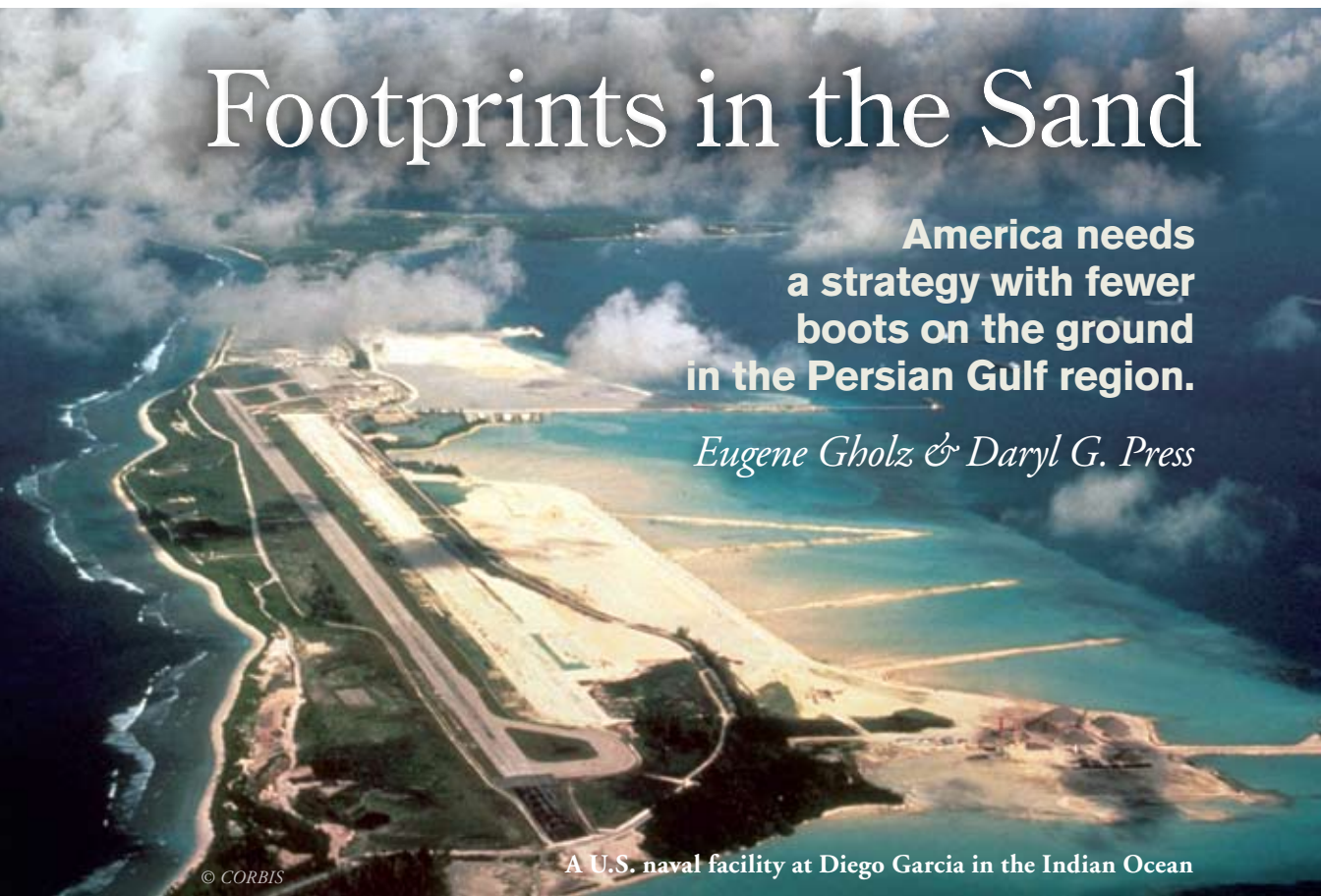


# Footprints in the Sand

**America needs  
a strategy with fewer  
boots on the ground  
in the Persian Gulf region.**

*Eugene Gholz & Daryl G. Press*



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A U.S. naval facility at Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean

**T**he United States has begun to draw down the U.S. troop presence in Iraq and plans to have all U.S. combat troops out of the country by August 2010. The drawdown in Iraq, plus the President's determination to begin a withdrawal from Afghanistan in July 2011, presents an opportunity to re-evaluate American strategy in what is now often called the Greater Middle East. We argue here that the United States can more readily achieve its strategic goals, while paying lower costs and taking fewer risks, by returning to the over-the-horizon strategy that served America well during the Cold War.

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Current U.S. national security strategy toward the Persian Gulf and environs rests on two pillars: a substantial land- and sea-based military presence throughout the region and close ties with the Gulf state monarchies. Under Presidents Carter and Reagan, the United States fulfilled its defense commitments with an over-the-horizon strategy, creating first a Rapid Deployment Force and then U.S. Central Command to prepare to flow forces into the region in the event of a crisis. The U.S. military pre-positioned equipment and built base infrastructure, but it did not station American troops in the region during peacetime. After the Gulf War in 1991, however, the U.S. changed its policy, defending its interests with forward-deployed forces. Because of that troop presence and the active American foreign policy in the region, the U.S. Central Command's Combatant Commander is probably the second-most-important figure in Persian

Gulf politics, ranking behind only local heads of government.

Most analysts recognize that the current American strategy is costly. The deployment of U.S. forces throughout the region has helped foment terrorism by al-Qaeda and other violent organizations. Furthermore, Washington's close ties to the Gulf's authoritarian governments sully America's image. And U.S. facilities present attractive targets for terrorists. Nevertheless, the consensus view holds that the United States must bear the costs of the current strategy because the countries surrounding the Gulf account for roughly 25 percent of global oil production.

The consensus is wrong. Using an "over-the-horizon" strategy, the United States can protect its oil interests while reducing America's strategic exposure in the Gulf region. The new "old" approach would counter the traditional military threats to Persian Gulf oil as effectively as the current strategy, and it would do a better job mitigating the more serious future dangers: terrorism against oil infrastructure and domestic instability within oil-producing countries. As an added benefit, an over-the-horizon approach would bring U.S. policy more in line with American values.

The military element of an over-the-horizon strategy calls for maintaining forces in the Indian Ocean and (as needed) in the waters of the Persian Gulf, but it would eliminate peacetime U.S. deployments to bases throughout the region. For contingencies beyond the capabilities of the nearby naval forces, air and ground units could flow into the theater.

The political dimension of the strategy would require maintaining cordial, discreet relations with the Gulf monarchies. The United States would continue to guarantee their borders from interstate aggression, as it has *de facto* since the British withdrawal from "east of Suez" in 1971, but the over-the-horizon strategy would reduce Washington's political role in the Gulf. The core of the strategy is simple: Remain close enough to prevent major acts of military aggression, but stay out of the daily fray of the region's politics.

Critics of new strategies often portray them as unrealistic. In this case, that is hard to do, since both the Carter and Reagan Administrations

followed the approach we recommend. Furthermore, the threats to U.S. oil interests in the Persian Gulf—or at least those dangers that U.S. military presence can mitigate—are far weaker than they were in the past. If an over-the-horizon approach made sense during the Cold War, then it should be an even better strategy today.

## The Old Threats

U.S. force posture in the Persian Gulf since at least the early 1970s has been designed to counter two principal military threats to oil flows: the conquest of major oil reserves and harassment of oil infrastructure and shipping. These threats are relatively small today, because the Soviet Union and Ba'athi Iraq no longer exist.

For decades, the cornerstone of U.S. military planning for the Persian Gulf was preventing conquest of the region's vast oil reserves—and wisely so. Soviet control of the Gulf—through conquest or subversion—would have profoundly changed the global balance of power. Similarly, a Gulf country that conquered a neighbor would pose a major threat to the remaining regional oil producers. The conqueror might be able to exploit his new position of power to enforce lower OPEC production levels (raising prices). The aggressor might also skew OPEC's production quotas in his favor. Most importantly, a conqueror might use his new oil income to build greater military might, further enhancing his leverage over other oil producers.

