

*Full citation:*  
J.E. Peterson. *Defending Arabia*, Chapter 5: US Military Options in the Gulf. Online edition from [www.JEPeterson.net](http://www.JEPeterson.net) (posted September 2000)

*Originally published as:*  
J.E. Peterson. *Defending Arabia*. London: Croom Helm; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986.

*N.B. The text in this online edition has not been updated from the originally published version.*

## **CHAPTER 5: US MILITARY OPTIONS IN THE GULF**

### **US COMMITMENT TO DEFEND THE GULF**

The process by which American interests in the Gulf emerged and then quickened has already been discussed, as has the transfer of responsibility for the security of the Gulf from Britain to the US in 1971. Thus it can be seen that the United States' assumption of primary responsibility (at least as self-perceived) for this task has been evidenced for little more than a single decade. The official commitment to physically defend the Gulf if necessary, however, emerged only at the beginning of the 1980s, as did the creation of viable machinery to handle this task.<sup>1</sup>

At the time of withdrawal, there really does not seem to be much evidence of concern, at least among the American public, for the security of oil supplies from the Gulf, nor was there even much recognition of US and Western dependence on Gulf oil. Briefly, American policy in the Gulf since 1971 falls into two distinct periods: 1971-1979 and 1979-present. While the first was characterized by benign inaction, the second has tended toward overreaction. The initial American response to British withdrawal involved little more than approval of the strengthening of indigenous military capabilities and leaving the US Navy's MIDEASTFOR at its existing strength. American policy toward the Gulf at this time was predicated on the Nixon Doctrine, first enunciated on Guam in 1969, with its minimization of the role of the US as a world policeman. In large part, the impetus for the doctrine came from America's disillusionment over the war in Vietnam and was aimed at "military retrenchment without political disengagement."<sup>2</sup> It was not long before the search was on for a surrogate or surrogates in the Gulf.

Here was the origin of the so-called "Twin Pillars" policy, whereby the US pledged to assist Iran and Saudi Arabia in their military development in order to protect common security interests

---

<sup>1</sup>The development of US policy in regard to the Gulf has been covered by Gary Sick, "The Evolution of U.S. Strategy Toward the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf Regions," in A.Z. Rubinstein, ed., *The Great Game: Rivalry in the Persian Gulf and South Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 49-80; Geoffrey Kemp, "Military Force and Middle East Oil," in David A. Deese and Joseph S. Nye, eds., *Energy and Security* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, for the Harvard Energy and Security Research Project, 1981), pp. 365-387; and Jacques Vernant, "L'Occident et la sécurité du Golfe," *Défense Nationale*, Vol. 37 (May 1981), pp. 135-141.

<sup>2</sup>Robert E. Osgood, "The Nixon Doctrine and Strategy," in Osgood, ed., *Retreat From Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), p. 9.

in the region. But these were not really two interchangeable pillars. Saudi Arabia's importance in this scheme was due to its possession of the world's largest oilfields, its paramount position among the states of the Arabian Peninsula, and its emerging influence in pan-Arab politics and councils. But Iran was the militarily more significant partner in this arrangement, due to its much larger population, relatively more developed economy, and more powerful armed forces. Consequently, the US spared no effort to build up the Shah's arsenal, partly in an effort to enhance its ability to police the Gulf (illustrated particularly well by Iran's involvement in the Dhufar rebellion), and partly to satisfy the insistent demands of the Shah and induce his flexibility on oil pricing issues.<sup>3</sup>

But a series of events in the region around 1979 seemed to mark a watershed in US regional policy. In order, these included: the emergence of a Marxist state in Ethiopia; fighting between the new Ethiopian regime and Somalia in the Ogaden; the downfall of the Shah's regime in Iran and subsequent bloody revolutionary process; the short border war between the Yemens in which South Yemen got the upper hand; the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; and the outbreak of the longrunning Iran-Iraq war. The indirect, even inattentive, American approach of the past decade was reversed in a spasm of concern and rhetorical reaction. The broader Gulf region was characterized as an "arc" or "crescent of crisis," and simmering plans for a more direct and stronger American role in the region were put on the front burner. A leaked Pentagon study, "Capabilities in the Persian Gulf" (the "Wolfowitz Report"), citing American weaknesses in the region compared to the Soviet Union, even advocated the use of tactical nuclear weapons in a superpower Gulf conflict. While the immediate reversal of policy occurred during the Carter administration, this policy shift has been made permanent by the actions of the subsequent Reagan administration.<sup>4</sup>

Of all these events, the fall of the "peacock throne" in early 1979 had the most effect in forcing a radical alteration of existing American policy. For one thing, the Iranian revolution in itself posed a threat to Gulf security. Second, there could be no surrogate policy without a military linchpin and Saudi Arabia was not able to take over that role, even if it had been willing. Third, the Carter administration became convinced that the entire region was prey to increasing instability (thus the "arc of crisis" characterization). Fourth, the negative way the administration came to view the Gulf and its periphery (an exceedingly vulnerable and fragile area upon which vital American interests were dependent) was paralleled in the overall deterioration in Soviet-American relations.

The resultant policy was the Carter Doctrine. Obviously, this shift had several objectives, one of which was to display toughness to the Soviet Union. A second, related goal appears to have been to buck up faltering public opinion polls at home. More directly, the doctrine signalled a new

---

<sup>3</sup>On the American relationship with the late Shah, see Fred Halliday, *Iran: Dictatorship and Development* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979); R.K. Ramazani, *The United States and Iran: Patterns of Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1982); and Barry Rubin, *Paved With Good Intentions: The American Experience and Iran* (London: Oxford University Press, 1980; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981).

<sup>4</sup>On the growing climate of alarm, see Zbigniew Brzezinski's comments in *Time*, 15 Jan. 1979, as well as Henry Kissinger's interview in *The Economist*, 3 Feb. 1979, and Robert W. Tucker, "American Power and the Persian Gulf," *Commentary*, Vol. 70, No. 5 (Nov. 1980), pp. 25-41. For a counter-interpretation of the Soviet role, see Fred Halliday, *Threat From the East?: Soviet Policy From Afghanistan and Iran to the Horn of Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). The Pentagon study was summarized by Richard Burt, *New York Times*, 2 Feb. 1980. Both Paul Wolfowitz and Burt later served in the Reagan administration.

resolve on the part of the US to forsake surrogates to carry out American interests and "go it alone." Adoption of such a policy depended on the development of appropriate military forces necessary for direct American action if called upon: thus the birth of the Rapid Deployment Force and its evolution into the US Central Command.<sup>5</sup>

The broad outlines of the new Carter policy were continued by the Reagan administration. Washington remained committed to enhancement of RDF capabilities even as it continued a heavy program of arms sales to and military cooperation with Saudi Arabia. But where Carter had embraced a symmetrical approach to containment, by limiting US response to a Soviet invasion of the Gulf to counterattack in the Gulf, the Reagan administration altered the emphasis in favor of an asymmetrical approach. Thus, the stakes implicitly were raised and Washington was relieved of its publicly committed reliance solely on a force that might not be capable of confronting a Soviet attack in the Gulf, let alone deterring it.<sup>6</sup>

Even within the first few years of Reagan's term, this established framework witnessed a shift of policy. With Secretary of State Alexander Haig as the architect, the administration at first embraced the idea of "strategic consensus" between the US and all its friends in the region as a bulwark against Soviet penetration.<sup>7</sup> Washington's new officialdom seemed to brush aside any consideration that this "consensus" would not work while deep divisions remained between Israel and the Arab states friendly to the US. Nor did it seem aware of the echoes this idea would inevitably raise of the 1950s when the American-engineered Baghdad Pact (later CENTO) increased polarization in the region. Fortunately, the idea was soon scrapped and was followed by relatively low-profile emphasis on improvement of the RDF, acceptance and approval of the newly formed GCC, and emerging (although distanced) concern over the direction of the Iran-Iraq war.

There is a vast difference between public declaration of a commitment to defend the Gulf militarily and actual capability to do so. While the emphasis in Washington since the Carter Doctrine has been on planning for the direct projection of US force into the region, it may be

---

<sup>5</sup>As noted at the beginning of this book, the nomenclature for RDF forces has gone through several changes; for simplicity's sake, the term RDF will be used variously to refer to the RDF, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), and the US Central Command (USCENTCOM).

<sup>6</sup>See John Lewis Gaddis' assessment of the vacillations by post-World-War-II administrations between symmetry and asymmetry in his *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Postwar American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), esp. pp. 352-357. The Reagan administration's response bears a striking resemblance to John Foster Dulles' reaction to Korea: "the free world [must] develop the will and organize the means to retaliate instantly against open aggression by Red armies, so that, if it occurred anywhere, we could and would strike back where it hurts, by means of our own choosing." Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 121. For an evaluation of the suitability of an asymmetrical response to Soviet action in the Gulf, see Joshua M. Epstein, "Horizontal Escalation: Sour Notes on a Recurrent Theme," *International Security*, Vol. 8, No. 3 (Winter 1983-1984), pp. 19-31.

<sup>7</sup>Secretary Haig, in Congressional testimony, outlined his conception of strategic consensus as follows: "the United States regards the peace process and the effort to counter Soviet and regional threats as mutually reinforcing. If our friends are more secure, they will be more able to take risks for peace. If there is progress in the peace process, security cooperation will be facilitated – cooperation as is essential to deter intervention by the Soviets and their proxies." U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, *Persian Gulf Situation*; Hearing, 17 Sept. 1981 (Washington: USGPO, 1981), p. 4.

impossible to rely solely on unilateral intervention. The alternatives of non-intervention and joint intervention must also be considered, not necessarily as exclusive alternatives but a part of a broader (and thus more successful) policy mix.

Non-intervention, or reliance on regional forces, has received much less attention than US military action, even though it may be far better suited to most types and levels of "threats." It is true that the US has continued to support the build-up of indigenous military forces, especially in Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Oman. But there are other motives present. Assistance to Oman largely is a *quid pro quo* for the sultanate's willingness to provide the RDF with access to Omani military facilities. Saudi acquisition of military equipment and plant far outstrips its ability to use all that it has acquire for long into the future; clearly, the US goal is to "overbuild" Saudi military capabilities as a means of prestocking facilities, equipment, arms, and even personnel for emergency use in the Gulf. Of course, Riyadh is not blind to this motivation and may encourage it as a way of guaranteeing that the US will defend Saudi Arabia when required, unlike the experience of the Shah.

