

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## Brother, Can You Spare a Carrier?

by Jon B. Alterman

.....

An aircraft carrier is a scarce resource. The United States has eleven carriers in its entire fleet, and only about half can deploy at any given time. According to the website [globalsecurity.org](http://globalsecurity.org), five U.S. carriers are currently at sea, and two of them are currently off the coast of Iran. That's a lot of firepower directed toward one target, especially when few expect U.S. tensions with Iran to vanish—or even diminish—any time soon.

It is easy to remember how we got here. Major U.S. military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan brought with them a large troop contingent (including carriers), some of which could be adapted toward securing global energy security in case of a crisis. With 20 percent of the world's traded oil flowing out of the Gulf through the Strait of Hormuz, the world could not afford an interruption, and the United States is the only power with the ability to secure the Strait. So as the troops flowed out, carrier strike groups remained and picked up much of the slack.

With a diminishing U.S. presence in the neighborhood, and with global tensions with Iran rising, many see the carriers as a way to both deter Iranian aggression and reassure allies of the U.S. commitment to their security. Yet, the cost of doing so is high, and the cost of doing so on an enduring basis may become unsustainable in the face of a shrinking defense budget. It is worth thinking of alternatives, and I attended a quiet meeting this week that explored a few.

To do so, one must think first about the kinds of scenarios in which Iran might act militarily, and how Iran might do it. One possibility is that Iran might seek to respond to an attack on its nuclear facilities, and another is that it might seek to escalate after a Western response to an Iranian provocation (such as Iran's capture of 15 British sailors in 2007). In either event, it seems unlikely that the Iranian response would be large-scale, immediate, and conventional. Even with a reduced U.S. military footprint in the Gulf, Iran is too outgunned to win such a confrontation with a potential foe, or even to play to a draw. Inviting a symmetrical conflict would be to invite a humiliating Iranian defeat.

(continued on page 2)

## Going Nuts for Fuel

The next time you eat pistachios, you might think about saving the shells. The Jordanian Rashadia cement plant recently got creative with waste, using 24 million tons of pistachio shells as fuel to offset tight supplies of oil and gas.

Jordanians have had particular need to break out of their usual energy mix, as Jordan imports more than 95 percent of the fuel it needs to generate electricity. Fluctuations in natural gas deliveries from Egypt in recent months have sent shockwaves through Jordan. To wean itself off Egyptian gas and Iraqi oil, Jordan is exploring a host of domestic production options and is currently negotiating projects to produce 110-130MW of wind power, 200MW of solar power, and 40-50MW of biogas. Jordan is also investigating tapping into shale oil deposits, which are hard to exploit but which Jordan has in abundance.

Jordan is not alone in a serious push towards energy diversification. Morocco has set a goal of obtaining 42 percent of its electricity by 2020 from renewable sources. Following on the lead of the MASDAR project in Abu Dhabi, it recently began development of a "green city" designed to integrate new technology with sustainable urban planning.

The United Arab Emirates is pursuing nuclear power, and even oil-rich Saudi Arabia talks about the importance of solar power in its future energy mix. Petroleum remains vital as a transportation fuel, but the skyrocketing demand for water and electricity are driving a search for alternative and renewable sources. That search will only grow more creative. ■ DB

## Gulf Roundtable on Cyber Conflict in the Gulf

James Andrew Lewis, director of the Technology and Public Policy Program at CSIS, analyzed cyber warfare in the Gulf in a lunchtime presentation on November 14. Part of the Middle East Program's Gulf Roundtable series, the talk analyzed Iran's offensive capabilities and threat perceptions in the cyber realm. Lewis highlighted successful Iranian attacks, such as the Shamoon virus that wiped out data on 30,000 computers belonging to the Saudi national oil company, Aramco, as well as Western efforts to slow the Iranian nuclear program. Lewis assessed that where Iran excelled was in the creativity of its tools rather than in their sophistication. He noted that the field of cyber warfare is rapidly evolving, and Iran's capabilities are less than a decade old. ■

Instead, Iran's comparative weakness in conventional terms means it would probably seek to conduct an asymmetrical attack at the time and place of its choosing — and probably one that offered plausible deniability, which mining the Strait of Hormuz does not. From military action to cybercrime, Iran's strong suit is using relatively rudimentary tools innovatively rather than employing overwhelming force or sophistication. An asymmetrical strategy would make it harder for the United States to respond to Iran.

