

**Foreign Policy**  
at BROOKINGS



# **No “Plan B”**

## **U.S. Strategic Access in the Middle East and the Question of Bahrain**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Maintaining a United States military presence overseas is vital for protecting U.S. interests, contributing to regional security and preparing to respond to crisis. Strategic access in the Middle East prepares U.S. forces for sustained operations and reassures critical allies of the enduring U.S. commitment to the region. Arguably, the most important U.S. strategic base in the heart of the Middle East lies in the small island country of Bahrain. Over the past two years, Bahrain has seen dramatic increases in Shia Muslim sectarian protests and political unrest resulting from a lack of democratic reforms with the ruling Al-Khalifa family. To date, the Bahraini government has controlled the protests, sometimes harshly. The protests, however, show no signs of going away, especially with democratic reforms with the ruling family are occurring at a slow pace. In view of the ongoing political unrest, the possibility of losing strategic basing rights in Bahrain is something that should be carefully considered. Unfortunately, military leaders state there is no “Plan B” if strategic basing in Bahrain is jeopardized.

Conventional wisdom from most U.S. military experts and planners in the Department of Defense is that “losing Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain is unlikely” and “the Saudis and the United States would never allow it.” The only course of action for military planners have set is to ensure that “Plan A” works. “Plan A” ensures that Bahrain’s government remains intact, the security situation remains stable, and the United States retains basing in the region.

Recent history, such as the loss of access in Iran and the Philippines, has taught us to expect the unexpected and highlights the reality that the U.S. does not influence every factor that contributes to the loss of access. The Navy would be wise to learn from historical lessons to best posture the force should these improbable “Black Swan” situations arise. While losing Bahrain is not a foregone conclusion, it remains a distinct possibility under a variety of different circumstances and scenarios. The absence of a U.S. presence could potentially create a power vacuum, destabilize the region, and eliminate the moderating effect of U.S. influence in any Bahraini crisis. Therefore, the United States must investigate viable alternatives as a hedge strategy.

This research will present viable Plan B alternatives and make recommendations that ensure U.S. access, diversify the U.S. footprint, and reaffirm the U.S. commitment to work through the challenging process of democratic reforms with Bahraini government and the Opposition.

# CHAPTER ONE

## *Introduction*

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United States strategic basing and overseas access to vital areas has never been more critical than it is today. Maintaining an American presence overseas is essential for protecting U.S. interests, contributing to security and stability, and preparing to respond to crisis throughout the world. Arguably, the most important U.S. strategic base lies in the heart of the Middle East in the small island country of Bahrain. Overseas access in the Middle East allows U.S. forces to preposition for sustained readiness and reassures critical allies of the enduring U.S. commitment to the region.

Over the past two years, Bahrain has seen dramatic increases in Shia Muslim sectarian protests and political unrest resulting from a lack of democratic reforms with the ruling Sunni Al-Khalifa family. To date, the Bahraini government has managed to limit the sectarian protests, sometimes using harsh methods. But the protests are not going away and the differences between the mostly Shia Opposition and the ruling family are nowhere close to resolution. In view of the ongoing political unrest, the possibility of losing strategic access in Bahrain is something that should be carefully examined.

In the past, the United States lost access to key strategic locations because it lacked an understanding of the geopolitical environment and, therefore, contingency plans were not developed. The sudden loss of access resulted in United States civilian and military leaders scrambling to maintain a presence in key regions. Surprisingly, military leaders have no “Plan B” if strategic access in Bahrain is jeopardized. Because of a strong desire to support the government of Bahrain, losing critical access is not currently being considered, and strategic basing alternatives are not being developed. As a result, the United States could be heading towards the loss of key access in a critical region once again.

### **Bahrain: A Strategic Necessity**

The Kingdom of Bahrain is a small island state strategically located inside the Persian Gulf directly to the east of Saudi Arabia and southwest of the Strait of Hormuz. Its prime location enables U.S. and coalition maritime forces to maintain a watchful eye on Iran and readily provide a robust maritime response in the highly volatile Persian Gulf and Strait of Hormuz. Bahrain hosts Naval Support Activity Bahrain and is home to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, Fifth Fleet Headquarters, and over 5,000 Sailors and Marines. Fifth Fleet oversees and operates all United States and coalition maritime

activity in the Persian Gulf, the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and much of the waters off eastern Africa. *Bahrain is unquestionably the United States' most important command and control, logistics, and maintenance base essential to sustaining the U.S. maritime presence in the region.* The United States is heavily invested in Bahrain and has built maritime strategy in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility around this key hub. Losing access to Bahrain as a result of the ongoing unrest in the greater Middle East and escalated tensions with Iran is considered absolutely unacceptable to civilian and military leaders.