At the same time, it is difficult to ascertain any overt enthusiasm in Washington for GCC activities in the area of military and security coordination. This may be because the Pentagon regards GCC capabilities as minimal. Or Washington may feel that Saudi Arabia (and, to a lesser extent, Oman) is the significant military actor within the GCC community and will continue to dominate GCC activities. Thus, there is no reason to complicate matters with a superficial channel of interaction on top of existing US-Saudi ones. Or perhaps the newness of the GCC enterprise simply indicates a temporary lag in bureaucratic response.

Joint intervention, in its various shapes, has been a subject of some discussion in published fora but has received very little serious consideration by the governments concerned. There is widespread recognition that American intervention in the Gulf may not be feasible without the assistance of friendly states. Thus, the US has placed considerable emphasis on securing use rights for facilities located in various countries around the Gulf. By 1985, the only states cooperating in this regard were on the periphery of the Gulf, viz. Kenya, Somalia, Oman, and possibly Egypt, and, within the context of NATO, Turkey.

Saudi Arabia and its neighbors remain convinced that granting such privileges involves more risk than benefit and continue to hold fast to the notion of an "over-the-horizon" American defense umbrella. Another American tack in securing regional cooperation has been the efforts to upgrade the capability for rapid deployment of Jordanian army units to the Gulf on behalf of the US. While some planning along these lines has taken place, further US enhancement of Jordanian capabilities is problematic in the face of opposition from Israel and its American supporters. Jordan has long assisted in Peninsular military development, including the dispatch of troops to Oman during the Dhufar rebellion. Seconded Jordanian officers included the UAE Chief of Staff from 1976 to 1980. As of 1980, approximately 1000 Jordanian military advisers were serving in the Gulf and more than 10,000 soldiers from Peninsula had received training in Jordan.<sup>8</sup>

Cooperation with the US's Western European and Japanese allies has been minimal, despite their much greater dependence on Gulf oil imports, and they consistently have declined to enter

---

<sup>8</sup>W. Andrew Terrill, "Jordan and the Defense of the Gulf," *Middle East Insight*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Mar.-Apr. 1985), pp. 34-41.

planning for military intervention in the Gulf. Japan, which in 1984 received over 60% of its oil from the Gulf, has sought to promote strong economic and political relations with all Gulf states. Tokyo notes that it is prohibited by its constitution from undertaking any military action in the region as well as from participating in any collective security effort. Certainly, there is growing recognition in Japan of the potential necessity to defend its sea lanes but the capability extends no farther at present than Japan's traditional "sphere of influence" in Northeast Asia, and not to the Gulf. In addition, there is a fear that such activity may endanger productive commercial ties in the region: Japanese relations with Iran remain strong, despite the US-Iranian hiatus, as do ties to all the other states of the Gulf. At most, Japan may be willing to contribute financially to an American or multilateral security forces.<sup>9</sup>

France, nearly as dependent on Gulf oil as Japan, has been just as reticent. One reason is traditional French suspiciousness of American foreign policy and its vagaries (of which Lebanon has been a recent illustration). Furthermore, Paris points out the inappropriateness of intervening in a superpower conflict confined to the Gulf; if such conflict were not limited geographically, then France would be occupied fully in Europe. In case of a non-Soviet threat, France considers its area of responsibility to lie more in Africa than Asia. Nevertheless, there has been some discreet French involvement in internal security matters, as brought to public attention by the recapture of the Great Mosque in Saudi Arabia. France has also become highly active in arms sales to most of the GCC states. In addition, France has continued to maintain a naval presence in the Indian Ocean, which is based in Reunion and has been increased to three Exocet-armed frigates and supporting vessels in recent years. It also maintains a squadron of Mirages and several thousand Foreign Legion troops in Djibouti, and could presumably deploy elements of its own RDF, the Forces d'Action Rapide, in an emergency.<sup>10</sup>

Even British involvement is modest, rationalized partly by continuing economic retrenchment and partly by current self-sufficiency in oil. Nevertheless, Britain has demonstrated its willingness to contribute forces for Gulf security in crisis situations, as illustrated by activities during the tanker war of mid-1984. Four frigates were placed on patrol in the Arabian Sea, four minesweepers were sent to the nearby eastern Mediterranean during the same period in case they were needed at the Strait of Hormuz, and a carrier showed its flag in the region as it transited the Indian Ocean. Continuing British assistance to the Sultanate of Oman is also significant, particularly in the secondment of a large number of British officers to the Omani armed forces. Britain has

---

<sup>9</sup>For a study of Japan's response to this situation, see Valerie Yorke, "Oil, the Middle East and Japan's Search for Security," *International Affairs* (London), Vol. 57, No. 3 (1981), pp. 428-448.

<sup>10</sup>French interests in the region are analyzed in Shahram Chubin, "La France et le Golfe: opportunisme ou continuité?" *Politique Etrangère*, Vol. 48, No. 4 (1983), pp. 879-887. See also Thomas L. McNaughter, *Arms and Oil: U.S. Military Strategy and the Persian Gulf* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1985), pp. 154-155; and Giovanni de Briganti, "Forces d'Action Rapide: France's Rapid Deployment Force," *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 122 (Oct. 1984), pp. 122, 1A4.

approximately 400 servicemen stationed in the GCC states, with 200 of them in Oman.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, like France, Britain has been quite active in arms sales to various Gulf states.

A number of observers have advanced schemes for joint allied planning for defense of the Gulf. Jonathan Alford suggests the creation of an ambitious Allied Deployment Force, primarily for use in the Gulf but also in other areas where intervention might be necessary, such as the Mediterranean Basin and Africa.<sup>12</sup> Such an approach, he argues, would force European allies to acknowledge their responsibilities in an enlarged definition of Western security, and would provide greater military flexibility. Others see less-sweeping schemes. Dov S. Zakheim suggests that allied contributions might take the form of peacetime contributions of naval forces and perhaps surveillance aircraft in the region, or providing the US with the use of airfield and port facilities to facilitate American deployment to the Gulf, or financial support for military construction programs there (such as British upgrading of their original facilities in Oman or West German refurbishment of airbases in eastern Turkey).<sup>13</sup> At a minimum, contends USCENTCOM's second commander, Lt. Gen. Robert C. Kingston, "We need assistance from our allies for over-flight and landing rights; for refuelling and bunkering facilities; for the use of staging bases and under certain threats for allied air and naval assistance."<sup>14</sup> But for reasons outlined above, even minimal cooperation along these lines does not seem imminent.

Another necessary source of cooperation is NATO ally Turkey. As Turkish commentator Ali L. Karaosmanoglu has pointed out, Turkey has a vital interest in Gulf security as well.<sup>15</sup> Albert Wohlstetter underscores Turkey's importance by pointing out the strategic location of the NATO air bases in eastern Turkey, near the Soviet Union and situated in close proximity to the head of the Gulf

---

<sup>11</sup>T.A. Boam, "Defending Western Interests Outside NATO: The United Kingdom's Contribution," *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 122 (Oct. 1984), p. 1A6.

<sup>12</sup>"Les Occidentaux et la securite du Golfe," *Politique Etrangère*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sept. 1981), pp. 667-690.

<sup>13</sup>"Of Allies and Access," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (1981), pp. 87-96. See also Albert Wohlstetter, "Les Etats-Unis et la sécurité du Golfe," *Politique Etrangère*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Mar. 1981), pp. 75-88; Christopher Coker and Heinz Schulte, "A European Option in the Indian Ocean," *International Defense Review*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1982), pp. 27-34; Donald S. Rowe, "Collective Security and the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force," *Joint Perspectives*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Winter 1981), pp. 3-17; Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "Security in the Persian Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (1979), pp. 821-835; and idem, "The Strait of Hormuz: The Global Chokepoint," in Larry W. Bowman and Ian Clark, eds., *The Indian Ocean in Global Politics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press; Nedlands: University of Western Australia, 1981), pp. 7-20.

<sup>14</sup>"From RDF to CENTCOM: New Challenges?" *RUSI – Journal of the Royal United Services Institute for Defence Studies*, Vol. 129 (Mar. 1984), p. 17.

<sup>15</sup>As evidence, he cites Turkish dependence on Golfoil, the estimated \$10 billion worth of contracts held in the Arab world, the 150,000 Turkish workers in the Middle East, and the 44% of total Turkish exports that go to the Middle East. "Turkey's Security and the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (1983), pp. 156-175.

where a potential Soviet attack might be aimed. Furthermore, he points out that the bases already exist and would not have to be created from scratch as elsewhere in the region.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, however, Turkey is reluctant to damage its deepening economic relations with the Gulf states, including Iran and Iraq as well as the GCC, by allowing use of its air bases for a unilateral and perhaps highly controversial American intervention in the Gulf. There is a long history of Turkish-American contretemps, due not only to the issue of Greece and Cyprus, but also perceived American callousness in its treatment of Ankara. One consequence has been the provision of a minimal amount of military aid, and the tying of the total provided to the amount of aid given Greece. It is not surprising, then, that Ankara maintains that use of its bases is limited to NATO purposes only. In effect, the initiative has been passed back to the Western Europeans.

Finally, efforts have been made to draw Pakistan into cooperation on Gulf security schemes, although these efforts have been complicated by Indo-Pakistani relations, much as Turkish-Greek relations have been problematic in Turkish cooperation. Not only does American support for Pakistan bolster Western defenses against Soviet penetration south from Afghanistan, but it helps solidify the American-Saudi-Pakistani triangular relationship, along with Sino-Pakistani ties, and could possibly lead to cooperation with the Pakistani navy.<sup>17</sup> So far, Pakistani troops apparently have been stationed in Saudi Arabia and there is close cooperation between the UAE and Pakistani air forces.

## **THE RAPID DEPLOYMENT FORCE: ORIGINS, EVOLUTION, AND STRUCTURE**

The genesis of US "quick reaction" or "quick strike" forces dates to long before the creation of the RDF. Some observers would trace it to the Vietnam era or even farther back to the aftermath of World War II; others see the Marine Corps essentially as always having played that role.<sup>18</sup> During the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara advanced a plan for prepositioning troops and supplies in the Western Pacific for use in Southeast Asian contingencies, but the idea foundered on Congressional opposition. During 1967-1968, the Pentagon

---

<sup>16</sup>"Meeting the Threat in the Persian Gulf," *Survey*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring 1980), pp. 175-187. See also Bruce R. Kuniholm, "Turkey and NATO: Past, Present, and Future," *Orbis*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Summer 1983), pp. 421-445; and idem, *The Persian Gulf and United States Policy* (Claremont, CA: Regina Books, 1984), pp. 120-124.

<sup>17</sup>See James H. Noyes, *The Clouded Lens: Persian Gulf Security and U.S. Policy* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1982), p. 135; and Kuniholm, *The Persian Gulf and United States Policy*, pp. 129-131. Both the US and France have helped build up the Pakistani navy in recent years, and Pakistan has played a major role in developing the naval establishment of the fledgling GCC navies. There has been some speculation that the US has sought use of the Pakistani port at Gwadar. See *Middle East International*, No. 224 (4 May 1984).