Whichever path or paths Iran chose, however, the issue for the United States is not that Iran has an overwhelming ability to inflict costs on the world. Instead, the issue is whether and how the United States restrains itself in responding to Iranian provocations.

The nature of U.S. restraint matters. Murmurs out of the U.S. Central Command suggest the United States has a comprehensive plan to destroy Iran's conventional military capability over a series of weeks. Air defense systems, missile batteries along the shore, and Iran's submarine fleet all seem like likely targets. Given the large number of U.S. military assets in the area, it seems within U.S. capabilities.

Yet, if the principal goal of a military action were to have a political effect, is that the only way forward? If, for example, the United States could demonstrate overwhelming military capabilities with a more modest set of assets and against a more symbolically powerful set of targets, would that have even more of a deterrent effect?

There is reason to think it would. For example, the extensive sanctions in place against Iran make clear the breadth of Iranian activities that are either run by the Iranian Revolutionary Corps (IRGC) or affiliated groups, and which the international community by implication considers to be part of the country's military infrastructure. The ubiquity of the IRGC throughout the Iranian economy creates a wide range of potential targets.

If the United States sought to cripple the Iranian ability to export its oil, it could do so swiftly. It would not need a carrier—let alone two—to destroy the oil export platforms at Kharg Island. Special forces could carry out a range of assaults as well, highlighting the mismatch between Iranian and U.S. capabilities.

Similarly, the United States could blockade Iran far more easily than Iran could blockade the Gulf, should matters come to that. Such an action would not decisively end any Iranian threat, but it would demonstrate U.S. abilities and commitment to both the Iranian government and to our allies.

Were the United States to convert to a lighter footprint in the Gulf, however, there is a danger that both U.S. allies and the Iranians would see it as a retreat. Crucial to success is assuring friends and foes this is not the case.

U.S. strategy has a strong preference for forcing people into our comfort zone of conventional warfare against clear military targets, and it does not always appreciate the symbolic impacts of U.S. actions. Maintaining two carriers in the Gulf allows the United States to fight the former kind of war well, and to win it decisively. With budgets constricting and Asia growing in importance, staying in the U.S. comfort zone may become a luxury.

There are ways to deter Iran other than showing the U.S. willingness to fight a long conventional war. These alternatives are more credible than a massive assault, and they stretch the U.S. budget and U.S. forces far less. We ourselves are the principal obstacles to pursuing such a strategy. We may not be able to afford to do so much longer. ■ 11/19/2012

## Links of Interest

*The New York Times* quoted Jon Alterman in “[On a Trip to Asia, Obama Can't Escape Mideast.](#)”

Haim Malka published a Critical Questions brief, “[Gaza Escalation.](#)”

*The Financial Times* quoted Jon Alterman in “[New Middle East runs into old realities.](#)”

KCRW show “[To the Point](#)” interviewed Jon Alterman in a segment titled “[Israel and Gaza Trade Fire.](#)”

Reuters quoted Jon Alterman in “[Fact-checking Obama and Romney in the U.S. presidential debate.](#)”

The Middle East Notes and Comment electronic newsletter is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and non-proprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). © 2012 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman  
*Director and Brzezinski Chair  
in Global Security and Geostrategy*

Haim Malka  
*Deputy Director and Senior Fellow*

Carolyn Barnett  
*Research Fellow*

Rebecka Shirazi  
*Program Coordinator and Research  
Associate*

Adel El-Adawy  
Daniel Brunner  
Jennifer Cunningham  
Ramzi Habayeb  
*Interns*