## **Would the United States Let Bahrain Slip Away?**

The immediate response from planners and policy makers in the Department of State and the U.S. Navy is emphatically “no.” Conventional wisdom from most U.S. military experts and planners in the Department of Defense is that “losing Fifth Fleet Headquarters in Bahrain is highly unlikely,” and “the Saudis and the United States would never allow it.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, when presented with the specter of losing Bahrain, the only Plan B they state is to ensure Plan A works. Plan A ensures Bahrain’s monarchy remains intact, the security situation remains stable, and the United States retains basing in the area. Obviously, Plan A is tied to keeping Fifth Fleet headquarters and a U.S. footprint in Bahrain.

Interestingly enough, most military planners admit they are concerned with the severity and duration of the continued unrest; yet, they adhere to the notion that the United States or Saudi Arabia would never allow the security situation to degrade to the point that Bahrain destabilizes and U.S. basing is jeopardized.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, despite their best intentions, many variables that the United States has little control over could determine the course of events in Bahrain or the final outcome following political instability. The situation has the potential to deteriorate quickly and degenerate into an environment that is no longer hospitable to U.S. access.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Navy military planner, interview by author, Pentagon, Washington, DC, October 25, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Two Surprise Cases*

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### **Lost Access in the Past**

Overseas basing rights can be lost as a result of policy differences with the host country, a significant shift in political leadership in the United States or host country, and waning support of U.S. basing with the host nation population. Recent history highlights the reality that the U.S. does not influence every factor that could potentially contribute to the loss of access in a region. In fact, past losses presented similar challenging scenarios for defense strategies. When the United States failed to properly shape the environment and didn't fully understand the geopolitical dynamics, denied access often resulted. Political and military leaders were forced to scramble to deal with the immediate aftermath and long term consequences. Two high profile cases where the U.S. lost access serve as strong reminders: pre-revolutionary 1979 Iran and the Philippines in 1991.

### **Iran: the Black Swan**

Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a close ally of the U.S. government, ruled over Iran from 1941 until his overthrow in 1979. Toward the end of his tenure, his unpopularity with the Iranian population grew to a breaking point due mainly to his family's excesses, the nation's poor economy, and political turmoil. But the U.S. alliance, in which the Shah aligned himself with the American government by assisting with numerous security interests in the region and abroad, persisted through his ousting. Iran sent jets to aid the war effort in Vietnam, and the Central Intelligence Agency established numerous bases on the Iranian border with Russia to monitor Russian troop movements and missile programs.<sup>1</sup> In return, U.S. military sales to Iran totaled in the billions of dollars, and there was a sense, similar to that in Bahrain today, that the United States had an obligation to support its ally because of mutual cooperation and common security interests.

U.S. foreign policy in Iran, however, soon reached a crisis. When President Carter entered office, he stated "that under his administration the United States would no longer be arms merchant to the world and human rights standards would be applied to allies as well as adversaries."<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Carter administration attempted to cut back U.S. military sales to better ensure compliance with human rights violations in Iran. Many argue that the Carter administration's policy of reduced military sales amid a push for additional human rights reform are what eventually led to the Shah's downfall.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, misaligned U.S. policy and a failure to recognize the rapidly



changing events occurring in Iran resulted in the loss of critical access within what had been a key ally in the Middle East.

## **The Philippines: Resurging Nationalism**

The non-renewal and subsequent loss of Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Station in the Philippines in 1991 took many by surprise. Our long-standing partnership with the Filipino government, which originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, was extremely strong and the U.S. presence in the Philippines was significant. Clark Air Base was the largest military base in the world with 156,204 acres.<sup>4</sup> The Subic Bay Naval Base encompassed 60,000 acres and served as the primary logistics and repair hub for the Seventh Fleet.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the large U.S. footprint, internal Filipino nationalism and political factors ultimately resulted in the loss of basing rights. Negotiations over a new basing agreement failed when “the Philippine Senate rejected the treaty after an impassioned debate in which the American military presence was assailed as a vestige of colonialism and an affront to Philippine sovereignty.”<sup>6</sup> Despite generous U.S. security assistance and foreign aid, which many believed would persuade the Philippine government to extend the lease, the agreement was terminated in 1991.<sup>7</sup> Notable to lessons of today, conventional wisdom indicated that nonrenewal of the basing lease was unlikely, and consequently, planners had little time to deal with the loss before it occurred. The United States was forced to quickly redeploy forces and redistribute tasks necessary to sustain operations in the Pacific and Middle East theater of operations.

## **Lessons**

What lessons should the United States learn from experiences in Iran and the Philippines? While U.S. security assistance and foreign aid can influence a situation, it is no guarantee of a desired political outcome, especially when opposed by the demands of nationalist movements. Ultimately, governments act in their best interests, and the results can be unpredictable if decision makers do not account for all the variables. Even more dangerous is when policymakers understand all the variables yet fail to plan when an undesirable outcome seems unlikely.

