	
8. Title (Include Security Classification): MILITARY PRESENCE AND THEATER STRATEGY: RECOGNIZING MOOTW RESTRAINTS IN CENTCOM (U)			
9. Personal Authors: LCDR T. PARKER JONES, USN			
10. Type of Report: FINAL		11. Date of Report: 13 FEB 98	
12. Page Count: 18			
13. Supplementary Notation: A paper submitted to the Faculty of the NWC in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the JMO Department. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the NWC or the Department of the Navy.			
14. Ten key words that relate to your paper: FORWARD PRESENCE MOOTW REGIONAL ACCESS DEPLOYMENT CENTRAL COMMAND SAUDI ARABIA GULF			
15. Abstract: FORWARD PRESENCE IS A KEY PART OF NATIONAL MILITARY STRATEGY. FOR THEATER CINCS, DETERMINING THE NATURE AND EXTENT OF U.S. MILITARY PRESENCE IN A FORWARD THEATER WILL HAVE A LARGE IMPACT ON HOW SUCCESSFULLY U.S. STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES ARE MET. THE ARABIAN GULF REGION IN GENERAL, AND SAUDI ARABIA IN PARTICULAR, ARE AREAS VITAL TO THE NATIONAL INTERESTS OF THE U.S. MAINTAINING ACCESS TO OIL SUPPLIES THERE AND PRESERVING REGIONAL STABILILTY HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE NATION. DECIDING ON THE APPROPRIATE REGIONAL MILITARY PRESENCE FOR A THEATER STRATEGY TO MEET THESE NATIONAL OBJECTIVES MUST BE DONE IN THE CONTEXT OF INTEGRATING ALL INSTRUMENTS OF NATIONAL POWER - POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND INFORMATIONAL AS WELL AS MILITARY. PARTICULARLY WHEN CONDUCTING MILITARY OPERATIONS OTHER THAN WAR, POLITICAL CONSIDERATIONS MUST DRIVE THE ULTIMATE DECISION MADE FOR MILITARY PRESENCE LEVELS. IN SAUDI ARABIA, THE PRESENCE OF U.S. COMBAT TROOPS IS DISRUPTIVE TO THE INTERNAL STABILITY OF THAT COUNTRY, PUTTING U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY OBJECTIVES IN JEOPARDY. ALTERNATIVE FORWARD PRESENCE CONCEPTS FOR THE GULF NEED TO BE PURSUED TO ENSURE U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY IS IN CONCERT WITH MEETING STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES.			
16. Distribution / Availability of Abstract:	Unclassified X	Same As Rpt	DTIC Users
17. Abstract Security Classification: UNCLASSIFIED			
18. Name of Responsible Individual: CHAIRMAN, JOINT MILITARY OPERATIONS DEPARTMENT			
19. Telephone: 841-6461		20. Office Symbol: C	

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SECTION	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTION _____	1
II. MILITARY PRESENCE IN ITS STRATEGIC CONTEXT _____	2
III. CENTCOM'S "FIVE PILLARS" AND THE THEATER FOOTPRINT _____	4
IV. IMPACT OF FORWARD PRESENCE _____	7
V. ASSESSMENT OF FORWARD PRESENCE _____	11
VI. CONCLUSION _____	14
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

MILITARY PRESENCE AND THEATER STRATEGY: RECOGNIZING MOOTW RESTRAINTS IN CENTCOM

I. INTRODUCTION

The Gulf region has long been identified as an area where vital U.S. national interests are at stake. Formally acknowledged as such in the Carter Doctrine of 1980 in the aftermath of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the fall of the Shah of Iran, the region's oil wealth and the West's dependence upon it had encouraged the U.S. to establish a low-key military presence in the area as far back as the immediate post-World War II era.¹ DESERT SHIELD and DESERT STORM embodied the ultimate in U.S. resolve to maintain regional stability and a secure access to oil, and today our National Security Strategy proclaims that "In the Gulf, where global access to critical resources is key, we will continue to demonstrate U.S. commitment and resolve ... We will maintain our military presence."²

The extent of that military presence has a huge impact on how successfully the U.S. meets its objectives in the Gulf. One of the difficult missions facing the operational commander in the Gulf is determining the appropriate regional military presence he feels is necessary for his theater strategy to meet national objectives. This mission is difficult enough to achieve given the necessity to integrate ongoing U.S. military operations other than war (MOOTW) with the political, diplomatic, and economic instruments of national power also at play in the Gulf. It becomes even more difficult, and imperative to get it right, given the unique social, cultural, and political environment of the Gulf region.