That, of course, was a main element of the old Iraq problem, one vividly illustrated in the Iraqi invasion and (temporary) occupation of Kuwait in 1990. Today, no country outside or within the Persian Gulf region is capable of major cross-border invasions and successful occupations. Even if post-Ba'athi Iraq develops a stable government, its military will be a shadow of the Saddam-era force for many years. Iraq is slowly building military capacity for counter-insurgency, policing and small raids, but Baghdad will lack the equipment and skills required for large-scale maneuver warfare for the foreseeable future.

Iran, meanwhile, lacks the equipment and training for major offensive ground operations. Its land forces, comprising two separate armies

(the Artesh and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), are structured to prevent coups and to wage irregular warfare, not to conquer neighbors. Tehran's air force is antiquated, and its navy is suited for harassment missions, not large amphibious operations across the Gulf. Furthermore, a successful invasion is not enough to monopolize a neighbor's oil resources; a protracted occupation would be required. But the idea of a sustainable and protracted Persian Shi'a occupation of any Gulf Arab society—even a Shi'a-majority one like Bahrain—is far-fetched.

Outside of Iraq and Iran, the small, niche armed forces of the other regional actors—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and the United Arab Emirates—are not geared for conquest and occupation either.

Under these circumstances, a U.S. force stationed over-the-horizon could thwart any invasion as effectively as a locally deployed force could. Even in the 1991 U.S.-Iraq war, modern airpower was already devastatingly lethal against ground forces on the move, and in that war only a small fraction of U.S. aircraft could deliver precision-guided weapons. Today, all U.S. combat aircraft, including those based on aircraft carriers, can carry precision-guided munitions, giving airpower unprecedented lethality against advancing ground forces—in a part of the world where there is virtually no cover from air reconnaissance. An over-the-horizon force of long-range bombers, naval aviation, and ships and submarines armed with cruise missiles would pose as formidable a bulwark against cross-border invasion as the current in-theater force.

To be sure, there are advantages to flying combat sorties from local ground bases rather than launching strikes from aircraft carriers or using long-range bombers. For example, ground-based aircraft can sustain higher sortie rates than naval aviation or strategic bombers. But given the growing lethality of air power against moving ground forces and the limited military capabilities of regional adversaries, this would not be a significant factor.

Countering a harassment campaign in the Gulf poses a greater challenge. Potential aggressors might initiate a wide variety of at-

tacks: naval mines, suicide speedboats to ram oil tankers, or mobile land-based missile launchers. Completely suppressing such attacks would be very difficult and might take weeks. But the consequences of a harassment campaign are typically overstated and, in any event, an over-the-horizon force could counter the threat as effectively as a force deployed to local bases in peacetime.

Iran's long Persian Gulf coastline makes it the best candidate to significantly staunch oil flows, but even Iran's capability is limited. First, when commercial shipping is harassed, ship owners don't give up; they negotiate higher fees, buy wartime insurance and resume their profitable trade. This is precisely what happened in the last case of sustained attacks on shipping in the Gulf, the so-called the Tanker War of the 1980s. Harassment campaigns create inconvenience, but they don't stop commerce.

Second, oil traffic is particularly hard to stop. Every day, roughly a dozen supertankers sail through the Strait of Hormuz in each direction. These are massive ships, even larger than aircraft carriers, and the severity of damage a weapon can inflict on a ship scales dramatically with size, making tankers hard to take out. Modern tankers are also protected by thick double-hulls and compartmentalized holds. Furthermore, when carried in a tanker, crude oil is very difficult to ignite because the fuel-laden compartments carry little oxygen. Therefore, a weapon exploding in a tanker's cargo hold will send a shock throughout the ship, but it is unlikely to start a fire, typically the most damaging consequence of an attack. It would likely take many hits to cripple a large tanker, so an anti-shipping campaign would rapidly consume Iran's limited arsenal of modern weapons.