Why did the United States fail to see the coming Revolution in Iran or the non-renewal of the bases in the Philippines? In his book *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War*, Robert Jervis comments on why policy makers fail to create Plan B: “If others learn of the existence of Plan B, they may give less support to Plan A.”<sup>8</sup> This appears to be the case with Bahrain. The primary concern that prevents leaders from developing alternatives is the view that Plan B would undermine the core relationship with Bahrain, which is central to Plan A. Jervis goes on to state, “as a policy develops momentum, information and analyses that would have

mattered if received earlier will now be ignored.”<sup>9</sup> Is the reluctance to develop Plan B in Bahrain a result of unyielding commitment to Plan A? Given how quickly an internal turn of events could change America’s relationships, failure to even consider Plan B could have disastrous results for the United States’ strategic interests.

While Bahrain is different from Iran and the Philippines, as we will explore, the loss of Bahrain is plausible and must be seriously considered to ensure long term access in the Middle East. In the case of Iran and the Philippines, policymakers did not fully account for or thoroughly understand the situation in-country or the government’s potential reactions. Had the U.S. government considered alternative outcomes and developed a viable Plan B, it could have better tailored policies to safeguard U.S. interests, strengthen alliances, and create a contingency plan that ensured access for the region.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Lyn Boyd, “A King's Exile: The Shah of Iran and Moral Considerations in U.S. Foreign Policy,” GUIDS Pew Case Study Center Case 234 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 2000), <http://www.usc.edu/dept/LAS/ir/sirga/ARboyd234.pdf>, accessed December 19, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Clark Air Base,” Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/clark.htm>, accessed May 15, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> David E. Sanger, “Philippines Orders U.S. to Leave Strategic Navy Base at Subic Bay,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 1991, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/12/28/world/philippines-orders-us-to-leave-strategic-navy-base-at-subic-bay.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>, accessed March 1, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> John P. McLaurin III, “U.S. Use of Philippine Military Bases,” pp. 20-22, (Fort Belvoir, VA: Defense Technical Information Center, 1990), <http://www.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a223290.pdf>, accessed January 3, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Jervis, *Why Intelligence Fails: Lessons from the Iranian Revolution and Iraq War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 163

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, 168.

# CHAPTER THREE

## *Bahrain: Another Potential Loss*

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### **The Saudi Influence: Bahrain's Big Brother**

Many argue that the role of Saudi Arabia would prevent Bahrain from falling into a state of political upheaval and unrest that could result in the loss of U.S. basing in Manama. Recently, a senior U.S. Naval Officer compared the importance of Bahrain to Saudi Arabia and stated, "Bahrain is to Saudi Arabia, as Hong Kong is to China."<sup>1</sup> In other words, the bond between the two countries is extremely strong, and their interests are closely intertwined. The implication was that under no circumstances would the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia cede control of Bahrain to anyone not aligned with the House of Saud.

Directly off the eastern Saudi coast, the King Fahd Causeway connects Bahrain to the mainland. The Causeway provides security and serves as a physical link between the Al-Khalifa family and the House of Saud. In fact, the Causeway was the link that allowed Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forces to enter Bahrain during the March 2011 protests. The Causeway also allows unimpeded travel for Saudi citizens to Bahrain for vacations and recreation.

Bahrain is a progressive Muslim country and offers numerous options in terms of restaurants, hotels, and entertainment. In fact, many Saudis travel to Bahrain on weekends to enjoy "luxuries" not readily available or that are forbidden in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Most recently, the cultural ties between the two ruling families strengthened further when the King of Bahrain's son married the daughter of the King of Saudi Arabia. However, the ties extend well beyond the royal families; Saudi Arabia has invested significantly in its neighbor and has a strong interest in maintaining security and stability in Bahrain. Saudi Arabia granted \$448 million to Bahrain as part of a greater \$2.5 billion pledge to fund development projects following the recent unrest.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, both ruling families in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are Sunni and share a common enemy- the Shia state of Iran. And in the eyes of Saudi and Bahraini leadership, there are few differences between Iranian Shia and the Arab Shia of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. While there has been a history of unrest and alleged subversive activity at Iranian behest, including a 1981 attempt at revolution by The Islamic Front for the Liberation of Bahrain, most Sunni Saudis and Bahrainis attribute legitimate Shia protests for better equality, improved government representation, and improved human rights to Iranian subversive activity.<sup>3</sup>

Numerous political, family, cultural, financial, and religious ties, plus a shared common enemy, closely align Saudi Arabia and Bahraini leadership. This strong relationship is further evidence that under no circumstances would a stable Saudi Arabia allow Bahrain to deteriorate to the point where the ruling family legitimacy is threatened. Consequently, Saudi Arabia carries significant influence with the Bahraini government.