Determining what the proper U.S. military presence in the Gulf should be is a critical component in MOOTW planning for that vital region. This paper will examine current U.S. forward presence in the Gulf in the context of the impact American military presence has on U.S. national and military objectives of maintaining regional stability and the security of regional partners, particularly Saudi Arabia. While underscoring the need for operational commanders to remember the central precept that political objectives must take precedent over military desires, it will highlight the requirement to stabilize the military balance in the Gulf without disrupting the region's fragile political equilibrium.

¹ The Navy's Middle East Force, operating mainly out of Bahrain, was established in 1948; the Air Force began constructing Dhahran Air Base in Saudi Arabia in 1943 and was granted access beginning in 1946.

² The President, A National Security Strategy For a New Century (May 1997), 27.

II. Military Presence in Its Strategic Context

The operational factors of space, time, and forces pose particularly challenging planning obstacles for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), the only unified command not physically located in its area of responsibility. The political environment of the Gulf region reduces options for permanent force stationing, and the distances involved for deployment of CONUS-based garrison forces limit flexibility in designing a credible rapid response capability. Striking the right balance between overseas presence and power projection capability is thus especially important for CENTCOM, and the decision on how to structure overseas presence in such a volatile theater becomes even more critical to its ability to accomplish its mission.

Military presence is one way the regional commander-in-chief (CINC) shapes his theater for operational planning purposes. Deciding U.S. force structure in the Gulf obviously does not take place in a military vacuum, however. U.S. military presence must not only meet the operational requirements of the CINC, it first and foremost must be in congruence with the country's National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Military Strategy (NMS). Identifying the strategic objective to be obtained and a desired end state is the fundamental principle for U.S. military doctrine, whether planning for actual combat operations or for MOOTW. Only with the objective defined and understood can the proper determination about military ends (the nature of American military presence in the Gulf) to accomplish the objective be made.

The strategic importance of the Gulf region to U.S. security is widely recognized. Together with the Korean peninsula, it is the area of potential conflict envisioned in the "two MRC (major regional contingency)" focus of U.S. defense planning. The NSS identifies Iraq and North Korea by name in its discussion of major theater warfare.³

The reason for the Gulf's importance is also widely recognized: the region's vast reserves of oil (the CENTCOM AOR contains 65 percent of proven world reserves) and the dependence of the industrialized world on that resource for their economic well-being. The NSS states that "maintaining the free flow of oil at reasonable prices" and "helping ... Arab friends provide for their security" are "enduring interests" of the U.S. in the Middle East, and that "the United States must remain ever vigilant to ensure unrestricted access to this

³ Ibid., 12.

critical resource.” U.S. strategy is thus “focused on deterring threats to regional stability and protecting the security of ... regional partners.”⁴

Access to oil is not the only U.S. strategic objective in the Gulf, nor is Iraq seen as the only threat to regional stability that would threaten that access. The NSS and NMS both stress the goal of nonproliferation and the need to limit the spread of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Both Iraq and Iran are threats to U.S. interests in this regard. In the near term, acquisition of such weapons would mainly have an impact on immediate regional states, which again gets back to the oil issue. Longer term, advanced delivery systems would threaten Israel and create the potential for a wider regional conflict.

Iran is also identified as a threat to U.S. interests due to its support for terrorism, opposition to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and its intimidation of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.⁵ In addition to conflicting with the U.S. objective of ensuring the security of Israel, Iranian threats here once again are important to the U.S. due to the potential to upset regional GCC stability and security, which could adversely affect the oil flow.

In order to secure the national objectives identified in the NSS, the NMS relies on flexible and selective engagement to accomplish the objectives of promoting stability and thwarting aggression. Military forces are tasked with peacetime engagement, deterrence and conflict prevention, and fighting and winning any wars that eventuate to meet those objectives. These tasks are performed via overseas presence and power projection with forces allocated by the Joint Strategic Capabilities Plan (JSCP).⁶ For the Gulf region, peacetime engagement and deterrence and conflict prevention are facilitated through bilateral defense cooperation agreements, security assistance, prepositioning, combined exercises, and forward presence.