<sup>18</sup>For an overview of this subject, see Robert P. Haffa, Jr., *The Half War: Planning U.S. Rapid Deployment Forces to Meet a Limited Contingency, 1960-1983* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984).

fostered a program for fast logistic ships (FDL) and the C-5A cargo aircraft to enhance abilities for rapid deployment in non-European overseas emergencies, but only the C-5 was built.<sup>19</sup>

More directly, the beginnings of the present RDF planning derive from the Presidential Review Memorandum No. 10 (PRIM-10) of July 1977, which ordered an interagency study on the use of quick reaction forces other than in Europe and Korea. The effect of this directive was to collect information and present papers on options currently available within the armed forces, not to generate ideas on forces which could and/or should be established.<sup>20</sup>

A little more than a year later, Secretary of Defense Harold Brown ordered a Department of Defense position paper on US military options in Southwest Asia. The paper called for the acquisition of regional military facilities, an expanded naval presence in the Indian Ocean, increased military assistance and, especially, upgrading US military capabilities to intervene with military force in the region. Superimposed on these preliminary internal attempts to deal with an emerging problem were developments in the region itself. In early 1979, the Iranian revolution came to a head, with the departure of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. At roughly the same time, war broke out between the two Yemens, triggering the American response described earlier.

These developments spurred on Pentagon planning for the RDF and speeded up efforts to acquire regional facilities. An interagency review of US military strategy in the region was instituted in April 1979 under the direction of National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. The review confirmed the need for regional facilities and in December 1979, a team composed of State Department, Defense Department and National Security Council representatives was sent out to the Gulf to open negotiations for access to facilities. By mid-1980, agreements had been secured with three countries (Kenya, Somalia, and Oman) and a promise for cooperation gained from Egypt. Meanwhile, the infrastructure for the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) was being laid, units designated, a headquarters established at MacDill Air Force Base (Tampa, Florida), and a position assumed in the command structure subordinate to the US Army Readiness Command. The RDJTF officially came into being on 1 March 1980.

In October 1981, the link to the Readiness Command was severed and the RDJTF became a separate force with its commander reporting directly to the Secretary of Defense through the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Finally, on 1 January 1983, the RDJTF was redesignated one of the six US unified, multiservice commands. As the new US Central Command (USCENTCOM), its specified theater of operations included Southwest Asia and Northeast Africa, and its commander enjoyed equal

---

<sup>19</sup>Maxwell Orme Johnson, *The Military as an Instrument of U.S. Policy in Southwest Asia: The Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, 1979-1982* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982), pp. 59-60; Dov S. Zakheim, "Airlifting the Marine Corps: Mismatch or Wave of the Future?" in Uri Ra'anan, Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, Jr., and Geoffrey Kemp, eds., *Projection of Power: Perspectives, Perceptions and Problems* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982), pp. 120-137.

<sup>20</sup>Johnson, *Military as an Instrument*, provides a detailed discussion of the evolution of the conception and planning for the RDF, on which much of the following information is based. See also idem, "Rapid Deployment and the Regional Military Challenge: The Persian Gulf Equation," unpublished paper presented at a US Army War College symposium on "US Strategic Interests in the Persian Gulf," 27-29 Mar. 1985; and Robert J. Hanks, *The U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East: Problems and Prospects* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Dec. 1982).



standing with other unified commanders, as in the Pacific (USCINCPAC) or Europe (USCINCEUR). As a result of this change, USCINCCENT was given responsibility for essentially all US military activity within this geographical region, including military planning, exercises involving US and regional forces, administration of security assistance, and other representational activities. USCENTCOM exercises command over the American troops of the Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) on the Sinai Peninsula, the AWACS and tanker aircraft stationed at Riyadh, and the 5-ship MIDEASTFOR. Full deployment could involve as many as 300,000 personnel, drawn from the units listed in Table 5.1. Headquarters for USCENTCOM remained at MacDill AFB.

Under present plans, USCENTCOM claims to be prepared to deploy an air force fighter squadron and a battalion of 800 army paratroopers, along with B-52 bomber support, to the Gulf within 48 hours, provided it has received an invitation from a country in the region and five-days warning. Within a week, it could have 3000 troops on the ground, including two additional battalions of paratroopers and a brigade headquarters. It is more than likely that a carrier task force would be on station as well, since at least one has been regularly deployed to the Arabian Sea for several years. The timing of arrival for the Marine Amphibious Unit depends on its location when orders to move are received.<sup>21</sup> In mid-1985, the Marine Corps' 7<sup>th</sup> Amphibious Brigade was stated to be in a position to transport 12,500 men to the Gulf within a week, with plans to upgrade that capacity to 16,500 by Nov. 1985.<sup>22</sup>

Follow-on of additional units assigned to USCENTCOM depends upon availability of air and sealift, at present generally viewed as inadequate. Consequently, the arrival of additional paratroopers and Marine units may take an additional week or more, as will the prepositioned supplies onboard ships stationed at Diego Garcia. But full deployment of the entire Marine Amphibious Brigade may take two to three weeks and arrival by sea of the army infantry division more than a month. This all assumes a benign landing and the absence of competing contingencies elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

Despite its very brief existence, the RDF has been the center of considerable criticism and controversy.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, much of the criticism revolved around differences over the nature of

---

<sup>21</sup>In a 1984 interview, USCENTCOM Commander-in-Chief Robert C. Kingston stated that the Command could get a battalion from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Division airlifted to the Iranian side of the Strait of Hormuz within 48 hours and the remainder of the brigade there in less than a week. *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 121, No. 12 (July 1984), p. 69.

<sup>22</sup>*New York Times*, 10 Apr. 1985.

<sup>23</sup>Richard Halloran, "Poised for the Persian Gulf," *New York Times Magazine*, 1 Apr. 1984, pp. 38-40, 61.

<sup>24</sup>David D. Newsom, Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs during 1978-1981, voices a number of misgivings, arguing that "a strategy that places U.S. ground forces in the Persian Gulf should not be undertaken without a thorough national and congressional debate. That debate has yet to begin." "America Engulfed," *Foreign Policy*, No. 43 (Summer 1981), p. 32. Newsom also charges that the Carter Doctrine was not properly thought out and "grew out of last minute pressures for a presidential speech." *Ibid.*, p. 17. See also Rouhollah K. Ramazani, "The Genesis of the Carter Doctrine," in George S. Wise and Charles Issawi, eds., *Middle East Perspectives: The Next Twenty Years* (Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, 1981), pp. 165-180; and Christopher Van Hollen, "Don't Engulf the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 59, No. 5 (1981), pp. 1064-1078.

American policy in the Gulf. However, many observers have focused their critiques on the mission, structure, and capabilities of the RDF itself, and some have addressed their remarks specifically to certain components of the RDF. These concerns will be discussed in that order.

The hue and cry of the last few years over the RDF makes it easy to overlook the sound premise that US policy regarding the Gulf should consist of more than simply the capacity to undertake military intervention. Any estimation of the necessary military role in this policy is dependent on how the larger policy is defined, which in turn depends on how important the Gulf is to vital national interests and how far the US is prepared to go to defend those interests.

This involves a calculation not only of military capabilities but also political costs, financial expenditure, and manpower availability within the armed forces. Assuming that development of a viable military intervention force is regarded as necessary, as both the Carter and Reagan administrations have done, the construction of that force and determination of its requirements depend upon definition of its mission. What threats must it be prepared to meet? Should the US totally rely on a "go-it-alone" approach or should it encourage the Gulf states' self-defense and intervene only as a last resort? Does creation of the military capability bring with it a propensity to use it? How realistic is current planning in meeting potential threats?

## EVALUATING RDF CAPABILITIES

In just a few short years, the RDF has evolved from a theoretical conception to a given. A major direction, thrust, or intent of American policy already has been decided and put into action. But it is often charged that the RDF was created haphazardly, that not enough attention has been paid to its conception, to the role it would play in an actual emergency, and to the negative effects that creation of the RDF holds for American defenses elsewhere. There are two central questions to the continuing debate over the RDF: what are the goals of the RDF, and how effective is it (or will it be in the future) in meeting those goals and carrying out its mission? With these questions in mind, the following summary of questions regarding the RDF can be divided into two categories: conceptual questions and operational questions.

### Conceptual Questions

The first conceptual issue concerns the necessity of creating a separate force. Several analysts have suggested that the RDF mission properly belongs to the Marine Corps. Jeffrey Record maintains that turning it over to the Marine Corps, backed up by a new Fifth Fleet, would not only give the job to the service best suited to handling it but would end inevitable confusion and rivalry inherent in a jerrybuilt, multiservice force.<sup>25</sup> The potential problem in confusion over lines of

---

<sup>25</sup>Jeffrey Record, *The Rapid Deployment Force and U.S. Military Intervention in the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, MA: Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis, Special Report, February 1981), pp. 70-73. See also his *Revising U.S. Military Strategy: Tailoring Means to Ends* (Washington: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1984), esp. Ch. 4, "The Carter Doctrine,

command has been resolved, at least on paper, by the creation of the independent USCENTCOM structure. A large part of Record's argument rests on his rejection of the assumption that the RDF's introduction into the Gulf would be under friendly conditions, but instead would require the Marines' amphibious, forcible-entry capability. This, however, runs directly counter to USCENTCOM's expectations and its mandate requiring an invitation. The probability of entry under fire depends directly on the type of threat that the RDF is deployed to meet: the initial landing in the Gulf is not likely to occur under hostile conditions in the event of a Soviet attack, or even against various regional threats.

The US government has appeared, publicly at least, to encourage a deliberate ambiguity in delineating the threats that the RDF might be called upon to counter. In part this may reflect a reluctance to be tied down to static declarations in the face of dynamic circumstances, but it may also be meant to obfuscate its response to direct and/or indirect Soviet expansion. It is possible as well that the ambiguity reflects differences of opinion within the government and policy-influencing elite. Which of the three types of threats (external, regional, or internal) should the RDF meet? Is the essential purpose to deter the Soviet Union, to defend the Gulf in the event of a Soviet attack, or to secure control of the oilfields, by invasion if necessary? Can the RDF be designed to serve multiple functions, or is it weakened by not being dedicated to a single purpose?