## **Will Big Brother Remain Stable?**

The focus on Saudi Arabia's role in Bahrain assumes stability on both sides of the equation. If Saudi Arabia were destabilized or to experience unrest then all bets are off concerning future stability in Bahrain. To the same effect, a senior U.S. Naval Officer stated that "Saudi Arabia will never allow Bahrain to fall as long as Saudi Arabia remains stable."<sup>4</sup>

Should stability in Saudi Arabia be assumed when discussing Bahrain? Nassim Taleb, the author of *The Black Swan*, a book about rare events, writes that "Saudi Arabia is unstable like Egypt."<sup>5</sup> While the House of Saud has a long history of maintaining stability and overcoming political adversity, some noteworthy undercurrents in the Kingdom could ultimately destabilize the country and lead to additional unrest.

First and foremost, "40 percent of the 26 million citizens in Saudi Arabia are under the age of 15," and the country has "an unemployment rate of approximately 43 percent for Saudis between the ages of 20 and 24."<sup>6</sup> Poor economic conditions and high unemployment could lead to significant challenges in three or four years. Second, King Abdullah's advanced age creates uncertainty over the direction future leadership will take the country. Finally, sectarian divisions between Saudi Sunnis and Shia (approximately ten percent of the population) persist. Does Saudi Arabia risk instability because of discontent among the youth and a sectarian divide? Will the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia continue down a path of reform or revert back to its more conservative past? Bruce Riedel of The Brookings Institution writes how the Saudis have sought to stem internal and external vulnerabilities.

In recognition of their vulnerability the Saudi royals have spent over \$130 billion since the Arab Awakenings began to try to buy off dissenters at home. Abroad they have sent troops across the King Fahd Causeway to stifle revolution in Bahrain.<sup>7</sup>

The Sunni-Shia division is fueling much of the unrest in the region writes scholar Olivier Roy. A "Shia Scare" is being perpetuated that "pits Persian Shias against Arab Sunnis in which all Arab Shias are regarded as Arabic speaking Persians."<sup>8</sup> Some Saudi Shia have claimed to be victims of discrimination within their own country. Kevin Sullivan of *The Washington Post* recently profiled the situation: "Shia have demanded an

end to discrimination in employment – few top-level government jobs go to them. They want more freedom to build Shia mosques and religious community centres, which are banned in many areas. They want more development in towns that appear run-down and neglected. And they want the release of Shia political prisoners, many of whom have been held without charge or trial for months or years.”<sup>9</sup> Some think it is less a matter of if than *when* these sectarian divisions boil over.

These deep divisions emphasize that stability in Saudi Arabia cannot be assumed. If one accepts the premise that “as Saudi Arabia goes, then Bahrain will follow,” then political unrest in Saudi Arabia could be concurrent or shortly followed by unrest in Bahrain. Therefore, it’s only logical to conclude that development of a Plan B is absolutely prudent.

### **Playing the Odds – Not if, But When**

Considering current trends in Saudi Arabia and intermittent unrest in Bahrain, longterm trends also indicate that the odds of potentially losing access continue to grow. First, the demographics in Bahrain are approximately 35 percent Sunni and 65 percent Shia (the Al-Khalifa family is Sunni). Many Shia youth are unemployed and make up a large portion of those protesting for reform. Second, a lack of substantial democratic reforms leading to a constitutional monarchy continues to fuel discontent among the Bahraini Opposition. The speed and pace of democratic reform have not been sufficient to deflect criticism, which continues to breed discontent. Finally, the Bahraini government has been accused of utilizing violent tactics and methods when controlling the Opposition protests.

*How the Bahraini government handles democratic reforms will, in large part, determine the long term future and stability of the country. How the United States responds will determine if we maintain access in this critical island state.*

In short, the outcome remains uncertain. In November 2012, Bahrain revoked the citizenship of 31 dissidents, including former members of the Bahraini parliament and the political opposition, due to security concerns.<sup>10</sup> Many viewed the Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry as a promising step toward democratic reform, yet critics argue that Bahrain’s compliance with the Commission’s findings and its implementation of recommended reforms and improvements have been extremely slow. In January 2013, King Hamad invited representatives of the political societies and independent members of the political community to resume a national dialogue.<sup>11</sup> These actions are promising, but reforms are still progressing at a very slow rate. *Many fear that the Bahraini youth will grow weary of slow reform and begin to radicalize.* While the hope is that this will not occur, the longer it takes Bahrain to implement reforms the likelier it becomes. The important takeaway is that America needs to examine all potential crisis situations and develop plans that prepare for a worst case scenario.