U.S. military presence under current MOOTW conditions in the Gulf thus should be structured to help facilitate access to oil by deterring threats to regional stability and helping to protect the security of regional partners. It is critical for operational leaders to note, however, that this implies a two-faced threat that must be addressed. There is the obvious threat of external military attack by Iraq or Iran against its neighbors. There is the much less obvious, from a military perspective, *internal* threat of any form that could destabilize GCC governments and threaten their stability and willingness to maintain the flow of oil. U.S. national policy must

⁴ Ibid., 26-27.

⁵ Ibid., 27.

be prepared to defend against the former and assist the host nation against the latter. U.S. forward military presence likewise must be structured to be sensitive to both requirements.

Although related to regional stability and oil access, the objective of limiting WMD proliferation could logically result in a decision for military presence levels that is independent of the oil issue or GCC security. Such appears to be the case today, with a U.S. military buildup occurring as a result of Iraq's refusal to comply with U.N. resolutions concerning U.N. inspection team access. Nonproliferation is essentially an independent political goal not directly tied just to Gulf security. The decision to deploy forces and conduct military operations to secure Iraq's compliance with U.N. demands is thus not one that is made because Iraq is posing a direct, immediate threat to its neighbors. GCC leaders are well aware of this; hence their caution in supporting U.S. military objectives (strikes against Iraq).

II. CENTCOM's "Five Pillars" and the Theater Footprint

CENTCOM forces are engaged in MOOTW on a daily basis. Aside from currently preparing to enforce WMD arms controls mechanisms by military means if necessary, units are also directly involved with U.N. sanctions enforcement, maritime interception operations, and enforcing the "no-fly" exclusion zone in southern Iraq. Freedom of navigation transits are routinely carried out in the Strait of Hormuz, and nation assistance programs such as security assistance and foreign internal defense are ongoing projects. In order to meet these demands, as well as be prepared to respond to host of other contingencies in a region 7,000 miles from CONUS, CENTCOM emphasizes military-to-military relations and regional access as the foundation of its theater strategy.⁷

CENTCOM theater strategy is based on five "pillars" for its execution: power projection, forward presence, combined exercises, security assistance, and readiness to fight. These pillars directly reflect the priorities and strategic concepts embodied in the NMS. Regional cooperative relationships and coalitions are seen as the most effective instruments to support deployment and employment of U.S. forces to the region.⁸ Although able to act unilaterally if required, the unique nature of the AOR's geographic isolation from

⁶ Joint Chiefs of Staff, National Military Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, D.C.: February 1995), ii.

⁷ J. H. Binford Peay, "The Five Pillars of Peace in the Central Region," Joint Forces Quarterly, Autumn 1995, 39.

⁸ Ibid., 34.

CONUS-based garrison forces and requirement for host nation approval for basing support mandate such a strategy. Access to regional ports and airfields is an operational requirement to sustain an MRC. Base access and host nation support for many MOOTW operations, while not as critical, remain a fundamental weakness in such a theater.

The five pillars contain the elements of a comprehensive, integrated strategy to provide military flexibility and capability for an austere and physically hostile theater. Each pillar is essential in its own right if U.S. strategic objectives are to be met in the region. *Determining the proper weight of each pillar, and which forces to allocate to each, represents the key to long-term mission success.*

While power projection forces to prosecute an MRC would come from CONUS, CENTCOM must still maintain a credible operational forward presence in theater. These forces serve to deter conflict, enhance access, and provide the means to support any required transition from peace/MOOTW to war. The forces are aimed directly at containing Iraqi and Iranian expansionist tendencies, and provide a symbol of U.S. resolve and commitment to GCC states. While the potential threats from Iraq and Iran wax and wane over time, the basic forward presence structure has remained fairly consistent.

Operational forward presence usually consists primarily of naval forces, due to the relatively minor political footprint they require in the regional states. U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and the U.S. Fifth Fleet are headquartered in Bahrain, and have command of naval task forces that may include a carrier battle group and amphibious ready group on station in or "tethered" to the Gulf. There is also a small maritime patrol aircraft contingent that flies out of Oman. These naval units enforce U.N. sanctions against Iraq, fly in support of Operation SOUTHERN WATCH to enforce the no-fly zone over southern Iraq, and provide contingency air and TLAM strike capability for the CINC.