Kenneth Waltz has argued for the creation of an "asset-seizing, deterrent force [as] an alternative to a war-fighting defensive force."<sup>26</sup> He goes on to assert that keeping the RDF force structure lean and solely directed at securing oilfields would not only obviate the need for a military base in the Gulf but would make the Soviet Union less likely to test US defenses there. Thomas L. McNaugher, on the other hand, argues that "The only feasible U.S. military strategy is one of deterrence."<sup>27</sup> At the extreme, one group places considerable emphasis on a "show of American power" in the Gulf, viewing the attitude and policies of the Gulf states, especially the Arab ones, as a threat as serious as the Soviet Union. Consequently, the US must not only be prepared to invade in an emergency, but must signal its willingness to do so if these states do not back down from their

---

Rapid Deployment Force, and Worldwide War Strategy, 1979-Present," pp. 36-48. Others arguing that the RDF mission is a Marine Corps job include Martin L. Cover, "FMF [Fleet Marine Force] for the RDF," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 108, No. 6 (June 1982), pp. 51-55; and David A. Quinlan, *The Role of the Marine Corps in Rapid Deployment Forces* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 1983).

<sup>26</sup>"A Strategy for the Rapid Deployment Force," *International Security*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (1981), p. 63.

<sup>27</sup>"Balancing Soviet Power in the Persian Gulf," *Brookings Review*, Vol. 1, No. 4 (1983), p. 24. See also his *Arms and Oil*.

"hostile" positions.<sup>28</sup> However, the ability of the US to gain control of the oilfields militarily and maintain control indefinitely is questionable, as shown at the end of this chapter.

Another central conceptual question arising from planning for intervention in the Gulf concerns the extent of any superpower confrontation in the region. Can fighting between the US and the Soviet Union in the Gulf be confined there, or will it inevitably spread to other arenas and perhaps to full-scale war? The answer to this question may well depend upon whether or not the RDF can provide an effective barrier to a Soviet attack. If so, then can it be considered a credible deterrent force? Or does any deterrence spring from the RDF's role as a tripwire, a mere signal of American resolve to act?

W. Scott Thompson voices the opinion of many in the Reagan administration when he states that the American objective should be to disrupt a Soviet attack and control the battlefield and environs long enough to deploy US reinforcements to the Gulf. "But most important is the restoration of American *strategic* strength, to which all such events at the theater level are related..."<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, Albert Wohlstetter argues against a tripwire policy and maintains that the US needs to be able to fight a conventional war in the Gulf: "to declare a bare tripwire policy does not register a determination to use nuclear weapons in a time of crisis; rather it registers a lack of will to prepare before the crisis to meet a non-nuclear threat on its own terms."<sup>30</sup> Thomas McNaugher concurs: "Trip-wire strategies are more feasible and less potentially destabilizing than a strategy of outright defense but otherwise make little sense."<sup>31</sup> He argues for the necessity of conventional deterrence, which has been adopted as a cornerstone of official US policy.

A credible deterrent is dependent upon having a viable RDF; a credible RDF means the US has the ability to engage the Soviet Union in the Gulf and counter a frontal assault – or at least disrupt the attack, thus raising the risks and costs to Moscow. To many, the missing element is feasibility at the present: many of the necessary improvements for the RDF, discussed more fully below, will not be available until the end of the 1980s. Thus, in the interim, the Reagan administration appeared to believe that the only American alternative to deter a Soviet assault (and since such an assault in the early 1980s, in this view, could not be countered effectively by American

---

<sup>28</sup>See, *inter alia*, Robert W. Tucker, *The Purposes of American Power: An Essay on National Security* (New York: Praeger, 1981); Miles Igotus (pseud.), "Seizing Arab Oil," *Harper's*, Vol. 250, No. 1498 (Mar. 1975), pp. 45-62; and Edward Friedland, Paul Seabury, and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Great Detente Disaster: Oil and the Decline of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). Tucker equates the Carter Doctrine's failure to address threats other than external ones as "appeasement" of the Gulf states "that have managed to outmaneuver and to intimidate Western powers for over a decade." *Purposes of American Power*, p. 106. See also the observations on this topic of Thomas A. Fabyanic, "Conceptual Planning and the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force," *Armed Forces and Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (1981), pp. 343-365.

<sup>29</sup>"The Persian Gulf and the Correlation of Forces," *International Security*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1982), p. 179.

<sup>30</sup>"Meeting the Threat in the Persian Gulf," pp. 164-165. He has written similarly in "Half-Wars and Half-Policies in the Persian Gulf," in W. Scott Thompson, ed., *National Security in the 1980s: From Weakness to Strength* (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1980), pp. 123-172.

<sup>31</sup>*Arms and Oil*, p. 49.

force projected to the Gulf) was adoption of a threat to deliberately expand the possible arena of conflict, both in geographic terms and in escalation from conventional warfare to nuclear.<sup>32</sup>

The question of current (i.e. as of 1985) US ability to counter a Soviet drive on the Gulf depends on a series of hotly debated factors, including the likelihood and direction of the potential Soviet assault, time available to react, preparedness and mobility of US forces, and extent of assistance from US allies and regional friends.<sup>33</sup> But a number of proposals have been made to improve American prospects, and the effectiveness of the RDF, in the event of a Gulf war.

Some of these concentrate on the limitations of unilateral action and stress the need for allied and regional cooperation. Under peacetime conditions, there has been little evidence of allied assistance. As pointed out above, Europe's involvement has been minimal: France maintains a small naval presence in the Arabian Sea, Britain still provides help for Oman's armed forces, and West Germany and Italy join France and Britain in selling arms to GCC states and Iraq. Japan has declined military participation entirely. Turkey is reluctant to jeopardize its position in the region, and risk Soviet displeasure, except in a joint NATO context. The most that has been offered is assumption of American commitments within NATO in the event of American deployment to the Gulf.

To overcome this perceived lack of reliability on the part of allies, the permanent stationing of American forces in the region has been suggested. The reluctance of the states in the Gulf proper to allow bases has led to a fruitless search for alternatives. Robert W. Tucker proposes bases in the northern Sinai (now restored to Egyptian control) or Israel.<sup>34</sup> Despite his protestations that the Arab-Israeli conflict has no relevance to Gulf security (and his inexplicable statement that Soviet bases in Egypt posed no political problems), such a proposal is likely to encounter complete resistance from all the Arab states. The evidence of its unworkability lies in the failure of Alexander Haig's stillborn "strategic consensus" idea.

Given these circumstances, an alternative suggestion has been the stationing of a permanent combat presence afloat in the Indian Ocean. James H. Noyes suggests that a major American "regional military effort should maintain combat forces afloat in the Arabian Sea sufficient for emergency use to support a threatened state in the Gulf."<sup>35</sup> Wohlstetter supports the idea, noting that the stronger the combat presence in the Gulf, the less rapid and powerful deployment needs to be. Furthermore, the least obtrusive combat presence would be offshore and "over-the-horizon."<sup>36</sup> But

---

<sup>32</sup>To some extent, this view was held also during the Carter administration. See the discussion of the "Wolfowitz Report" earlier in this chapter. See also the argument against nuclear escalation in favor of horizontal escalation at sea in F.J. West, Jr., "NATO II: Common Boundaries for Common Interests," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan.-Feb. 1981), pp. 59-67.

<sup>33</sup>Furthermore, it may be unrealistic to think that a conventional war with the Soviet Union could be limited to the Gulf. If conflict escalates to general war, where will American forces and logistics to fight in the Gulf come from?

<sup>34</sup>*Purposes of American Power*, pp. 107-108.

<sup>35</sup>*The Clouded Lens*, p. 135.

<sup>36</sup>"Meeting the Threat in the Persian Gulf," p. 167.

he also points out that diverting troops, equipment, and naval forces to this purpose means a drawing down of strength in the Mediterranean and Pacific. Essentially, his answer to the dilemma lies within the solution to a larger problem: the ability of the US to fight a "half-war" (as in the Gulf) as well as a full war (global confrontation with the Soviet Union). This would require a vastly increased commitment to the enlarging and improvement of American armed forces, particularly the navy.

The potential function of the navy in defending Gulf oil lay at the heart of the debate between maritime and coalitional strategies. Both sides took as their starting point the difficulty of unilaterally projecting sufficient US forces into the Gulf to counter a Soviet attack. To overcome this deficiency, the continental/coalition adherents proposed vertical escalation to theater nuclear weapons. On the other hand, the maritime advocates argued for increased reliance on superior naval power, seen as more flexible since it is not restricted by geography nor dependent on land-based facilities.

Reminiscent of the 1960s British inter-service debate, some naval advocates recommended creation of a number of new carrier battle groups for the US Navy. They held that the intertwining of NATO naval commitments would ensure allied reinforcement of American engagement at sea, unlike a European reluctance to become involved in conflict on distant lands. Other naval proponents argued for a policy that placed less emphasis on (potentially unreliable) NATO support, and rejected the concept of a few super carriers in favor of a more flexible naval build-up. The Reagan administration, meanwhile, appeared to embrace the attempt to pursue both vertical and horizontal escalation strategies, thus at least partially placating all service lobbies.<sup>37</sup>

A final debate over the conceptualization of the RDF has been largely superseded by events. Kenneth Waltz, among others, has suggested that creation of the capability to intervene would bring a temptation or even a proclivity to do so. "An RDF should serve vital interests only and in serving them should be guardedly used. ... We should avoid the temptation of resorting to force because nothing else will avail. We should use force only if we can see a way of doing so that will enable us to get our way."<sup>38</sup> The commitment to build a viable force has been made already and RDF enhancement is well under way. Apart from dismantling the present structure, the sole relevance of the above argument lies in the size of the RDF. As it is unlikely that the Pentagon will have an opportunity to build in a comfortable margin above bare requirements, the final size of the RDF inevitably will be a function of its mission. Definition of the mission, in turn, is a function of the threats that the RDF is expected to meet.

---

<sup>37</sup>See West, "NATO II"; Robert Komer, "Maritime Strategy vs. Coalition Defense," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 60, No. 5 (1982), pp. 1124-1144; Stansfield Turner and George Thibault, "Preparing for the Unexpected: The Need for a New Military Strategy," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (1982-1983), pp. 64-77; and Keith A. Dunn and William O. Staudenmaier, "Strategy for Survival," *Foreign Policy*, No. 52 (1983), pp. 22-41. See also the discussion in Bruce R. Kuniholm, *The Persian Gulf and United States Policy*, pp. 49-53.

<sup>38</sup>"Strategy for the RDF," p. 57. See also the comments in John Joseph Stocker, "Rapid Deployment Force," Issue Brief No. IB 80027, Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.

## Operational Questions

While the above comments have revolved around issues dealing with the formulation of a proper and effective role for the RDF, other critics have focused on perceived problems that the RDF may encounter in carrying out its assigned mission, as presently defined. A number of these operational questions merit discussion here.