*Do U.S. interests in Bahrain result in turning a blind eye?*

This brings us to the United States and recent reactions to the Opposition protests. U.S. foreign policy is in a quandary; the Kingdom of Bahrain has been one of the United States' closest allies in the region for years. At the same time, the U.S. must decide to what extent it should encourage democratic reforms but avoid jeopardizing its close relationship with the Al-Khalifa family, which could undermine security interests or harm relations with the Saudis. This close relationship with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain is the reason the State Department has only applied moderate pressure for reforms.

Many critics proclaim that U.S. actions and messages to Bahrain haven't gone far enough. They argue that tacit support of the ruling family ignores the will of the Bahraini people and does not reflect the United States' core values. Maryam al-Khawaja, acting president of the Center for Human Rights in Bahrain, commented concerning U.S. policy.

The US has done nothing. I don't anticipate the US or UK changing their international policies anytime soon due to the geopolitical interest they have with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and other countries in the region.<sup>12</sup>

Critics assert that the United States turns a blind eye to any wrongdoing by the Al-Khalifa family because of national security interests in the country. For example, "total military sales to Bahrain since 2000 total 1.4 billion."<sup>13</sup> It is true that the United States is vested in Bahrain, but critics further contend that the U.S. government has not fully backed democratic reforms because of its military presence in-country. The United States has halted only the sale of defense articles that could be used for crowd control.<sup>14</sup> However, the sale of any military articles is interpreted by many as support for an autocratic regime that results in the erosion of American moral high ground. While this analysis is certainly disputed, it is clear that the United States should view democratic reforms, wherever they occur, as in its best interest.

## **Do Reforms Undermine U.S. Interests?**

Will the U.S. government put additional significant pressure on the Al-Khalifa family to reform? If so, what does reform mean for the United States? Many argue that the consequences of supporting the Opposition, where the Shia majority has greater power, could potentially result in the removal of the U.S. military presence from Bahrain. This is the leading concern among military leaders with regard to greater power for the Shia majority.



The Opposition states they do not want the U.S. military to leave Bahrain.<sup>15</sup> However, the end state of a Shia-dominant constitutional monarchy remains unknown. Many U.S. leaders fear that ceding additional power to the Shia majority could result in a Bahraini government that no longer has shared interests with the United States and could ultimately require U.S. forces to depart. The critics concerns are not entirely unfounded, and they point to “democratic reforms” in Egypt and Gaza as examples where reforms didn’t exactly align with U.S. interests. In *Front Page Magazine*, Nichole Hungerford describes the frequent confusion between democracy and the freedoms that “democratic” governments ultimately espouse.

Thus the paradox of democracy in the Middle East is really not as difficult as it may seem. It arises from a naïve conflation of “democracy” and “freedom.” While it’s true that America should support free, civil societies, which do tend to engender global peace, not every populist movement is a free movement. Many – if not most – of the so-called “democratic revolutions” in the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been fascist movements which have hijacked and perverted the lexicon of freedom. All of the Communists called their massacring police states “peoples democracies;” the theocracy of Iran, which executes Islamic deviants, was installed through another such “democratic revolution.” Don’t be fooled. Democracy for these movements is only a means. Not an end.<sup>16</sup>

The uncertainty of democratic reforms in the Middle East forces many U.S. policymakers to approach Bahrain with the mindset that it’s better to deal with a familiar and predictable government (the Al-Khalifa family) vice an unknown entity (the Bahraini Opposition). Simultaneously, the United States has a moral obligation to strongly encourage democratic reforms and American values, particularly where we have such an influential relationship and significant investment. If the United States is not seen encouraging democratic reforms, it risks losing credibility in the eyes of the Bahraini Shia and the greater Middle East.

Finally, to whom are the Bahraini Shia loyal? This is a critical question that is essential to understanding whether greater Shia participation in governance would undermine U.S. interests. On the one hand, if Bahraini Shia loyalties lie with Iran, then U.S. interests would be undermined. On the other, if the Shia are predominantly loyal to Bahrain and truly desire greater reform and a voice for all Bahrainis, then the U.S. should not fear incremental change. The Bahraini Independent Commission Inquiry has articulated the religious beliefs and loyalties of many Bahrainis that help understand their intentions.

