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Don't Stop at Iraq: Why the U.S. Should Withdraw From the Entire Persian Gulf

By Toby C. Jones

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Our experiment in militarizing the region has made it more volatile, less free, and more costly to American interests and values

The U.S. is finally drawing down its military presence from Iraq, but why stop there? Why not reduce or outright remove our military presence from the entire Persian Gulf? The U.S. has been waging war in the Gulf for more than two and a half decades, since it took up arms against Iran in the closing stages of the Iran-Iraq war. The human and environmental costs have been catastrophic. The presumptive gains of what has amounted to one long war have proven elusive at best. More often than not, the justifications for war have been either ill-conceived or manufactured. The Persian Gulf today is hardly stable or secure. But permanent war, and our militarization of the Gulf, isn't so much a reflection of regional instability as it is the cause.

Today, it's still not clear what the United States' strategic priorities are in the Gulf. Are we there to secure access to oil? Protect friendly regimes from unfriendly ones? American policymaking is muddled, a combination of concern about energy security, Iranian aggression, and terrorism. This uncertainty is perilous. And the reality is that none of these challenges really require a significant military presence. Indeed, if recent history is any guide, a large military footprint in the Gulf will generate more rather than less risk.

Historically, oil and "energy security" have been at the heart of American strategy in the Gulf. It is home to the richest oil and natural gas deposits on the planet. It was President Jimmy Carter who most clearly made protecting the flow of oil to global markets a national priority. Carter declared oil a "vital interest" and that any assault on it would "be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." Protecting oil meant protecting its producers. Indeed, much of the war-fighting of the last two decades has been rationalized as necessary to defend Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and their oil, from neighborhood threats. The economic logic that has underpinned all this is based mostly on an assumption that oil is a scarce resource, that there is a tight gap between supply and demand, that ensuring supply is essential to stabilize prices and to protect the global economy from potentially devastating disruptions.

None of that is really true. For most of the 20th century, oil companies and oil producing states regularly collaborated to regulate supply in order to limit competition and control prices. There never has been a global oil market. Instead, oil's production and delivery has been managed by a small network of corporate and national energy elites, whose primary concern has been serving their own interests and maintaining their bottom line.

Among the few to benefit from high oil prices are global weapons manufacturers. Oil states have recycled hundreds of billions of dollars in oil revenues through Western economies by purchasing high-tech and expensive weapons systems. A year ago, Saudi Arabia committed to purchasing a staggering \$60 billion in new weapons from the United States. In spite of spending outlandish amounts to procure some of the world's most modern weapons, Saudi Arabia has not been able to defend itself. Instead, the burden of protecting Saudi Arabia falls on the United States. Advocates of this arrangement argue that the influx of cash is good for the American economy and that it creates jobs in parts of the country that need them. Oil money also helps pay for expensive military research and development projects, deflecting some of the cost of weapons design from American taxpayers. This may all be true, but it also contributes to the militarization and destabilization of the Gulf.

The world today is awash in oil and natural gas. Protecting the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to global markets is far less necessary than it once was. Over the past generation, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the other oil producers in the region have grown accustomed to bloated national budgets and expensive state-run, cradle-to-grave welfare services, which means that there is greater pressure on them to sell oil than to hoard it.

Since the fall of the Shah in 1979, U.S. policy of containing Iran has arguably been linked to its energy security. Of course there's been more at stake than just oil, and since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, concerns about Iran's growing assertiveness and influence in the region have eclipsed those about energy security, at least in public political discourse. It is difficult to untangle where American concerns about Iran overlap with its desire to protect regional allies, and whose interests are primarily being served by the United States' policy of non-engagement.

Led by Saudi Arabia, the Arab Gulf states claim that their fears of Iranian ambition are existential. It is certainly true that Tehran is locked in a regional balance of power struggle with Saudi Arabia and that Iran seeks greater influence. But Iran does not seek the destruction of

Saudi Arabia or the overthrow of Arab world's political order. In spite of claims to the contrary by the Saudi and Bahraini governments, Iran's revolutionary imperative is a relic of the past. Israel expresses a similar anxiety about Iran as a security threat. And Iran's leaders have played their part in fostering Israeli uncertainty. Iran's potential acquisition of nuclear weapons is a source of concern, of course, as is its support for Hezbollah and Syria. The challenge of how best to deal with Iranian ambition, however, is mainly a political problem, one that has for too long been treated almost entirely through the lens of security and militarism.

The presence of the American military in the Gulf has not only done little to deter Iran's ambitions, it has emboldened them. Surrounding Iran militarily and putting it under the constant threat of American or Israeli military action has failed to deter the country. Instead this approach has strengthened hardliners within Tehran and convinced them that the best path to self-preservation is through defiance, militarism, and the pursuit of dangerous ties across the Middle East. The rivalry between Iran, the U.S., and its regional partners has turned into a political and military arms race, one that could easily spin out of control.