Significant Air Force assets are located with the 4404th composite wing at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. The 4404th was moved out of Dhahran to the vicinity of the relatively isolated interior city of Al Kharj in 1996 following the Khobar Towers bombing incident. This unit is the primary asset for Joint Task Force Southwest Asia (JTF SWA), headquartered at Eskan Village on the outskirts of Riyadh. JTF SWA was established in 1992 to conduct SOUTHERN WATCH.

An A-10 attack squadron is also stationed in Kuwait, and the Air Force periodically rotates experimental Air Expeditionary Forces (AEF) to the theater (Jordan, UAE, and Bahrain have hosted them to

date). AEFs, which usually consist of a composite mix of about 30 aircraft, can either provide relief for times when aircraft carrier presence is gapped, or timely additional assets during periods of crisis or increased tensions. At such times (as the present), specialized aircraft such as F-117s, B-1s, and B-52s may also be flown into theater.

While more limited than air and naval assets, ground forces are permanently assigned to the area to man PATRIOT batteries in Saudi Arabia, and have deployed elsewhere in times of crisis (Kuwait, Bahrain). Up to 1500 Army personnel also periodically deploy to Kuwait to exercise falling in on equipment prepositioned there. Special operations forces also routinely deploy to the theater as part of foreign internal defense programs.

Forward presence also includes large quantities of military supplies stored either directly in theater or nearby aboard ships. Because of political sensitivities and the lack of permanent bases, equipment is prepositioned both afloat and ashore to overcome the time factor required to rapidly deploy forces forward. Two brigades worth of equipment (one Marine, one Army) are contained afloat in ships usually at anchor in Diego Garcia, along with Air Force supplies and ammunition and Army port opening equipment. CENTCOM hopes to eventually preposition the equivalent of a heavy division ashore in theater, and currently has brigade sets prepositioned in Kuwait and Qatar. The presence of this and other equipment ashore provides operational flexibility while accommodating regional political and cultural sensitivities toward the establishment of foreign military bases.

In addition to the rotational combat forces, a significant U.S. permanent party presence is maintained in security assistance organizations (SAO). The largest presence by far is in Saudi Arabia, where several hundred personnel train, advise, and assist the Saudi Arabian Armed Forces (SAAF) and the royal family's Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) as part of the largest U.S. security assistance program in the world. This program is administered by the U.S. Military Training Mission (USMTM, a joint command) for SAAF and the Office of the Program Manager (OPM, a U.S. Army command) for SANG. The Chief of USMTM, an Army two-star general, also serves as the U.S. Defense Representative in country.

Two separate SAO organizations exist due to the Saudi government-directed division between its own regular armed forces in SAAF, charged with defending the nation from external threats, and SANG. SANG has internal security missions, and at heart is a tribally-recruited force of loyalists serving as the royal family's private security army and countercoup force. Although USMTM and OPM are both headquartered at Eskan

Village outside Riyadh with JTF SWA, they man key advisory offices at the Saudi Ministry of Defense itself and at every Saudi military service headquarters.

IV. Impact of Forward Presence

Compared with other forward theaters, such as those of U.S. European and Pacific Commands, U.S. forward (combat) presence in CENTCOM is relatively small. With multiple daily operational commitments and frequent outbreaks of major crises with Iraq, CENTCOM has labored for years to improve its regional access and establish host nation support agreements for increased forward presence levels. This is especially true in Saudi Arabia.

While the other Gulf states are important partners of the U.S., the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the key to U.S. strategic objectives of ensuring regional stability and access to oil. Saudi Arabia alone has the largest oil reserves in the world (26 percent of the total), is the largest producer, and the largest exporter.⁹ As the largest country by far on the Arabian peninsula, both in terms of physical size, population, and resources; it exerts great influence over the other conservative Gulf princedoms that make up the GCC and is the one all others must coalesce around if any serious regional security capability is ever to be attained. Indeed, without a friendly and stable Saudi Arabia, the security and even continued existence of the smaller Gulf states would be at risk. Saudi Arabia, for U.S. strategic objectives in the Gulf, is quite literally the golden goose.

Although always valued as a conservative influence in the Gulf and a friendly source of oil, Riyadh since the 1979 ouster of the Shah of Iran has assumed even greater strategic importance for the U.S. Iran and Saudi Arabia had been the lynchpins behind President Nixon's "Two Pillars" security policy in the Gulf. The Shah was lavishly armed by the U.S. to serve in the role as the primary bulwark against any potential regional predator and to advance U.S. interests in the region. When Iran came under the control of hostile mullahs, Saudi Arabia not only remained the primary oil supplier, but became the primary American political and military ally in the region as well.¹⁰

⁹ Central Intelligence Agency, World Factbook (<http://odci.gov/cia/publications>, Washington, D.C.: 1996), 6.