Finally, Iran itself is dependent on the Strait; its economy depends both on the crude oil it exports and the gasoline it imports. A war in the Strait would ruin Iran's economy and subject its military to weeks of air and naval attacks by the United States.

Again, however, the more important point is that the forces the United States would employ to counter a harassment campaign are exactly those that can be easily stationed over-the-horizon. U.S. warships and helicopters would

convoy tankers to protect them from speed-boats; strike aircraft, which can be launched from aircraft carriers, would search for Iranian missile launchers; U.S. submarines might hunt Iran's mine-laying submarines. A tanker war would principally be an air- and naval-conflict. Suppressing Iranian attacks on shipping would not be easy, but it would not require ground-based forces deployed in the region during peacetime. Indeed it might not require ground-based forces at all.

From a broader strategic perspective, if the primary military danger in the Gulf stems from harassment campaigns, then the strategic situation is highly conducive to an over-the-horizon force posture. Strategic planners worry about relying on distant forces if they fear that adversaries can achieve *faits accomplis*. But harassment campaigns, even when they are effective, don't throw knock-out blows; they create steady, grinding pressure. With an over-the-horizon approach, the United States would retain plenty of combat power nearby to suppress attacks on oil targets, and the United States would face virtually no risk of catastrophe while follow-on forces flowed into the theater as necessary.

## The Enemy Within

Not only is U.S. peacetime military presence unnecessary for preventing traditional cross-border attacks in the Persian Gulf region, it also does not help deal with the other potential threat to oil flows: domestic instability. At present, the Gulf monarchies appear stable, as they have been since independence in the early 1970s. There have been tussles and father-son coups in some of the Gulf states, but all of the ruling families that began the independence odyssey some three decades ago remain in power today, and they may well continue to do so for decades to come. That goes for the key state in the region, Saudi Arabia, too.

Or they may not: The current stability covers up worrisome sectarian divides, growing inequality and the well-known problems accruing to states with large rentier classes. Predicting the resilience of authoritarian governments is an uncertain exercise. Furthermore, Iran and Iraq, the two most populous countries in the

region, may both be entering periods of internal turmoil that could spill across borders and weaken other governments. However, the United States should not plan for potential domestic political and social turmoil by maintaining a major U.S. military presence in the region: U.S. deployments do not mitigate the danger of unrest; in some cases they probably make it more likely.

We must still plan for instability, of course. Greater social and political instability may significantly impede oil flows. Terrorists and insurgents can often do more damage to oil infrastructure than military forces lobbing inaccurate missiles with small warheads from far away. The situation in Iraq is illustrative: Repeated attacks on the major export pipeline in northern Iraq essentially closed it down from 2003 to 2007. Not only did the attacks damage the pipeline, but they also hindered repairs and scared away investment. A successful terrorist campaign in Saudi Arabia, involving repeated attacks on the kingdom's terminals, pipeline junctions and pumping facilities, could likewise keep vast quantities of oil off the market.

Terrorism and insurgency are not the only form of "domestic instability" that could reduce oil output from the Gulf; labor strikes and civil wars could do as much or more damage. Strikes have caused several of the greatest oil-market disruptions in history. In most oil-producing countries, oil field workers are an important group in domestic politics, and work stoppages can dramatically undercut oil production, as they did in Iran in 1978–79 and in Venezuela in 2001–02. A full-blown civil war in an oil-producing region, where workers become combatants or cannot reach their job sites due to fighting, might be even worse. After a terrorist attack, workers typically return to their jobs and strive to restore output, but during a strike or civil war, output may remain depressed for protracted periods.