*Command, Control, and Communications.* The problem cited earlier of possible confusion over lines of command authority in theory been has resolved by the creation of a command independent of the separate services. But control of nearly all USCENTCOM forces remains outside the jurisdiction of USCINCCENT except in emergency, and even regular joint maneuvers may not be enough to solve problems of coordination inherent in such a large scale operation as full RDF deployment. Furthermore, USCENTCOM is unique among the US commands in that its headquarters is not physically located in its geographical area of operations. In the event of a contingency in the Gulf, USCENTCOM headquarters and its commander must deploy to the region and rapidly establish effective communications with its subordinate units. In late December 1983, a "forward headquarters element," comprising less than 20 people, was established aboard the USS LaSalle, flagship of the MIDEASTFOR, in an attempt to ameliorate the communications problem.<sup>39</sup>

*Assignment of Subordinate Units.* Jeffrey Record, writing in late 1980, charged that the RDF consisted of a "hastily thrown together collection of existing units [most of which were] already earmarked for contingencies outside the Gulf region and improperly equipped or structured for the exacting demands of desert warfare against large and often mechanized potential adversaries in a logistically remote part of the world."<sup>40</sup> Few of the USCENTCOM forces (with notable exceptions being the headquarters contingent and MIDEASTFOR) are dedicated to the RDF mission. A number of other analysts have pointed out that the units assigned to USCENTCOM must come from forces already earmarked for other contingencies, whether in Europe, Korea, or elsewhere. The only sure way around this problem is a tremendous (and prohibitively expensive) expansion of US armed forces.

It should be remembered, though, that in the event of Soviet-American hostilities in the Gulf, Moscow would find it necessary to draw upon forces earmarked for other contingencies as well. In addition, since the time Record voiced his criticism, considerable effort has been made to improve the ability of assigned forces to fight in Gulf conditions, both by the provision of new equipment and by holding in situ exercises. Since its formation, the RDJTF/USCENTCOM have conducted 16 major exercises, five in its area of responsibility.<sup>41</sup>

*Force Size.* Considerable debate exists over whether the RDF possesses sufficient assets, even if fully deployed, to meet potential threats in the Gulf, particularly a conventional war with the

---

<sup>39</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 1 Dec. 1983; Robert C. Kingston, "US Central Command: Refocusing the Lens of Stability on a Region in Crisis," *Defense '84*, Nov.-Dec. 1984, p. 31. See also Kingston's comments in "C<sup>3</sup>I and the U.S. Central Command," *Signal*, Nov. 1983, pp. 23-25.

<sup>40</sup> *Rapid Deployment Force*, p. vii.

<sup>41</sup> Robert C. Kingston interview in *Armed Forces Journal International*, p. 73.

Soviet Union. Undoubtedly, this can be answered fully only by examining the probable extent of Soviet forces committed in such a scenario (addressed below). There is some consensus, however, that the organization of the RDF, as planned at least on paper, is sufficient for expected purposes. As Thomas McNaugher has put it, further build-up of US forces allocated to the RDF may cause the Soviet Union to give higher priority to its military capability in the Gulf. Furthermore, the size of the force is no more important in providing deterrence than speed, positioning, tactics, and support.<sup>42</sup>

*Facilities in the Gulf Region.* The countries and facilities for which the US has negotiated military use rights in connection with the RDF are listed in Table 5.2. To this list may be added the possible use of the Cairo West and Ra's Banas (on Egypt's Red Sea coast) airfields, Djibouti, and Turkish NATO bases at Mus, Batman, Erzurum. In addition, strategic airlift is heavily dependent on Portugal's Lajes airfield in the Azores and Morocco's Sidi Sulaiman air base. While there is no question of the usefulness of these facilities, at least potentially, it should be noted that none of them are located in the Gulf itself.

Kenya and Somalia provide a certain utility for prepositioning fuel supplies, guarding sea lines of communication, and as places for shore leave. Diego Garcia is important as an anchorage for the fleet of prepositioned supply ships, a naval port of call, and a potential base for B-52 bombers. Oman's Masira Island has been used for several years for anti-submarine surveillance and for transfer of mail and passengers to US naval forces in the Arabian Sea, and could serve as a principal airfield for the RDF, being conveniently isolated from contact with the indigenous population. The giant air base at Thamarit (far into the desert behind Oman's southern province of Dhufar) is being prepared as a major staging area. On the other side of the Gulf, the Turkish bases are ideally situated to interdict a Soviet drive through Iran.

But the scenario of a Soviet frontal assault through Iran to reach Khuzistan means that an American response must be to assemble troops, equipment, and supplies at a point or points near Khuzistan. At present, Washington cannot be assured of access to facilities in the Gulf, although the program of overbuilding in Saudi Arabia indicates that bases built there and equipment transferred to the Saudi armed forces would be available for American use in case of these extreme scenarios. In particular, use of the Saudi air base at Dhahran would be of immense value for airstrike operations against invading Soviet columns in Iran; the airfields at the newly completed King Khalid Military City at Hafr al-Batin (near the Iraqi and Kuwaiti borders) are even closer. The other GCC states quite likely also would allow American entry at this time, although the advantages of prestocking and familiarization would be lost.

In addition, the lack of air bases (and the navy's reluctance to send its carriers into the Gulf) creates major difficulties in sustaining an air interdiction campaign against a Soviet attack and in providing air cover for American operations. Basing in eastern Turkey, politically sensitive and vulnerable to attack, is necessary because of the limited range of most strike aircraft, while B-52 bombers could be employed from as far away as Diego Garcia and Australia.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup>"Balancing Soviet Power in the Persian Gulf."

<sup>43</sup>See the discussion in McNaugher, *Arms and Oil*, pp. 53-64. McNaugher notes that many of appropriate strike aircraft, such as the B-52, F-111, and A-7, are no longer in production and the A-6 is purchased only in small numbers by the navy. As planning now stands, air cover would have to be provided by carrier-based fighters from the Arabian



*Strategic Airlift.* A major bottleneck in quickly inserting RDF forces into action in the Gulf is the lack of sufficient strategic airlift assets. In 1985, the total US inventory consisted of approximately 70 C-5A and 230 C-141 cargo aircraft, as well as aircraft from the civilian reserve. Of these, only the C-5A is capable of handling such outsize cargo as tanks, self-propelled howitzers and air force support equipment. But given the fact that many of the airfields that the RDF airlift would utilize in the region are relatively small and would be extremely congested during a deployment, the Pentagon has sought to build an alternative to the huge C-5A, as well as increase inventories of existing craft and enlarge the lift capacity of the C-141. Consequently, the C-17 has been proposed as a purpose-built transport, smaller in size than the C-5A and requiring less runway space yet still able to handle the C-5A's outsize cargoes. The program, however, has faced political roadblocks in Congress and consequently has been much delayed, with the first C-17s not expected to arrive before the early 1990s.<sup>44</sup> In addition, there is the problem of acquiring sufficient aerial refuelling assets to get both tactical fighters and cargo aircraft to the Gulf.

*Strategic Sealift.* The inadequacy of airlift requires even more of sealift. There is a trade off between air and sea lift: the former can move limited numbers of men and equipment quickly while the latter must bear the burden of transporting the majority of RDF forces into the theater of combat, particularly the infantry division, most of the heavy equipment, and nearly all supplies. Sealift also has the advantage of moving forces into an area without appearing to make a commitment – unlike an airlift which is inherently high-profile and provocative.

The US faces just as severe a problem in sealift assets as it does in airlift. Two approaches have been taken to overcome the problem. One is the prepositioning of roll-on/roll-off container ships, filled with equipment and supplies, in the region. A 17-ship NTPS (Near-Term Prepositioned Ship) flotilla anchored at Diego Garcia (with an additional ship in the Mediterranean) carries enough heavy equipment, supplies, ammunition, fuel, and water for a single Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB), as well as supplies for air force and army units. As the name suggests, this is a temporary stop-gap measure intended to fill in until the MPS (Maritime Prepositioned Ship) flotilla, consisting of ships either purpose-built or converted from existing stock, can put into operation. Thirteen MPS vessels, able to support 3 MABs for 30 days, were expected to be ready in 1986. However, it is not certain that all of the MPS ships are destined for the Gulf, and some have been slated for Pacific and Atlantic bases.<sup>45</sup>

The second approach has been to convert eight SL-7 (Sea-Land Container) ships to RDF configurations. The advantage of these vessels is their speed, nearly twice that of existing

---

Sea, or from Masira Island, which is not much better in terms of proximity to the theater of operations. See also Cordesman, *The Gulf*, pp. 814-817.

<sup>44</sup>Johnson, *Military as an Instrument*, pp. 80-87; Zakheim, "Airlifting the Marine Corps," p. 124; Bruce Schoch, "Sea Lift for the RDF," *National Defense*, No. 65 (May-June 1981), pp. 71-74; Cordesman, *The Gulf*, pp. 825-829; and Raphael Iungerich, "US Rapid Deployment Forces – USCENTCOM – What is It? Can It Do the Job?" *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 122 (Oct. 1984), p. 97.

<sup>45</sup>Iungerich, "US Rapid Deployment Forces," p. 97. As Iungerich points out, "Airlift savings associated with the prepositioning concept are enormous. For example, the total ammunition tonnage aboard NTPF ships would require roughly 2,450 C-141 sorties from the East Coast." *Ibid.*

conventional cargo ships. It is estimated that the addition of the SL-7s to RDF forces will cut the time necessary to move a mechanized infantry division to the Gulf from 30-35 days to approximately 14 days. Their disadvantage lies in exorbitant fuel consumption, making it likely that they will be used sparingly until called upon.<sup>46</sup>

*Tactical Mobility.* Once RDF forces arrive in the Gulf, they must be able to move quickly and effectively to the area of combat and be defended. Total reliance on tanks is considered unsuitable, because of their weight and potential difficulty of movement in Gulf terrain. In addition, gunships and assault helicopters may be particularly vulnerable to Soviet tactical air defenses. A need was seen for vehicles which are lightweight, easily transportable by air, armored, and able to maneuver and survive in the desert environment of the Gulf. The acquisition of existing armored wheeled vehicles as a preferable alternative to utilizing tanks was widely suggested.<sup>47</sup> As a consequence, the Marine Corps purchased a number of these vehicles.

*Forcible-Entry Capability.* As pointed out earlier, initiation of RDF deployment is based on invitation from a state in the region. Consequently, planning has been based on a benign entry, with access to necessary airfields and seaport under friendly conditions. Whether or not this will be the case depends upon the scenario envisioned. If the purpose of the RDF is to respond to a Soviet attack, particularly one aimed at Khuzistan, then it may be safely assumed that the initial US landings will be made in GCC countries, with their active cooperation. On the other hand, a response to regional or internal threats may require that US forces fight their way ashore. To meet this contingency, it has been suggested that Marine amphibious capabilities be improved and that additional naval gunfire capability be provided for the RDF.