¹⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, The Gulf and the Search for Strategic Stability (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984), 57.

The centrality of Saudi Arabia to American strategic objectives is illustrated by the intensity and depth of U.S. interagency engagement with the country, which plays host to the largest standing U.S. military presence on the Arabian peninsula. On the military level, this intensity is reflected in four major areas:

1. planning for the defense of the country
2. building infrastructure to support introduction of U.S. power projection forces
3. increasing the size, capability and interoperability of SAAF (and SANG to a lesser degree)
4. establishing host nation agreements for U.S. forward presence

All these efforts result in some inevitable and necessary form of U.S. military presence that exerts pressure upon the frailties of the Saudi state, with unsettling effects on the country's internal stability. Should this pressure become too great, the stability and viability of the government may be at risk. Such effects call into question whether U.S. forward presence levels, though limited, may in fact be undermining U.S. strategic objectives in the theater.

As previously mentioned, ensuring access to oil and protecting the stability of Gulf states require acknowledging both external *and* internal threats to their security. Military presence affects not only Iraqi and Iranian scenarios, but also domestic tranquility in Saudi Arabia. While DOD is not the responsible agency for determining the status of political stability, joint doctrine specifically states operational commanders must understand political objectives and the potential impact of inappropriate actions, and that "failure to recognize changes . . . may lead to ineffective or counterproductive military operations."¹¹

The current standoff with Iraq illustrates the problems U.S. forward presence has for Saudi officials. The Defense Minister, Prince Sultan, stated on 8 February 1998 that Riyadh was against "striking Iraq as a people and as a nation," and senior Saudi officials have told the press that the country refuses to allow any strikes to be launched from Saudi soil (e.g., by the 4404th).¹² Saudi Arabia similarly refused authorization for strikes to be launched from its territory in autumn of 1996, when the U.S. struck Iraqi air defense sites in southern Iraq to retaliate against Iraqi moves against the Kurds in the north.

While the Saudis share U.S. desires for regional stability, there are significant differences in perceptions of threats to Saudi security. Many American officials feel there is an element of lack of gratitude on the part of Saudis for U.S. "protection." For Saudis, the issue is, "protection against what/whom?" U.N.

¹¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War (Joint Pub 3-07) (Washington DC: 16 June 1995), I-2/3.

¹² Waiel Faleh, Associated Press, 08 February 1998. Prince Sultan statement reported by AP to be from Arab News, an English-language newspaper published in Saudi Arabia.

inspection team access is a grave international concern that needs to be addressed, but it does not pose an immediate threat to Saudi security. Similarly, Saddam's aggression against the Kurds is lamentable, but that is seen as an internal Iraqi matter not related to Saudi security.

Close defense ties with the U.S. have long been a sensitive issue with Riyadh, but especially so in the aftermath of the Gulf War with the continued U.S. military presence in the Kingdom. Riyadh refused authorization to use its bases to launch strikes against Iraq in September 1992 in the first confrontation over U.N. access, and has consistently brushed off U.S. proposals for a Gulf defense pact that included permanent U.S. basing. Immediate post-war plans for Egypt and Syria to play a role in Gulf defense were largely the result of fears by Saudi leaders that a continued American military presence would undermine its legitimacy and stability. Knowing that the presence of foreigners was anathema to militant Muslims, the regime even refused requests for repositioning U.S. Army equipment on its soil.¹³

Many Saudis are uncomfortable with the whole concept of Operation SOUTHERN WATCH: it was established to protect Iraqi Shia rebels from Iraqi air power, not to protect Saudi Arabia against Iraqi attack. Whether true or not, there is a palpable atmosphere in Riyadh that the mission of U.S. combat forces in Saudi Arabia is not a narrow one to protect Saudi territorial integrity, but rather to keep an Arab leader (Saddam) in his place. It also escapes no one in the Arab world that while the U.S. is eager to punish Saddam for abusing Kurds or Shias, that same eagerness is absent when it comes to Israel's treatment of Lebanese and Palestinians.