These worrisome scenarios actually understate the dangers from instability in the Persian Gulf. In a worst-case scenario, if an al-Qaeda-linked group were to win a civil war in Saudi Arabia, it would gain control of some 12 million barrels per day of production capacity that it could manipulate in dramatically anti-American ways. The new government could also

spend its oil revenue on anti-American projects. Overall, internal political instability in Persian Gulf oil-producing countries could badly damage American interests.

Unfortunately, the American military presence in the Persian Gulf region does not reduce this threat. The U.S. military is not tasked with protecting its host governments from internal enemies—not the fighter aircraft and ground forces deployed in Kuwait, the command center and repositioned materiel in Qatar, the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquartered in Bahrain, nor other regional military assets. Ensuring internal stability is the Gulf monarchies' *highest* priority, so most give control of their security apparatus to a senior member of the royal family. They do not outsource this job to the United States.

Nor could the U.S. military be as effective as locals at stamping out this kind of instability within the Gulf kingdoms. The counterinsurgency skills that the U.S. military has learned in Iraq do not apply to the day-to-day problems that the Gulf states face. Rooting out extremists requires spying on and infiltrating political and religious organizations. Local security forces know the region and understand the languages and local dialects necessary to do these jobs effectively; even the highly skilled Special Forces of the U.S. military could not do as well. Similarly, locals do a better job at protecting the regular operations of oil-producing facilities because they better understand who “belongs” near sensitive sites and who does not; it's the rough equivalent of an effective foot patrol in police work.

The United States can indirectly support its allies' internal security efforts, for example, by helping train and equip their security forces. But that mission does not require a large overt U.S. military presence in the region. Domestic instability in the Gulf is a major potential threat to oil flows, and in a tight global supply-and-demand situation any significant loss of supply can have a major impact on price. But the U.S. military is not the answer to this problem.

Of course, if a major Gulf oil producer did descend into civil war, the United States would have difficult decisions to make: whether, and how, to intervene. But even in that scenario, the current U.S. peacetime presence in the region would not appreciably help. Effective U.S.

military response to political instability could come in two flavors: small-scale (typically covert) efforts and major stability operations. For the smaller missions, the United States would use Special Forces and intelligence operatives to try to reverse an unfavorable local political outcome. The small team of forces for that type of operation would not need the current U.S. base infrastructure in the region, and might not use it even if available.

On the other hand, if the United States were to respond to a full-blown civil war in the Persian Gulf with a major military intervention, current (or foreseeable) forward deployments would not contribute much to the operation. The large intervention force would have to come from bases in the continental United States, Germany or East Asia, as did the forces that fought the Gulf War in 1991 and the Iraq War in 2003. With an over-the-horizon strategy, American leaders could choose either kind of intervention, just as they could with the current forward-presence strategy. When it comes to contingencies tied to local political instability, however, our current force presence in the region adds no value whatsoever. Indeed, it subtracts from it.

## The Costs of Peacetime Presence

**W**hy is a peacetime U.S. military presence in the Gulf on balance counterproductive?

First, the presence of thousands of American military personnel in Muslim countries clearly infuriates radicals like Osama bin Laden, aids their efforts to recruit new jihadists and increases the level of quiet support for extremists within the broader population. Violent Muslim groups offer a range of explanations for their attacks on the United States, but among the most important (if not *the* most important) is the presence of U.S. military forces in the Persian Gulf region. The U.S. decision to keep military forces in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War triggered bin Laden's “Declaration of War” against the occupier of “the land of the two holy Mosques” (bin Laden's words). While Saudi Arabia is a special case in religious terms, to this day al-Qaeda rhetoric is still laced with

invective against U.S. military deployments in the region, long after U.S. forces have departed the kingdom itself. This message apparently persuades some of its audience to take up arms, while others only find the videos and web posts persuasive enough that they donate money to terrorist causes or reduce their cooperation with local counter-terrorism authorities. Moving over-the-horizon would not end the friction between the United States and violent Muslim groups, but it would remove a critical irritant and a useful recruiting theme.