A minority of Shia, called the Ajam, are of Persian descent. Most Shia in Bahrain belong to the Ithna teachings of a broad range of religious guides or taqlid, who are eminent Shia scholars who provide guidance and leadership to the community on theological matters. Many follow the guidance of Ali Khamenei of the Qum School. Politically, the Grand Ayatollah espouses the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih, which grants the religious establishment supreme authority over matters of both faith and state. Other Bahraini Shia follow the guidance Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani of the Najaf School in Iraq, which does not subscribe to the doctrine of Wilayat al-Faqih. Other jurisprudential schools that are

followed by that of Imam Mohammed Al Shirazi and Lebanese Ayatollah Mohammad Hussein Fadhlallah, neither of whom calls for the application of Wilayat al Faqih. This is particularly the case among the young, affluent and educated.<sup>17</sup>

To summarize, only a small minority of Bahraini Shias are Persian, while most are Arab. Most Bahraini Shia are not calling for Wilayat al-Faqih (complete religious authority over the state). There are followers of Ali Khamenei; however, this group represents a small minority of Bahraini Shia. Bahraini Shia loyalties lie with many different religious leaders, which limit Iran's influence. The limited influence, the rejection of Wilayat al-Faqih, and loyalty to different religious leaders should provide some reassurance to the skeptic that the majority of Bahraini Shia are not looking to make Bahrain an Iranian puppet.

There can be no doubt that Iran seeks to exploit the tenuous situation in Bahrain, but it will only succeed in exploiting the situation if democratic reforms stall and domestic unrest continues. *Clearly, the biggest threat to U.S. access is not democratic reform that leads to a constitutional monarchy, but a lack of reform that result in continued instability, unrest, and the empowerment of radical leadership.*

## **Without Encouraging Reform, the U.S. Could Lose Favor**

The United States could find itself in a position where it's politically unpopular to continue supporting the ruling family. Consider a scenario in which tensions between the Al-Khalifa family and the Shia opposition increases in severity and the Bahraini government uses extremely harsh and violent methods to quell the unrest. If the United States does little to condemn the crackdown, it could be viewed as complicit in the ruling family's violent response.

In their chapter from the compilation *The Arab Awakening*, Stephen Grand, Shadi Hamid, Kenneth Pollack, and Sarah Yerkes speak to this possibility.

If the United States is not seen as pushing for reform in a country with military ties to the United States, a great many people will assume that behind the scenes it is providing that country with military support to help the leadership resist calls for reform. Whether the United States likes it or not, that is the reality of the region. Thus, continuing to provide military aid and maintaining American military bases in a country where the regime refuses to address the legitimate grievances of its citizens has a cost for the United States.<sup>18</sup>

In this situation, the United States could be forced to remove its immediate footprint. But most policy makers in the Department of Defense believe that the United States' strategic partnership with Bahrain dictates that Middle East stability will trump calls for any military withdrawal. Again, policymakers insist solely on Plan A, therefore, the U.S. is criticized for a policy where little is done by the U.S. to promote reform.



## Three Possibilities - Reform, Repression, or Revolution

Finally, a strong case could be made that if significant democratic reforms are not achieved and the Shia majority does not gain a greater voice, then the chance of a Shia revolution will increase substantially. The danger in this situation is that once revolution starts, the U.S. has very little control over the outcome. Undoubtedly, America needs a stable Bahrain that is aligned with U.S. interests. America has a strong history of advocating for democracy around the globe, and for the U.S.-Bahrain partnership to continue to be successful, democratic reforms in Bahrain must be part of the stability discussion. Failure to address them could ultimately result in a new government or a political environment that is no longer hospitable to a U.S. military presence.

Colin Kahl, a Senior Fellow at the Center for New American Security, succinctly breaks down the possible outcomes in a potential Bahrain crisis.

Three things could happen in Bahrain. First, open dialogue with the ruling family and opposition could occur where genuine reform ensues that eases political tensions and restores order. Second, the ruling family could engage in another violent and oppressive crackdown against the Shia majority and the U.S. turns a blind eye. Third, a violent revolution could occur where the Shia majority overthrows the ruling family and an entirely new government comes to power. In options two and three it's highly unlikely that U.S. basing in Bahrain would survive.<sup>19</sup>

Considering these potential outcomes, creating a viable Plan B with basing alternatives is the necessary decision.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Navy senior leader, Bahrain Discussion, speech given at Center for a New American Security, Washington, DC, November 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Leila Hatoum, "Saudi Arabia Grants \$448M to Bahrain for Development Projs - BNA," *Zawya*, January 2, 2013, [http://www.zawya.com/story/Saudi\\_Arabia\\_grants\\_USD448m\\_to\\_Bahrain\\_for\\_development\\_projects\\_BNA-ZW20130102000004/](http://www.zawya.com/story/Saudi_Arabia_grants_USD448m_to_Bahrain_for_development_projects_BNA-ZW20130102000004/), accessed February 1, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Michael "Mickey" Segall, "Why Iran Is Pushing for a Shia Victory In Bahrain," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, June 2, 2011, <http://jcpa.org/article/why-iran-is-pushing-for-a-shiite-victory-in-bahrain>, accessed January 2, 2013.