Differences in identifying threats to security expose the Saudi government to charges from its domestic opponents that it is acting as a "stooge" for the U.S. by allowing American forces to be stationed there for reasons not related to Saudi interests. This situation is greatly exacerbated by the economic costs borne by the Kingdom to support an aggressive military stance, religious implications of allowing foreign "infidel" armies to be stationed on what is seen as holy Islamic territory, and by cultural strains.

An analysis of Saudi economic weaknesses is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is useful to note that the Saudi Arabia of 1998 is not the land of untold riches it was in the 1970s. Lower oil prices and exploding population growth means Saudi Arabia today has a per capita GNP on par with that of *Portugal*.¹⁴ Under such circumstances, lavish defense spending exerts considerable pressure on funding available for government social

¹³ Mordechai Abir, Saudi Arabia: Government, Society and the Gulf Crisis (London: Routledge, 1993), 195, 208.

¹⁴ CIA.

programs. Riyadh underwrote a substantial portion of the cost of the Gulf War, and it continues to fund operational expenses for the deployed forces of JTF SWA. In addition to these controversial costs, regime opponents believe the U.S. is trying to foist unnecessary, and very expensive, military hardware on the country. Riyadh ordered over \$30 billion of new weaponry in the aftermath of the war, even though the resources to pay for it are not available. Between 1987-94, Saudi Arabia received over \$54 billion in arms shipments (more than Iran, Iraq, Egypt, and Syria combined).¹⁵

Added to the economic costs of U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia is the affront to Islam that the presence is thought to represent by many citizens. Riyadh rules over land that is seen to be holy, not only by Saudis themselves, but by the entire Muslim world. The King's formal title, "custodian of the holy mosques" in Mecca and Medinah, reflects the importance of this concept to Saudi life. An enormous portion of the Saud family's legitimacy to power rests on its performance as this holy custodian, ensuring safe access to the cities for pilgrims and preservation of the holy sites themselves from non-Muslim contamination. The presence of U.S. combat forces seven years after the end of the Gulf War (then justified as acceptable for "defending Islam") is considered heretical by many opponents of the Saud regime.

Saudi society is well known in the West for its closed nature, strict moral code, sense of public decorum, and reverence for protecting the Saudi way of life. The presence of uniformed soldiers from a "decadent" foreign country aggravates the tensions caused by political, economic, and religious differences. It was not uncommon to see young Americans in full combat mufti careening around the streets of Riyadh, the very heartland of Saudi conservatism, as late as July 1996, even after the June bombing of Khobar Towers and well after the November 1995 car bomb at OPM headquarters.¹⁶ Such practices have been curtailed with the reduction of the American military "footprint" in Riyadh through consolidation at Eskan Village, but the incidents point out the inevitable cultural clashes that will occur when troops deploy to unfamiliar environments. There is a recognizable arrogance in many American officials traveling to Riyadh. Many come with the mental attitude that "the cavalry has arrived to save you, now get out of the way." This in spite of the difficulty in finding a Saudi who believes the mission of JTF SWA, and hence the presence of the 4404th, is to

¹⁵ Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, Saudi Arabia: The Coming Storm (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1994), 163, 192; and Strategic Assessment 1996: Instruments of U.S. Power (Washington: Institute for National Strategic Studies, 1996), 99. The country has been running budget deficits almost continuously since 1982 and has had to cut back subsidies on many consumer items.

¹⁶ Personal observations of author.

protect the Kingdom. Indeed, many in Riyadh (if not Kuwait) question American preoccupation with an Iraq that is seen to have been greatly weakened by the Gulf War, and not currently a threat to its neighbors.

These cultural clashes are not, unfortunately, restricted to just junior or mid-ranking personnel that are not properly indoctrinated or supervised. Senior U.S. military leaders continue to routinely visit cabinet officials and Pentagon-equivalent offices in Riyadh with their staffs in field combat uniforms, engendering an atmosphere of continual crisis and war footing not appreciated by their hosts. It is not the type of behavior expected (or tolerated) for American officers in London or Paris, so why in Riyadh?

Saudi Arabia has many potential vulnerabilities due to its unique tribal structure of government (in many respects a family business), economic structure, and social and cultural composition. Public attitudes toward a U.S. forward combat presence pose a very real threat to the legitimacy of the Saudi government. It is instructive to note that the OPM and Khobar bombings were not part of a wider "anti-American" campaign in Saudi Arabia. American businesses, diplomatic establishments, and schools have not been attacked, nor their employees (there are approximately 40,000 Americans in country). Rather, symbols of the royal family (SANG) and foreign armies (the 4404th) were targeted. The conditions which led to such actions have not changed. The implications for future Saudi stability and the effects of U.S. forward presence are therefore not positive.