U.S. military deployments also weaken the legitimacy of their host governments, which, all else equal, increases the chance of labor strikes or domestic unrest. During the Cold War, U.S. deployments served as a symbolic tripwire to reassure our allies that America would show up in a time of crisis. The *peoples* of the Persian Gulf, however, require no reassurance that the United States will fight for oil; the tendency in the region already is to ascribe all U.S. actions to the Western interest in oil. Instead, the presence of U.S. forces defending their rulers and their oil reminds even relatively moderate locals that their ruling elites have interests apart from those of their people. It also demonstrates to many locals that their governments cannot manage the threats and challenges that face them. To the extent that current governments seem decadent, ineffective or incompetent—a verdict that differs from place to place, to be sure—they seem more worthy of replacement, particularly by religious radicals who promise to restore the society's honor, dignity and religious purity. The small Gulf monarchies are stable now, but U.S. military deployments risk further casting these governments in an unflattering light with their own people.

Third, U.S. deployments in many Gulf countries raise significant force protection risks for the United States. U.S. forces have not suffered a major attack in the region since the bombing of the U.S.S. *Cole* in 2000, but several key facilities (NSA Bahrain, for example) are located in the midst of major population centers. The Marine barracks in Lebanon, Khobar Towers near Dhahran, and the U.S. Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania seemed relatively safe before they were attacked. Terrorists certainly have an easier time attacking a facility in their

own backyard than they would if they had to plan and execute an attack in an unfamiliar country or an isolated rock like Diego Garcia, where the U.S. military bases over-the-horizon forces. The current U.S. forward-presence posture also puts American forces within range of Iranian missiles, making them potential hostage targets in a crisis.

Finally, the forward-deployment strategy ties the United States more closely to authoritarian regimes across the Gulf than would otherwise be the case. Allying with authoritarians may be necessary in some circumstances, but it always has at least some ethical and strategic costs. If revolutionaries seize power, they will associate the United States with the old regime. The United States has paid this price before; many experts believe that the past three decades of hostility between Iran and the United States are partly attributable to Iranian bitterness over American support for the Shah. Similarly, overt American support for the Saudi regime has clearly contributed to the virulent anti-American radicalism among some of the population there, too. Americans should prefer that reformers and revolutionaries around the world build models of the Statue of Liberty (as they did in Tienanmen Square in 1989) rather than burn American flags (as they did in Tehran in 1979).

None of these arguments suggests that the United States should withdraw if the forces were actually needed to protect key American interests. But given the current situation, an over-the-horizon posture would be more sensible: It would do the security job we need at lower economic and political cost.

## America's Energy Safety Net

While an over-the-horizon approach to the Gulf can prevent disruptions to oil supplies at least as well as forward-deployed forces, U.S. leaders are appropriately risk-averse. They may be loath to risk military delay of any sort in a vital oil-rich region, given the importance of oil in the fast-paced global economy. But the industrialized world's massive emergency petroleum stocks should assuage these fears. Those stockpiles are so large that they can re-

place interrupted oil supplies for many months, providing an additional buffer to facilitate withdrawal of U.S. forces from their land bases in the Gulf.

The industrialized world's emergency oil stockpiles have grown dramatically in recent decades. The United States stores more than 700 million barrels of crude oil in its Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and allied governments' stockpiles in Europe and Asia add hundreds of millions of additional barrels. Private inventories have also grown. Adding up commercial and government stockpiles, the industrialized economies control more than four billion barrels of oil in ready-to-access storage tanks and salt caverns.

Comparing these stocks to the total daily consumption of oil, they seem inadequate. For example, the United States consumes about twenty million barrels of oil every day, so the 700 million barrels in the vast U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve could only supply the country for 35 days. (Furthermore, the United States

could not draw oil out of the reserve at such a high rate.) The 1.3 billion barrels of crude oil held by the United States and allied governments could only supply the world economy for 16 days.

But global stocks should be measured against the size of plausible disruptions, not against total global consumption. No foreign disruption can cut off the millions of barrels of domestic oil production that feed the U.S. distribution network every day, and a foreign disruption in one place, even the Persian Gulf, would not cut off *all* U.S. imports. U.S. foreign policy only needs to defend against the worst plausible overseas disruption.