The following section presents the numerous arguments against the advisability of using US forces in most hostile actions against regional forces. Nevertheless, the issue of naval gunfire support ranges beyond that of simply amphibious assault cover. The potential value in a Gulf conflict (or even deployment for demonstration purposes, as was the case of the *New Jersey* off Lebanon) provides an additional argument for the reactivation of the US Navy's battleships, according to some (this argument ties in with the maritime strategy discussed above).<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the above issues, there exist a number of other operational problems that may seem minor but have serious implications. For one thing, airlift constraints may make it impossible to deploy a general field hospital quickly, yet the US no longer has the hospital ships used during the Vietnam war. Furthermore, the scarcity of fresh water supplies in the Gulf will require US forces to provide their own, requiring the acquisition of additional MPS vessels for this purpose, as well

---

<sup>46</sup>Johnson, *Military as an Instrument*, pp. 68-80; Zakheim, "Airlifting the Marine Corps," p. 124.

<sup>47</sup>For example, see Richard A. Stewart, "Tactical Mobility for the Rapid Deployment Forces: The Solution is at Hand," *Armed Forces Journal International*, Vol. 117 (Mar. 1980), pp. 70-72, 83; and Raymond E. Bell, Jr., "The Rapid Deployment Force: How Much, How Soon?" *Army*, Vol. 30 (July 1980), pp. 18-24; and Record, *Rapid Deployment Force*, pp. 62-63.

<sup>48</sup>Johnson, *Military as an Instrument*, pp. 93-95; idem, "Force Projection in Southwest Asia: The Role of Maritime Based Strategy," *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 68 (Feb. 1984), pp. 64-68; and Record, *Rapid Deployment Force*, pp. 65-66. See also William F. Hickman's analysis of the ineffective role of American naval deployment during the Iranian hostage crisis, "Did It Really Matter?" *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Mar.-Apr. 1983), pp. 17-30.

as further development along the lines of ROWPU (Reverse Osmosis Water Processing Units) experiments for field use. Paradoxically, the RDF also will have to provide most of its own fuel, since oil supplies present in the Gulf are limited to crude or refined gasoline. Consequently, a number of NTPS ships have been dedicated to providing stocks of necessary grades of fuel for aircraft, tanks, heavy trucks and other requirements.<sup>49</sup>

## ASSESSING RDF PERFORMANCE

As previously stressed at various places above, the viability and effectiveness of the RDF depend on the definition of its mission. The greatest utility of US military intervention is likely to be in countering one of the least likely threats. Conversely, the emergence of more probable threats (and which are likely to be perceived as having more apocalyptic effects than they actually are likely to have) will be far less amenable to US military action.

### The Soviet Threat

The prospect of Soviet invasion of the Gulf provided the principal impetus for the RDF's creation, particularly because of the heightening of American apprehensions in the late 1970s and the enunciation of the Carter Doctrine. While fears of an imminent Soviet drive on the Gulf seem to have abated, deterrence of Soviet direct and/or indirect moves in that region remains the key determinant of current American planning. The Department of Defense's 1982 *Defense Guidance* defines the Central Command's mission as follows:

Our principal objectives are to assure continued access to Persian Gulf oil and to prevent the Soviets from acquiring political-military control of the oil directly or through proxies. It is essential that the Soviet Union be confronted with the prospect of a major conflict should it seek to reach oil resources of the Gulf. Whatever the circumstances, we should be prepared to introduce American forces directly into the region should it appear that the security of access to Persian Gulf oil is threatened.<sup>50</sup>

For a number of reasons, a direct Soviet attack on the Gulf, independent of general war with the US, appears to be unlikely. As Dennis Ross has observed, "Soviet use of its indirect means to achieve its goals in the area is far more likely than any direct use of Soviet military force."<sup>51</sup> Given the assumption that the Soviet Union desires at least the capability of denying Gulf oil to the West if not overt control of that oil, indirect penetration through development aid, arms sales, subversion to acquire clients, and pressure by clients on neighboring states, have all been suggested as less risky options than frontal assault. Thomas L. McNaugher asserts that

---

<sup>49</sup>Johnson, *Military as an Instrument*, pp. 87-93.

<sup>50</sup>Quoted in the *New York Times*, 25 Oct. 1982.

<sup>51</sup>"Considering Soviet Threats to the Persian Gulf," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1981), p. 174.

The low readiness of ground forces in the Soviet Union's southern military districts and the reactive mode of the Soviet naval buildup in the Indian Ocean suggest that Moscow's interest in its southern flank thus far has not been driven primarily by lust for control of the Gulf's oil. Rather a prudent concern for the area's turbulence and possible U.S. buildup there motivates the Soviets. Nothing in their present force posture suggests that they are poised to impose their will on the area. Rather, the Soviets are best prepared to respond to opportunities, which they have done in the past in other parts of the world, but only when they expected no opposition.<sup>52</sup>

Nevertheless, defense planning must cover all possible contingencies, and not just the likely ones. As Keith A. Dunn has pointed out, evaluation of Moscow's capabilities for a direct attack on the Gulf most frequently has emphasized Soviet advantages (relative to the US) while ignoring various real constraints.<sup>53</sup> Among the Soviet advantages he points out are proximity to the region and, paradoxically, the relative strength of American influence in the Gulf, since political instability and regional military rivalries point to disturbance of the status quo.

At the same time, Dunn notes a number of serious constraints on Soviet military action in the region. One of these involves Soviet ground forces, since most of the approximately 30 divisions along the border and in Afghanistan are unprepared, undermanned, and lack adequate logistical support for a sustained campaign.<sup>54</sup> A second constraint revolves around Soviet tactical air support, as many of the aircraft the Soviets could put into action in Southwest Asia would be less than front-line quality and are limited in their ability to perform close-air-support functions. There are limitations to Soviet naval forces: the USSR only recently has moved from a coastal defense force to a globally deployed navy, and maintains limited (although growing) deployment in the Indian Ocean.

Geography also poses a constraint, as the mountainous and desert terrain of Iran generally does not favor Soviet tank and mechanized divisions with their limited logistical support. Distance as well works against Moscow: it may be only a short hop from Soviet territory to Azerbaijan but it is nearly 1200 miles to Hormuz and 2000 miles to Aden. Not all Soviet tactical planes can reach Hormuz, even from Afghanistan, while Soviet naval reinforcements have nearly as far to travel as US naval forces do. The Soviet Union must also grapple with strategic lift capabilities, just as the US must. Finally, there is the element of risk. The USSR faces the same problem as the US in depending upon regional clients. Dunn concludes that the main constraint is political: "It involves

---

<sup>52</sup>*Arms and Oil*, p. 45.

<sup>53</sup>"Constraints on the USSR in Southwest Asia: A Military Analysis," *Orbis*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Fall 1981), pp. 607-629.

<sup>54</sup>These forces have been improved in recent years, although they are said to be less prepared for a sustained campaign than those in central Europe. The Soviet Southern Theatre of Military Operations also controls 5200 tanks, 6600 artillery/mortar pieces and 890 aircraft; the number of Soviet troops in Afghanistan is about 115,000. US Department of Defense, *Soviet Military Power, 1985* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.; Washington: USGPO, Apr. 1985), pp. 15 and 129. See also Cordesman, *The Gulf*, pp. 818-820.

a lack of friends and allies; a lack of guaranteed access to facilities; and a general dislike and distrust for not only the Soviet Union but also the communist system."<sup>55</sup>

The invasion of Afghanistan has had some benefit for the Soviet Union, providing a useful test of its strategic reach and its ability to deploy forces into adjoining Southwest Asian territory. It has also given the Soviet armed forces extensive experience in mountain and rough terrain warfare, and a valuable look at the performance of its fighters and helicopters in similar combat conditions. At the same time, however, the strategic value of Afghanistan in an attack on the Gulf itself is marginal. Deployment of ground forces through Afghanistan toward Iran would be more difficult and entail longer time than movement directly across the Soviet border, and to reach the Gulf from Afghanistan by invading Iranian or Pakistani Baluchistan would require an even greater effort – and considerably more costs – than the Afghanistan invasion. The addition of Afghani airbases places tactical fighters only marginally closer to key Iranian targets. At best, Afghanistan allows the Soviets to use tactical air power to harass American forces in the southern Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and perhaps mount a surprise airborne assault to seize strategic areas until heavier units arrive.<sup>56</sup>

As a consequence of these constraints and American efforts, the widely perceived great military imbalance in Moscow's favor may not actually exist. Joshua M. Epstein, in a step-by-step dissection of the most logical scenario, a Soviet drive through northeastern Iran toward Khuzestan, exiting the mountains at Dezful, discounts an inevitable Soviet victory in head-on confrontation in the Gulf.<sup>57</sup> He argues that the rough terrain and Soviet dependence on a handful of mountain passes would allow the US to delay an overland drive long enough to put four RDF divisions into Khuzestan. This force should prove adequate to meet a probable maximum confronting force of seven Soviet divisions, given US advantages in technology, training, mobility, logistics, coordination, and probably even morale after the long, dangerous drive over the mountains.

This "Zagros Mountains" strategy appears to be at the root of present USCENTCOM planning for a Soviet attack. The 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Amphibious Brigade (MAB) would be airlifted to a nearby airfield with a contiguous port (or, if a forcible-entry contingency, would be required carry out an amphibious operation to secure the port and airfield) where equipment and supplies in the NTPS flotilla could be landed. Army units capable of sustained combat operations ashore are scheduled to follow the Marines and take up defensive positions in the Zagros Mountains, the natural

---

<sup>55</sup>"Constraints on the USSR," p. 629. In his opinion, the primary response to the Soviet threat "must continue to be essentially political, bolstered by military capabilities – and not the reverse." Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Cordesman, *The Gulf*, pp. 843-847.