V. Assessment of Forward Presence

CENTCOM forward presence in Saudi Arabia has negative effects on five of the six principles of war for MOOTW: objective, unity of effort, restraint, security, and legitimacy. These will be addressed below, but first it should be noted that even though the strategy of maintaining combat forces in the Kingdom satisfies the doctrinal military principle of perseverance, that could be taken to be a negative in this situation.

Although it is the primary principle of war in U.S. military doctrine, the concept of *strategic objective* often tends to break down in Defense circles into discussions more correctly identified as "military" objectives. This is a trap into which it is easy for the military professional to fall. The overriding *raison d'être* of the military, after all, is to deter conflict and then be able to fight and win the nation's wars, should that become necessary. The operational and theater commander must resist such temptations to overly focus on the military aspect of national power, however. As emphasized in Joint Pub 3-0 (Doctrine for Joint Operations),

"Successful military operations may not, by themselves, achieve the desired strategic end state. Military activities... need to be synchronized with other instruments of

national power and focused on common national aims.”¹⁷

The diplomatic, economic, and informational instruments of national power must be integrated from the very outset into theater strategy, along with the military tools. In addition to the other nonmilitary *instruments* of national power at play, there are also other *interests*. Joint Doctrine again specifies that, *especially* in MOOTW, political considerations must drive operational planning: “a distinguishing characteristic of MOOTW is the degree to which political objectives influence operations and tactics.”¹⁸

Disruptions caused by the peacetime presence of U.S. combat troops in Saudi Arabia could result in severe challenges to the stability of the regime there, which would threaten U.S. objectives of access to oil and regional stability. Fixation on forward presence in the Kingdom could, in effect, result in the untenable Vietnam scenario of having to “destroy it in order to save it.”

Unity of effort with the host nation and other regional states is clearly hampered by differences over U.S. force levels and what the mission is. Disagreement over how to discipline Iraq is one example where there clearly is no common purpose among participants. That situation is also an example of how the principle of *restraint* is subordinated by sustaining a combat presence in Saudi Arabia. The host nation clearly does not believe U.S. intentions for the employment of units in the Kingdom will result in a “judicious” use of force, but rather in “excessive” use. Given the lack of Saudi identification of a clear-cut threat emanating from Iraq, the permanent presence of the 4404th and its thousands of personnel would not appear to be a prudent application of appropriate military capability.

The principle of *security* is one most clearly adversely affected by U.S. combat presence in Saudi Arabia. Khobar Towers is a permanent and tragic monument to the vulnerability of U.S. troops in an environment where they do not enjoy widespread support. Khobar Towers and the OPM bombing also illustrate how domestic opposition to the U.S. presence threatens the *legitimacy* of the host nation government. Preoccupation with force protection since June 1996 has also restricted U.S. freedom of action in the Kingdom, as self-imposed limits were placed on personal movements and tour lengths. The conversion of the majority of permanent party security assistance billets at USMTM and OPM to one year tours is contradictory to the intent of a training and advisory staff, especially in a country such as Saudi Arabia where effectiveness is so closely tied to the development of personal relationships with host nation officials.

¹⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Operations (Joint Pub 3-0) (Washington DC: 1 February 1995), I-4.

While considerable lip service is given to understanding Saudi political, social, religious, and cultural sensitivities, CENTCOM planning continues to proceed under the assumption that to defend Saudi Arabia, one has to be *in* Saudi Arabia. The continued presence of the 4404th and JTF SWA is rigorously pursued, as is Saudi permission to use those assets to conduct military strikes from Saudi soil that may or may not have anything to do with Saudi interests.

In certain respects, this myopic focus on forward presence in Saudi Arabia is reminiscent of the traditional U.S. military fondness for building up overwhelming force to bludgeon any foe. While militarily useful, it totally lacks the subtlety required for building up host nation support or for understanding the effect such presence has on internal stability. It subjugates national objectives to the single dimension of military power, and replicates the old Cold War pitfall of viewing security solely in terms of firepower, number of divisions deployed, or number of air sorties generated. It downplays the utility of other instruments of national power, and violates joint doctrine which emphasizes the primacy of political objectives in MOOTW.

