

SUMMARY - GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

PARTICIPATING SCHOLARS

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Gulf Power after Iraq

As U.S. military forces withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan while “pivoting” towards Asia, the United States faces a turning point. Budgetary constraints and war weariness create public pressure for a large drawdown in the Gulf, but ongoing threats related to terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and regional instability more generally mean only modest force reductions are likely. Dr. Colin Kahl of Georgetown University and the Center for a New American Security and Rear Admiral John Sigler of the National Defense University discussed current U.S. strategy and several scenarios that could shape the U.S. presence in the region at a Gulf Roundtable at CSIS on May 24, 2012.

Sigler provided a brief history of U.S. force strength in the Gulf. Until the late 1970s, only around 1,000 troops were stationed in the Gulf. That number grew to around 5,000 after the Iranian Revolution, and ballooned briefly to 543,000 during Operation Desert Storm. Between 1991 and 2001 troop levels fluctuated between 17,000 and 24,000, with up to 7,000 of those stationed in Kuwait as a deterrent to an Iraqi re-invasion. After September 11, when Operation Enduring Freedom began in Afghanistan, forces in the Gulf grew to around 55,000, and numbers jumped to 250,000 with the Iraq invasion in 2003. Since the withdrawal from Iraq, there remain approximately 40,000 troops in the Gulf; nearly half are in Kuwait, with thousands more stationed at the various naval and air force bases in Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates.

U.S. interests and objectives will determine the troop levels required in the Gulf going forward. Kahl boiled down U.S. key interests in the Middle East to protecting the U.S. homeland from terrorism or weapons of mass destruction, ensuring the free flow of energy sources, and guaranteeing the survival of the state of Israel. Sigler identified other key strategic issues as containment of bad state behavior, countering nuclear proliferation, and countering terrorism and extremism. Distinguishing between interests and objectives, Kahl argued that additional objectives arising from our interests included ensuring general regional stability, preventing a single state from achieving regional hegemony, ensuring U.S. military access to the region, working toward Arab-Israeli peace, and promoting development, reform, and good governance.

THE GULF ROUNDTABLE SERIES

The CSIS Middle East Program launched the Gulf Roundtable in April 2007 to examine the strategic importance of a broad range of social, political, and economic trends in the Gulf region and to identify opportunities for constructive U.S. engagement. The roundtable defines the Gulf as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, and Iran. The roundtable convenes monthly, assembling a diverse group of regional experts, policymakers, academics, and business leaders seeking to build a greater understanding of the complexities of the region. Topics for discussion include the role of Islamist movements in politics, the war on terror, democratization and the limits of civil society, the strategic importance of Gulf energy, media trends, trade liberalization, and prospects for greater regional integration. The Gulf Roundtable series is made possible in part through the generous support of the Embassy of the United Arab Emirates. ■

Out of this history and set of interests, Kahl and Sigler offered estimates of what U.S. presence in the Gulf might look like in the coming years. Sigler argued the United States would see a baseline posture—in the absence of a crisis related to Iran—similar to what existed between 1991-2001, without the buffer force in Kuwait. That would leave around 12,000 troops in the region, including around 5,000 afloat and 6,000 on rotation devoted to countering terrorism and promoting regional security cooperation. Kahl argued that about 25,000 troops would remain in the Gulf, basing his calculation on what would be needed to deal with a crisis arising from Iran minus the unique troop requirements of ongoing involvement in Afghanistan.

Both Kahl and Sigler identified likely contingencies that would drive up the troop levels expected in the Gulf. Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon or suffering an attack on its nuclear facilities by either the United States or Israel are easily envisioned scenarios. State failure in Yemen, conflict over energy resources, or environmental disaster counted among disruptive possibilities that Sigler could anticipate. Kahl added the possibility of revolution in Bahrain with ripple effects in Saudi Arabia or an attack on the U.S. homeland by extremists based in Yemen as other potential wildcards. Any of these scenarios would quickly change the calculus in Washington of what forces were needed in the region to protect core U.S. interests.

U.S. forces in the Gulf will have to balance a variety of missions even in the absence of a new crisis. A reduced presence in the Gulf would still see those troops in place focused on guaranteeing energy security, dealing with issues arising in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, and addressing challenges from non-state actors. On a more strategic level, the U.S. presence in the Gulf must reassure U.S. partners and friends in the region that the United States will continue to guarantee their security. That same presence must dissuade nuclear proliferation and deter attacks. Sigler argued that a reduced force would need to be increasingly deployable—relying on prepositioning (possibly through sea-basing), “warm basing” by bringing local bases up to U.S. standards for use in emergencies, and strengthening the intelligence capabilities of partners to reduce the need for a physical U.S. presence.

Governments in the Gulf are concerned for their own security with relation to Iran and continue to seek U.S. arms in addition to assurances. The Gulf region features the most robust military sales in the world, and the United States is a major supplier. The United States has strongly pushed for

the integration of the region’s early warning systems, air and ballistic missile defense, and other capabilities. Kahl believed that the anticipated U.S. force reduction in the region had increased Gulf leaders’ appetites for multilateral security cooperation.

At the same time, Kahl argued, the military hardware build-up in the Gulf raised difficult questions for balancing U.S. strategic priorities. Warning against U.S. “strategic over-dependence” on Gulf countries that could be vulnerable to domestic instability, he urged more creative thinking about where U.S. forces in the Gulf could go in the event of dramatic upheavals. He also cautioned that growing accusations of human rights abuses would make it harder to sustain close U.S. ties. A rapidly growing arsenal in the Gulf could face a ceiling if regional capabilities began to erode Israel’s qualitative military advantage over its neighbors.

Balancing such competing objectives will be difficult but crucial. Forces cannot be withdrawn in dramatic fashion, but some reductions are inevitable. Restructuring will require streamlining deployments and encouraging greater cooperation among U.S. services and combatant commands. Even if this is accomplished, the military will still face the challenge of managing an increasingly combustible region with a leaner presence. ■

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