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Abelsky and Henry Meyer, "Taleb Says Saudi Arabia Is Unstable," Bloomberg, February 3, 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=aGcbn4L9WKYI>, accessed January 2, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Bruce Riedel, "Revolution in Riyadh" in *Big Bets & Black Swans: A Presidential Briefing Book*, The Brookings Institution, January 17, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2013/01/revolution-in-riyadh>, accessed May 13, 2013.

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<sup>9</sup> Kevin Sullivan, "Saudi Arabia's Secret Arab Spring," *The Washington Post*, October 23, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/saudi-arabias-secret-arab-spring-8223550.html>, accessed January 3, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Kareen Fahim, "In Crackdown, Bahrain Revokes the Citizenship of 31 People," *The New York Times*, November 7, 2012, [http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/world/middleeast/bahrain-revokes-citizenship-of-31-people-in-bid-to-quell-dissidents.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/08/world/middleeast/bahrain-revokes-citizenship-of-31-people-in-bid-to-quell-dissidents.html?_r=1&), accessed January 3, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Amena Bakr, "Bahrain King invites Opposition to restart talks," Reuters, January 21, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/21/us-bahrain-king-talks-idUSBRE90K0W220130121>, accessed March 6, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Cora Engelbrecht, "Bahrain's inconvenient revolution grows impatient," *Global Post*, May 13, 2013, <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatches/globalpost-blogs/rights/bahrain-inconvenient-revolution-grows-impatient>, accessed May 14, 2013.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Relations with Bahrain," Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, August 28, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm>, accessed on January 21, 2013.

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<sup>15</sup> Khalil Marzooq, spokesperson for National Islamic Society, interview by author, The Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, February 15, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Nichole Hungerford, "If We Lose Bahrain," *FrontPage Mag*, February 18, 2011, <http://www.frontpagemag.com/2011/nicole-hungerford/if-we-lose-bahrain>, accessed November 26, 2012.

<sup>17</sup> Mahmoud Sharif Bassouni, "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, December 10, 2011, p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Stephen Grand, Shadi Hamid, Kenneth Pollack, et al, "Making Reform Credible: The Critical Piece of the Puzzle," in *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution Press, 2011), p. 156.

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# CHAPTER FOUR

## *What Happens if the U.S. Loses Access?*

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### **What Would the U.S. Lose?**

To say that Bahrain holds immense strategic and operational value is an understatement. *Functionally and geographically, the small island state serves as the strategic centerpiece for U.S. maritime strategy, security, and stability in the Persian Gulf.* As mentioned earlier, the base serves numerous purposes. First and foremost it serves as home to U.S. Naval Forces Central Command and Fifth Fleet. The Fifth Fleet Area of Operations is immense and covers approximately “2.5 million square miles with three critical choke points: the Suez Canal, the Bab al Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz.”<sup>1</sup>

The value of its close proximity to the Strait of Hormuz cannot be overemphasized. The short distance to the Strait acts as a deterrent to Iran, which has threatened to close this critical waterway. Lying only 300 miles to the southwest of the Strait, U.S. and coalition ships can routinely patrol the area to ensure safe passage for international maritime traffic on a daily basis. These routine patrols are essential; over a fifth of the world’s oil supply passes through the Strait each year, and if Iran ever attempted to close the critical chokepoint, the price of oil would skyrocket and global markets would plummet. Finally, basing in Bahrain sustains U.S. and coalition naval forces operating in international waters of the Persian Gulf, particularly off the coast of Iran, and provides the United States Navy with a convenient logistics and maintenance hub.

### **Loss of a Long Term Ally**

The partnership between the United States and the Kingdom of Bahrain has been extremely successful throughout the years. This strong relationship was evident when the U.S. designated Bahrain a major non-NATO ally in 2002. The U.S. Navy and the Bahrain Defense Force routinely operate together and the relationship between the two services is close and cooperative. According to the Department of State’s Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs fact sheet, Bahrain and the United States signed a ten-year defense pact in October 1991 and again in October 2001, and recently renewed the pact in December 2011. Bahraini forces contributed troops for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan and were “the first Arab state to lead a Coalition Task Force patrolling the Gulf and has supported the counter-piracy mission with a deployment of its flagship.”<sup>2</sup>

Economically, the relationship between the U.S. and Bahrain is vibrant according to the State Department.

The U.S.-Bahrain Free Trade Agreement went in effect on August 1, 2006 and is generating increased U.S. commercial interest. Bilateral trade between the U.S. and Bahrain has increased since the signing of the Free Trade Agreement, exceeding \$1.7 billion USD in 2011. U.S. exports to Bahrain include machinery, aircraft, vehicles, and agricultural products. U.S. imports from Bahrain include fertilizers, aluminum, textiles, apparel, and organic chemicals.<sup>3</sup>

When compared to other host governments in the Middle East, it would be challenging to find a government with closer ties and as supportive as Bahrain's.