Parallels with past U.S. failures in Vietnam and Iran are not unrealistic. Although Saudi Arabia is a unique country with unique strengths and weaknesses, the negative domestic pressures that can be associated with American heavy-handedness and “in your face” posturing are well known. As concluded by two analysts with considerable time in country,

“today, Saudi Arabia is increasingly resembling the shah’s [sic] Iran. The parallels are many: the ruling family is perceived as being corrupt and tied to the United States; foreign policy is pegged to a strong American presence . . . , with indirect ties to Israel; and oil policies are not based on national considerations.”¹⁸

U.S. decision-making over Saudi Arabia is also reminiscent of the Shah’s days, in the arguable diminution of the weight given to the advice and assessment of the country team vis-a-vis those supposedly with the “big picture” back in CONUS. Decisions made on the relocation and consolidation of SAOs, the cutbacks in tour lengths, and the banning of all but a few senior military dependents were largely made with no local input and no assessment on ramifications for long-term military-to-military relationships. Although anecdotal, the existence of frequent wide divergences between country team attitudes and outlooks (both civilian and military) and those of staffs in Tampa and Washington is both readily apparent, and quite instructive.

¹⁸ Joint Pub 3-07, I-2.

VI. Conclusion

The foregoing is not to suggest that U.S. engagement with Riyadh or elsewhere in the region should be reduced. Rather, the *nature* of U.S. engagement is in question; specifically, the level of forward combat presence. CENTCOM has productive initiatives in security assistance, foreign internal defense, exercise programs, prepositioning, and unit rotations that are successful in meeting command goals of maintaining regional access and military-to-military ties.

Low visibility security assistance organizations, already embedded within the Saudi system, have unique and direct access to the national security leadership of that country, ensuring CENTCOM will always have an "in" there to promote U.S. military interests. USMTM and OPM can also meet the engagement requirements discussed in Section IV of planning Saudi defense, building power projection infrastructure for U.S. forces, and improving the capability of host nation forces. From the Saudi view, USMTM and OPM advisors and trainers are seen as "their" people, bought and paid for to assist SAAF and SANG, and do not have either the high profile or negative connotation of occupying forces that the 4404th does.

The CENTCOM AOR is an area where it is politically difficult to maintain forward bases; in Saudi Arabia, it is not only difficult to do, it is counterproductive to Saudi internal stability. Additionally, if U.S. forces are in Saudi Arabia to protect Iraqi Shia's rather than Saudis, and if Riyadh will not authorize strikes from its territory unless in direct defense of Saudi Arabia, why are the U.S. forces there? Secretary of Defense Cohen himself stated 8 February 1998 that bases in Saudi Arabia were not "necessary" for the U.S. to strike Iraq.²⁰ It seems clear that a forward combat presence in Saudi Arabia is a "nice to have," but not a "must have."

There are no easy answers for determining the proper military presence in a MOOTW theater. While not optimal, the CENTCOM AOR is essentially an expeditionary theater, and there are alternatives to stationing combat troops permanently in Saudi Arabia. While naval forces are ideally suited for the region, there clearly needs to be some land-based air and ground power capability to fulfill presence requirements for deterrence and crisis response. The potential of AEFs to deploy throughout the theater and for Army combat groups to rotate

¹⁹ Peter W. Wilson and Douglas F. Graham, Saudi Arabia: The Coming Storm (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1994), 268.

²⁰ Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Will Not Ask to Use Saudi Bases For a Raid on Iraq," The New York Times, 9 February 1998, A-1.

through Kuwait has only just begun to be explored.²¹ In an era of reduced global forward presence, Army and Air Force units will increasingly have to look at routinely deploying overseas as naval forces do, and falling in on prepositioned equipment rather than operating from permanent bases or garrisons. These concepts could be pursued more aggressively, as could the feasibility for more permanent arrangements with less conservative and insular countries than Saudi Arabia (i.e., Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE).

Political objectives drive U.S. interests in the Gulf on a day-to-day basis, and need to be the standard around which military operations are structured in the theater. Sublimating this “prime directive” of MOOTW threatens to kill the proverbial golden goose in order to achieve secondary military objectives of rigid forward presence concepts, at the expense of strategic national objectives of maintaining access to oil and regional stability.

²¹ See, for example, Douglas A. Macgregor, Breaking the Phalanx (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997), and William R. Looney III, “The Air Expeditionary Force: Taking the Air Force into the Twenty-First Century,” Airpower Journal, Winter 1996.

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