<sup>57</sup>"Soviet Vulnerabilities in Iran and the RDF Deterrent," *International Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (1981), pp. 126-159. While Epstein assumes a US entrenchment centered on Abadan, Thomas L. McNaugher suggests that US interdiction of invading Soviet forces should take place farther north, near the point of entry into Iran. "Deterring Soviet Forces in Southwest Asia," in Stephen J. Cimbala, ed., *National Security Strategy: Choices and Limits* (New York: Praeger, 1984), pp. 125-154. See also his discussion in *Arms and Oil*, pp. 23-46. Over 25,000 troops took part in Operation Kavkaz-85, held in Soviet Georgia in July-Aug. 1985. The maneuvers demonstrated Soviet deep penetration ability in the first major Soviet rugged terra in exercise in nine years. *Washington Times*, 5 Aug. 1985. While the setting of the maneuvers in Georgia rather than Azerbaijan indicated that the adversary was Turkey, the value of this exercise applies equally well to Iran.

barrier between the northeastern Iranian plateau and the Khuzestan plain. Additional USCENTCOM forces would be deployed as quickly as possible and as required.<sup>58</sup>

The three-pronged attack launched by Iraq against Iran in September 1980 provides an indication of the vulnerability of any American defense of Khuzestan to other routes of egress from the Iranian highlands. While Iraq concentrated the lion's share of its forces on Khuzestan, significant numbers of units were dispatched to northern Iraq, partly to prevent any recrudescence of Iranian-backed Kurdish dissidence but also to seal off the border passes. Capture of the Kurdistan area of Iraq would also provide access to Iraq's northern oilfields and refineries. At the same time, Iraqi forces captured the strategic mountain pass of Sar-e Pol-e Zahab, near the border town of Qasr-e Shirin, and managed to hold it despite repeated Iranian attempts to recapture it. The importance of this pass derives from the road linking the Iranian regional center of Kermanshah and behind it Tehran to Qasr-e Shirin and Baghdad. Once Qasr-e Shirin is passed, the land becomes flat and easily traversible all the way to Baghdad, less than 100 miles away, or alternatively south all the way to Basra, the Shatt al-'Arab and Khuzestan.

A Soviet airlifted assault, Epstein contends, would be just as vulnerable since the Soviet Union does not possess sufficient fighter escort capability and it would be operating outside its normal range of ground control. Furthermore, even a massed bomber attack on US carriers in the region, in support of a combined overland and airlifted assault, would mean the stripping of Soviet defense elsewhere (after all, Moscow must prepare for even more contingencies than the US) and has no real assurance of success. He concludes that "The Soviets face the grave threat that the military cost of a move on Iran would vastly outweigh its potential benefits – indeed, the risk that all such benefits would be decisively denied."<sup>59</sup>

Even if the Soviet Union does not mount a direct assault on the Gulf, there still remains an indirect Soviet threat through the use of regional clients. Assessment of the likelihood of this scenario evokes the debate over "grand design" versus "opportunism." There are a large number of obvious difficulties in correctly assessing or interpreting such a situation. It may not be always possible to know which side is the instigator in any conflict between US and Soviet clients. The motives of the Soviet client are unknown: there may be no intent to invade. Can the cause of conflict be traced to Soviet machinations or is it just as likely to be due to indigenous factors? Even given Soviet motivations, is Moscow the omnipotent manipulator of its clients or is it often reduced

---

<sup>58</sup>Johnson, "Rapid Deployment," p. 4. Cordesman notes that "the control of Iran is losing some of its strategic importance. The Iran-Iraq War, Iranian revolution, and Iranian civil war have severely cut Iran's near-term oil- and gas-production capabilities and quite probably its ultimate recovery potential. Iran's economy is still weak, and the West has learned to live without a heavy dependence on Iranian gas and oil. Iran's politics may make any firm Soviet presence untenable for years to come. Accordingly, a Western 'defense' of Iran could be limited to de facto partition at the Zagros or Elburz mountains." *The Gulf*, p. 856.

<sup>59</sup>"Soviet Vulnerabilities in Iran," p. 158. W. Scott Thompson, in his "The Persian Gulf and the Correlation of Forces," takes issue with some of Epstein's assumptions. Even if the US is able to prevent a Soviet takeover of Khuzestan, Moscow will have occupied northern Iran and thus will be in a far better position to threaten the oilfields and states of the region than it is presently. Furthermore, he contends that an air interdiction campaign against Soviet columns moving into northern Iran is clearly vulnerable to a Soviet preemptive strike against American air bases in Turkey.

to supporting locally generated policies? An American misreading of an ambiguous situation could result in the initiation of hostilities, instead of reaction to moves already made.

The fighting between the two Yemens in 1979 provides a useful illustration of this problem. The widespread assumption in some quarters that this episode represented Soviet-inspired aggression by South Yemen against North Yemen is not credible for various reasons. There has been a serious rivalry between the two states since the 1960s for the distinction of being the sole legitimate state for all Yemen. To this end, both Sanaa and Aden have supported, in their territories, armed groups opposed to the regime in the other state. This has led to recurrent border tensions that have been prone to escalate into open warfare, as happened in 1972 and as was the case in 1979.

Even the fact that the course of the fighting in 1979 clearly favored South Yemen, as its troops pushed well into YAR territory in areas, does not prove intention of invasion. Aden's armed forces were better trained, equipped, and disciplined than those of Sanaa, and it is not surprising that they were able to move quickly over relatively open terrain (the fighting stopped once the South Yemenis reached the mountains and the North Yemeni troops were reinforced by tribal irregulars). In addition, the speed in reaching a negotiated settlement to the conflict and reaffirmation on both sides of the commitment to unity further disproves the idea of a master Soviet plan.<sup>60</sup> These considerations serve to point out that the emergence of such a conflict scenario is less likely to appear unambiguously as a Soviet threat than as a regional one, and will have to be treated by the US as such. The introduction of RDF forces in such a scenario would be extremely risky – even if they were to be invited, itself rather unlikely.

## **Regional Threats**

Because of their ambiguous nature and unpredictability, either as to imminence or course, regional conflict scenarios pose particular problems for US military policy. With the exception of one or two unique scenarios, it is difficult to see when American intervention definitely would be beneficial and even more difficult to discern when it might be necessary. Indeed, there are many plausible cases in which it may not even be feasible. While in theory it may seem that American intervention to support a Saudi Arabia under attack is unarguable, such a clear-cut situation is only one plausible scenario and perhaps a less likely one at that. It seems more probable that future regional conflict will develop along the lines of the Iran-Iraq war or inter-Yemeni hostilities, where the rationale for intervention (and even on which side) is far less certain. Furthermore, in almost all foreseeable cases, the transfer of equipment and perhaps dispatch of a few advisers will be preferable to the deployment of the RDF for both international and domestic reasons.

The Iran-Iraq war provides a good example of the problem. It is inconceivable that employment of the RDF could have prevented the outbreak of war, even if deployed early enough. Subsequent use of the RDF, as well as the provision of overt political and logistical aid, has been a nonstarter because of Washington's official neutrality between the belligerents. Presumably, the

---

<sup>60</sup>See J.E. Peterson, *Conflict in the Yemens and Superpower Involvement* (Washington: Georgetown University Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, 1981).

RDF could be used to tip the scales of the fighting, but at the cost of permanently alienating the other side and supporters, as well as other countries in the region. In addition, American involvement on one side very likely would provoke Soviet intervention on behalf of the other. Rather than a uniquely complex case, this war would appear to be rather typical of future conflict.<sup>61</sup>

Nevertheless, there may be at least one exception to its lessons. American intervention may be seen as necessary if Iran were to achieve a dramatic breakthrough and its forces advanced on Saudi Arabia. This assumes that Iran would both seek to invade Saudi Arabia and also be prepared to do so – which is by no means given.<sup>62</sup> The necessary preliminary of invitation presumably would be forthcoming, although Riyadh conceivably might wait until the last second to be absolutely certain. If such a chain of circumstances were to occur, it seems unlikely that an Iranian offensive would stand much chance against even limited US force. Iran has virtually no air capability and its apparent inability to launch successful fullscale offensives against Iraq in 1984 and 1985 indicates severe logistical constraints (as well as domestic political differences over the war). Assuming that American military involvement would pass the test of domestic US politics, there remains the problem of extrication. Iran has shown its tenacity in eschewing a negotiated settlement to more than five years of battle with Iraq, and there is little reason to assume that a military defeat in Arabia would cause it to sue for peace, unless the battlefield was widened by carrying the war back to Iran.

It should be stressed that an Iranian attack may be the sole regional threat to Saudi Arabia automatically involving the RDF. Threats from Riyadh's Arab neighbors are far less likely and/or less serious from a military point of view. Even before the war, Iraq was moving closer toward the GCC states and as a consequence of the war, Baghdad's economic, political and security relations with the GCC states have deepened considerably. Saudi security horizons also involve a potential Israeli threat, but it is inconceivable that the US would become involved in Saudi defense in case of an Israeli strike on Saudi Arabia.

One other regional threat involving possible American military action received prominent attention in late 1983 and early 1984: the possibility of an Iranian attempt to close the Strait of Hormuz. The disruption of Gulf oil supplies through such a scenario would have catastrophic effects on the West. A Congressional Research Service study concluded that a complete cessation of all oil traffic through the strait in 1980 (before the recession took hold) would have caused the major industrialized countries to suffer a shortfall of 20-25% in their oil requirements. Crude oil prices would likely have risen from \$30 to between \$90 and \$300, gross national product in these countries would have fallen 12-27% and employment there would have dropped by 15-30%. A projection for a similar disruption in 1982 showed milder but still grave effects.<sup>63</sup> While it is by no means certain

---

<sup>61</sup>See the comments of Thomas McNaugher and William Quandt, *Oil and the Outcome of the Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Energy Research Associates, 1984).

<sup>62</sup>In fact, this seems unlikely. As James A. Bill points out, while Iran's leaders are keen on exporting their revolution throughout the Gulf, "force is considered unnecessary, counterproductive, and antithetical to the tenets of Islam." "Resurgent Islam in the Persian Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (Fall 1984), p. 118.

<sup>63</sup>U.S. Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, *Western Vulnerability to a Disruption of Persian Gulf Oil Supplies: U.S. Interests and Options* (Washington, 24 Mar. 1983).



that Iran has the capability to close the strait, almost any Iranian action is likely to produce severe psychological effects.

Application of American force to counter such action, if it were to occur, would depend on the type of Iranian measures taken: mining of the strait, aerial or naval attacks on shipping, or shorebased shelling. Naval action would seem to be the most efficient (and least controversial or risky) counter, variously involving minesweepers, escort vessels, or naval gunfire. Such a response would not require RDF mobilization. Ground-based action, if required and approved, would present considerably more problems. The minimal operation, for example, to take out Iranian gun emplacements along the strait, would be a commando-type raid. Even if successful in its immediate mission, would a single raid be sufficient to prevent future shelling? Fully guaranteeing freedom of passage through the strait might involve occupation of Iranian territory, as well as permanently stationing naval vessels in the immediate vicinity. Such a strategy involves heavy political costs, both internationally and domestically, as well as potential escalation through Soviet assistance to Iran.<sup>64</sup>

### Internal Threats

Considerable talk has been generated about the "instability" of Saudi Arabia and the other GCC states, and President Reagan has indicated that the US would act to prevent a successful *coup d'État* or revolution in Saudi Arabia. It should be noted at the outset that extraconstitutional political change in Saudi Arabia is by no means certain nor inevitable.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, the commitment has been made. But is the American commitment to intervene to save the present regime in Saudi Arabia credible?