Less obvious, the United States' military posture has also emboldened its allies, sometimes to act in counterproductive ways. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain justify their brutal crackdown of Bahrain's pro-democracy movement by falsely claiming Iranian meddling. While American policymakers support democratic transitions in the Middle East rhetorically, their unwillingness to confront long-time allies in the Gulf during the Arab Spring is partly the product of the continued belief that the U.S. needs to keep its military in the Gulf, something that requires staying on good terms with Gulf monarchies. The result is that Saudi Arabia and its allies have considerable political cover to behave badly, both at home and abroad.

If the Arab Spring has demonstrated anything, it is that the old political order is vulnerable to domestic political pressure. The Middle East is moving to an era of mass politics, in which mobilized publics demand greater rights and greater influence. While many observers [believe](#) that the oil states are less susceptible to such pressures, this seems far from certain. In fact, Saudi Arabia, the world's most important oil producer, shares many of social and political-economic characteristics of its beleaguered neighbors, including high unemployment, widespread poverty, popular disillusion with corruption, and an increasingly sophisticated network of grassroots organizations committed to political change. Even flush with considerable oil revenue and the capacity to throw money at its many internal problems, Saudi Arabia has still been forced to unleash its police and security forces to quell unrest. The United States, because of its relationship with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain and its apparent preference for preserving the political status quo in the Gulf, is increasingly seen by the region's citizens as conflated with the violent forces of counterrevolution. Should revolutionaries and would-be revolutionaries in the Gulf force political transitions in the future, the United States could pay a political price for its long-standing military entanglements.

Now, even the White House no longer believes our large military presence in the Gulf is good for combating the big threat we're supposedly there to contain: terrorism. Ben Rhodes, the deputy national security adviser for strategic communications, [remarked](#) last week that the U.S. will seek to reduce the American military footprint there. This would allow "us in many respects to demilitarize elements of our foreign policy and establish more normal relationships," he said,

to bring the U.S. security posture in the region more "in line with where we were before 1990." Rhodes apparently did not comment on either energy security or Iran. While his comments strike the right tone, there may be less to them than meets the eye. Last week's statement directly contradicted an October New York Times [report](#) that administration officials plan to reallocate military resources and combat troops from Iraq to elsewhere in the Gulf, Kuwait in particular.

There are compelling reasons to believe that the Obama administration will not demilitarize the Gulf to pre-1990 levels, as Rhodes said. The majority of U.S. military facilities, including the al-Udeid airbase in Qatar and the headquarters of the Navy's Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, were built after 1990. New military spending and new construction are planned for 2012. The State Department has [requested](#) around \$26 million dollars for new construction at the Fifth Fleet's Bahrain headquarters. This is not a huge sum, but it was requested as Bahraini security forces carried out a brutal crackdown on its own people. American priorities are, sadly, all too clear.

The status quo is never easy to change, especially when it comes to institutions as risk-averse as the Pentagon and State Department and to practices as entrenched as the 25-year U.S.-Gulf alliance. A new strategic approach, one that relies less on the projection of military power, will seem replete with risk. Skeptics will warn that Iran would be emboldened, that terrorists would seek a foothold, and that the flow of oil would be imperiled. But these fears are exaggerated. To the extent that these dangers are plausible at all, it's because our current policy makes them possible. The greatest risk is proceeding ahead with the status quo. To disengage from our fraught and increasingly counterproductive Gulf presence would require the U.S. to begin withdrawing its military personnel from the region, reduce its spending on existing infrastructure, put an end to the weapons pipeline, and look for places from which it can depart immediately, such as moving the Fifth Fleet out of the Gulf and reducing the Navy's burden in patrolling the Gulf.

This would not mean abandoning the region altogether. Given its global reach, the United States will always retain the capacity to project military power, but the terms should be limited. The challenge is less about finding friendly ports to station personnel than it is about charting clearer and more effective terms of political engagement with allies and rivals. And this requires a new strategic doctrine, one that makes clear to regional actors that the era of open security guarantees -- which have proven so dear to both Americans and to the hundreds of thousands who have died since the United States began its military build-up -- is over. This would not mean the loss of leverage or influence, but in fact the opposite. Once it is clear that the United States is not solely committed to preserving the status quo, regional states will no longer believe they can ignore American calls for reform, restraint, and respect for human rights. Indeed, it is the belief in the Gulf States that they have "special relationships" with the United States.

Where the presence of the military has constrained American leverage, its removal will increase its power in other ways. After all, even with a struggling economy, the United States will for the foreseeable future remain the world's greatest military and economic superpower. The Gulf states are wealthy and resource rich, but they are beholden to the free movement of labor, capital, and oil. Once oil has to flow in a free market, rather than in one controlled by producers who operate under Western military protection, they will be subject to a range of "normal" kinds of political and economic leverage. Using these sources of leverage would prove less problematic for an

America that is struggling with the gap between its interests and values in the less-than-democratic Gulf.

Since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the limits of American power and the constraining effects of the United States' Gulf alliances have been clear. It would be better for us, and better for them, to end our failed three-decade experiment in the Gulf.