The worst oil disruptions in history—the 1973 Arab oil embargo, the collapse of the Iranian oil industry during the revolution in 1978 and the sanctions on Iraq after its conquest of Kuwait in 1990—each deprived global markets of less than 5.5 million barrels per day. If a future disruption were as bad as these, U.S. and allied governments



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**Strategic Petroleum Reserve holding tanks in Louisiana**

could replace every lost barrel for more than seven months. Some analysts worry that Iran might trigger an oil crisis by attacking tankers as they pass through the Strait of Hormuz, near Iran's coast. Such efforts are likely to fail for reasons described earlier, but even if Iran could reduce the 15–17 million barrels of oil that pass through the Strait every day by 30 percent, global reserves could replace those losses for nearly a year.

In any of these scenarios, over-the-horizon military forces would have plenty of time to respond—if military intervention were appropriate. Political leaders contemplating a shift to an over-the-horizon strategy should feel comforted by the knowledge that global oil supply does not hang by a thread.

Critics of the over-the-horizon approach might raise a range of concerns. First, the United States has other national security interests in the Persian Gulf region beyond oil. For example, could the United States pursue terrorists throughout the region if it adopted an over-the-horizon posture? The answer is “yes.” Nothing in an over-the-horizon strategy would prevent the United States from maintaining small groups of special operations forces at remote bases in the region to conduct clandestine raids. Large facilities full of U.S. servicemen attract attention and breed animosity. Small desert encampments far from public view do not.

Other critics worry about the effect of an over-the-horizon strategy on U.S. political ties to the Gulf monarchs. Would they remain friendly to the United States (albeit discreetly) and, for example, oppose OPEC price hawks to keep oil prices down? Or would they feel betrayed by the United States? Adopting this new strategy would benefit the Gulf monarchies, and they would quickly see this. The United States would still give these monarchies what we give them today: protection from external military threats. But the over-the-horizon strategy would do it without asking them to take the politically difficult step of hosting American forces.

There is only one other potentially reasonable objection we can think of to moving from a forward-presence to an over-the-horizon

defensive posture: optics. If over the next few years the U.S. military will be leaving Iraq and drawing down elsewhere adjacent to the region, and especially if things do not go so well in Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran, then a movement to an over-the-horizon posture, if done the wrong way, could contribute to an impression of American irresolution or defeat. Such an impression could boost the morale of our worst adversaries. For example, Osama bin Laden would surely claim a great victory.

This worry should not prevent the United States from adopting the most effective foreign policy to protect its interests. We should simply recognize that no matter what we do, al-Qaeda will play one of its tired refrains: U.S. military activity in the region proves its insatiable desire to control Muslim lands, or reductions in American presence prove American weakness. Either way, al-Qaeda leaders call for jihad. In the face of that rhetorical constant, the United States should simply choose the right strategy to defend its core interests, the strategy that most centrally aligns ends and means.

The United States should then use the full range of diplomatic efforts to explain what we have done—in this case truthfully—as the best way to protect American oil interests in the Gulf. In terms of the optics, the people of the Persian Gulf will eventually notice two things after the return to the over-the-horizon posture: First, the U.S. military is a much smaller presence in their daily lives; and, second, bin Laden is still a fugitive living in a cave somewhere, trying to justify terrorist attacks that kill Muslims and undermine the region's peaceful development. The public should be able to draw the right lesson about who is on the run.

To take a step back, the United States clearly has a range of foreign policy interests in the Persian Gulf region beyond oil, including counter-terrorism, non-proliferation and human rights. But the only one of those interests that even appears to demand a large peacetime American military presence in the region is oil. In reality, the United States can get what it needs from the Persian Gulf without stationing U.S. forces there and without being deeply entangled in the region's politics. An over-the-horizon strategy is the best approach to the Persian Gulf. 🌐