The emergence of a situation along these lines necessarily raises questions of the political and/or military feasibility of American intervention. The first consideration must be to outline the precise circumstances under which American assistance would be provided. But in the heat and confusion of the first signs of possible problems in Saudi Arabia, it may be extremely difficult – if not impossible – to interpret accurately events and circumstances. What is the source of the threat? If from within the Al Sa‘ud, should the US get involved? It is not implausible that a monarch would call upon the US for assistance if faced with opposition from the rest of the Al Sa‘ud. But such a development may not constitute a "threat": the ruling family acted in concert in the 1960s to remove

---

<sup>64</sup>On this subject, see Thomas M. Johnson and Raymond T. Barrett, "Mining the Strait of Hormuz," *US Naval Institute Proceedings*, Vol. 107, No. 12 (Dec. 1981), pp. 83-85; Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *The Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Sijthoff and Nordhoff, 1979; International Straits of the World, Vol. 3; idem, "The Strait of Hormuz: The Global Chokepoint"; and William L. Dowdy, "The Strait of Hormuz as a Secure International Waterway," in B.R. Pridham, ed., *The Arab Gulf and the West* (London: Croom Helm, 1985; for the University of Exeter Centre for Arab Gulf Studies), pp. 162-171.

<sup>65</sup>It could be postulated that there is a direct correlation between assertions of Saudi instability and unfamiliarity with that country.

King Sa'ud because of his incompetence. Blanket American interference in inter-familial rivalries may prove counterproductive and conceivably result in propping up an unwanted ruler.

Similar caveats emerge from a challenge to the authority of the Al Sa'ud arising from the military. In the heat of the moment, it may well be impossible to tell who is involved, what their goals are (an attempted overthrow or simply the expression of grievances?), how widespread disaffection is, and how well organized the plotters may be. Even if American forces were to be successful in blocking a military coup, such action could entangle the US in providing troops as a permanent praetorian guard for an increasingly unpopular regime. Furthermore, it is not always possible for outsiders to distinguish between dissidence on the part of a minority and the genesis of widespread opposition to an increasingly illegitimate order. It is precisely this distinction that eluded American policymakers in Iran.

These considerations form only the first part of the equation. Assuming that circumstances actually warrant American intervention, is such action militarily feasible? If US forces are to avoid becoming invaders in a hostile environment, they must act quickly and effectively. Success depends in part on the quality and timeliness of intelligence (in having sufficient warning in advance to move upon command), but also on the speed of deployment. Would the insertion of 800 paratroopers and a USAF fighter squadron within 48 hours, as the Central Command has indicated is possible, be enough to prevent a *coup d'État*? In the case of a military plot, it may be enough only if the rebels were partially thwarted beforehand, if they had failed to seize all the key objectives, if resistance was offered by loyal forces, and if the size of the rebellion was small to begin with, US troops could then tip the balance. In the case of dissidence within the Al Sa'ud, the necessary circumstances for the successful application of US force would seem to be the emergence of two blocs, each with significant support from military or paramilitary units. Otherwise, the US would face the prospect of trying to reverse a *fait accompli*.

All these hypothetical scenarios indicate that successful American intervention to protect an existing Saudi regime (or any other GCC regime) from internal threats is extremely questionable. This, in turn, raises the question of whether, in the event of a change of regime, American military action is necessary, let alone feasible. As noted earlier, even the emergence of a government in Saudi Arabia hostile to American interests is not a guarantee that American and/or Western access to Saudi oil would be cut off. Despite the reorientation in the political sphere, any Saudi government would still be almost totally dependent on oil income, not to mention having its capital investments in the West held hostage. The necessity for American action would seem dependent on what the long-term changes in the terms for the continued supply of Saudi oil were and, on the other hand, whether there was to be continued provision of Western exports and development assistance. This is to say that even this scenario does not necessarily require American military action. In fact, such action would still remain remote.

American action to take over Saudi oilfields has been actively discussed since the October 1973 war. In the immediate aftermath of the oil price revolution, a small number of "interventionists" appeared to advocate invasion of Saudi Arabia irregardless whether oil supplies were cut off. One advocate, writing under the pseudonym, "Miles Ignotus," justified invasion on the specious grounds that the OPEC states are "extortionists," the Arabs "blackmailers," and "behind the Arabs stand the Russians." He called for the US to strike quickly, utilizing Israeli bases and

assistance, seize the Saudi oilfields and turn them over permanently to compliant (presumably American) oil companies.<sup>66</sup>

Even in the early 1980s, Robert W. Tucker wrote of appeasement of Gulf states "that have managed to outmaneuver and to intimidate Western powers for over a decade," and argued that American credibility in the Gulf could be restored only by "a visible demonstration of power and the more impressive the demonstration the better."<sup>67</sup> In general, the extreme views of these interventionists appear to be colored not only by their belief in the decline of American "will" over the last several decades but also by their views of the Arab oil producers as simply enemies of Israel and therefore of the US. The adoption of their objectives by any US administration would seem particularly unlikely.

At the same time, there are many moderates who, while reluctant to consider the possibility of invasion, maintain that it may be necessary under extreme circumstances, e.g., imposition of another oil embargo, or an oilfield takeover by forces hostile to the US (whether external or internal). RDF action to secure control of the oilfields against active resistance raises similar questions to the hypothetical scenario of the emergence of internal threats.

In a comprehensive study of the viability of using US military force to occupy Saudi Arabia's oilfields, John M. Collins and Clyde R. Mark (both of the Congressional Research Service) conclude that the US could easily defeat defending forces while seizing the oilfields and related facilities.<sup>68</sup> However, they caution that preserving the installations intact would be uncertain even under ideal conditions. It would be nearly impossible to arrive quickly enough to prevent sabotage and a considerable investment in material and works imported from the US, not to mention a lengthy period of time, might be required to repair damages.

Furthermore, several US divisions, complete with adequate air, sea, and land support, would be needed on an indefinite basis to maintain security over the installations. This could deplete strategic reserves to the point that little would be left for contingencies elsewhere. Direct Soviet intervention, a distinct possibility, might well make the US mission impossible, particularly in protecting sea lanes. Success, the authors argue, would depend on two prerequisites: slight damage to key installations and Soviet abstinence from armed intervention.

---

<sup>66</sup>"Seizing Arab Oil," *Harper's*, Vol. 250, No. 1498 (Mar. 1975), pp. 45-62. In this vein, see also Edward Friedland, et al., *The Great Detente Disaster*, and the various articles of Robert W. Tucker in *Commentary*. For a response to these views, see I. William Zartman, "The Power of American Purposes," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Spring 1981), pp. 163-177. Leftist assaults on the interventionists – and on US policy in general – are contained in Michael Klare, *Beyond the "Vietnam Syndrome": U.S. Interventionism in the 1980s* (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, 1981); and Leila Meo, ed., *U.S. Strategy in the Gulf: Intervention Against Liberation* (Belmont, MA: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, October 1981).

<sup>67</sup>*The Purposes of American Power*, p. 106.

<sup>68</sup>US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, *Oil Fields as Military Objectives: A Feasibility Study*, Prepared by the Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress (Washington: USGPO, 1975). An updated version of this study was retitled "Petroleum Imports from the Persian Gulf: Use of U.S. Armed Force to Ensure Supplies," Congressional Research Service, Issue Brief No. IB 79046 (8 Jan. 1980). See also the discussion in McNaugher, *Arms and Oil*, pp. 183-197.

The above discussion demonstrates the extreme limitations of use of the RDF, apart from one or two slightly possible scenarios. Even though the development of viable US military options is a real and necessary policy, their enactment may never be required, at least not on the scale envisioned in the RDF. Furthermore, American policy in the Gulf is constrained by the problem of ambiguity. The failure to explicitly disavow use of the RDF except in the case of external threats (i.e. external to the Arabian Peninsula) may prove counterproductive in (1) promoting closer cooperation between the US and the GCC states, and (2) acquiring regional facilities for possible use against the Soviet Union.

The RDF may play a useful and even necessary role in the American policy mix for the Gulf, but far more important are other avenues of cooperation and preparation for underpinning Gulf security. In the last analysis, it is the states of the region whose fate is most directly and acutely affected. They must, in many ways, bear the greatest responsibility, and the largest burden, for Gulf security. It is to their options, and the American role therein, that this discussion must now turn.

**Table 5.1. United States Central Command**

<b>Forces Assigned to CENTCOM</b>	<b>Personnel</b>
US Central Command Headquarters (augmented)	1,132
US Army Forces Central Command	130,764
Headquarters, US Army Central Command	
(Third US Army)	
XVIII Airborne Corps Headquarters	
82d Airborne Division	
101 <sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (Air Assault)	
24 <sup>th</sup> Infantry Division (mechanized)	
6 <sup>th</sup> Cavalry Brigade (Air Combat)	
1 <sup>st</sup> Corps Support Command	
US Navy Forces Central Command	52,538
Headquarters, US Navy Central Command	
3 Carrier Battle Groups	
1 Surface Action Group	
3 Amphibious Ready Groups	
5 Maritime Patrol Squadrons	
US Middle East Force	
US Marine Corps Forces	69,644
1 Marine Amphibious Force, including:	
1 Marine Division (reinforced)	
1 Marine Aircraft Wing	
1 Force Service Support Group	
1 Marine Amphibious Brigade, including:	
1 Marine Regiment (reinforced)	

1 Marine Air Group (composite)	
1 Brigade Service Support Group	
US Air Force Central Command	32,968
Headquarters, US Air Force Central Command	
7 Tactical Fighter Wings	
4 Tactical Fighter Groups	
1 Tactical Fighter Squadron	
1 Airborne Warning and Control Wing	
1 Tactical Reconnaissance Group	
1 Electronic Combat Group	
1 Special Operations Wing	
Unconventional Warfare and Special Operations Force	3,418
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>290,434</b>
<i>Source: Headquarters, US Central Command, Public Affairs Office, Fact Sheet (February 1983).</i>	

**Table 5.2. Regional Facilities for RDF Use**

<b>Country</b>	<b>Facility</b>	<b>Type</b>
British Indian Ocean Territory	Diego Garcia	airfield and port
Kenya	Mombasa	port
	Nairobi	airfield
	Nanyuki	airfield
Oman	Khasab	airfield
	Masira	airfield
	Muscat	port
	Salala (Raysut)	port
	al-Sib (Muscat)	airfield
Somalia	Thamarit	airfield
	Berbera	airfield and port
	Mogadishu	airfield and port