## **Warfighting Readiness: Maintaining and Equipping the Fleet**

Maintenance and logistics also make Bahrain critical to naval forces stationed in the region. Logistically, Commander Task Force Five Three (CTF 53) is responsible for maintaining all logistics for the entire Fifth Fleet Operating Area. CTF 53 is headquartered in Bahrain and moves parts, personnel, fuel, ammunition, and mail for over 20 ships deployed away from their homeport.<sup>4</sup>

Naval forces need fuel, provisions, ammunition and parts to sustain operations afloat. Most replenishment vessels restock and refuel in Bahrain in order to facilitate underway replenishments. There are other replenishment ports such as Fujairah and Jebel Ali, United Arab Emirates, and Muscat, Oman where oilers can dock to receive fuel and goods; however, most supplies are routed through Bahrain. All logistic movements, however, are coordinated by the Task Force 53 organization in Bahrain. CTF 53 also has a dual responsibility with another critical logistics organization, Military Sealift Command Central (MSCCENT). MSCCENT is one of five Military Sealift Command operational commands worldwide and is headquartered in Manama, Bahrain. MSCCENT ships move combat cargo, fuel, and supplies for all U.S. forces operating in the Middle East. CTF 53 and MSCCENT are technically two different commands run by the same commander to better coordinate the huge logistics requirements necessary to sustain operations in the Fifth Fleet.<sup>5</sup>

## **Robust Infrastructure**

Bahrain's infrastructure is one of the best in terms of supporting forward deployed ships, aircraft, and servicemen. Mina-Al-Salman Pier permanently berths and supports numerous American ships, to include five Cyclone Class Coastal Patrol Craft and eight Avenger Class Mine Counter Measure Ships. Additionally, the pier accommodates and services numerous deployed Aegis Cruisers, Arleigh Burke Destroyers, Submarines, Military Sealift Command Vessels, and coalition ships. In fact, it's one of the few port facilities in the Persian Gulf dredged deep enough to berth the

11-meter navigational draft required by many U.S. combatants. The other deep water port in Bahrain is Khalifa Bin Salman, one of Bahrain's newest port facilities and one of the few berths in the Persian Gulf (aside from Jebel Ali, UAE) with a turning basin depth of 15 meters designed to accommodate the 12 meter navigational draft desired for U.S. Aircraft Carriers and Amphibious ships.

Moreover, Naval Ship Support Activity Norfolk, Detachment Bahrain utilizes local facilities when necessary and leads repair efforts for U.S. ships deployed to the Persian Gulf. "The Arab Shipbuilding and Repair Yard Company (ASRY) is the repair facility in Bahrain that operates a repair yard with 500,000 Dead Weight Tonnage (DWT) graving dock, two floating docks with the capacity to lift vessels of 33,000 and 30,000 tons displacement (respectively) and four Very Large Crude Carrier (VLCC) repair berths."<sup>6</sup>

Finally, the Bahrain International Airport Military Terminal handles a large portion of military logistics flights in and out of the Middle East. Weekly logistics flights, coordinated by CTF 53, are made to ships operating in the Persian Gulf. Service members are flown in and out of Bahrain International Airport Military Terminal as they are routed to their ultimate destinations in the Horn of Africa, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. Finally, Isa Air Base serves as a hub for coalition aircraft operating in the region and as a divert airfield for carrier aircraft operating in the Persian Gulf. Without these critical air bases, air operations supporting U.S. and coalition forces in the Persian Gulf and Fifth Fleet Area of Operations would be severely limited.

## **Key Command and Control Center**

As discussed earlier, Bahrain is also home to Fifth Fleet, Naval Central Command and the supporting staffs. "At any given time Fifth Fleet controls over twenty U.S. and coalition ships deployed in their area of responsibility."<sup>7</sup> The command and control function for the entire theater of operations is controlled from the headquarters physically located on Naval Support Activity (NSA) Bahrain. The facilities and infrastructure to accommodate such a large staff is immense, covering between 60 and 100 acres. For this reason, the base is often referred to as the "busiest 60 acres in the world." Additionally, NSA Bahrain is home to U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, Destroyer Squadron Fifty, and three Combined Maritime Forces and their supporting staffs. Command elements such as these have an incredibly high volume of information and bandwidth necessary to conduct daily operations with multiple operational commands over a vast operational area.

## **A Model "Integrated" Community**

Perhaps one of the most important but least discussed benefits of basing rights in Bahrain is the relationship between the U.S. Navy and the local Bahraini community.

Bahrain is currently the only U.S. base in the Middle East where large numbers of active duty servicemen and women are integrated in the local Muslim population. Even during recent protests in Bahrain, the local population was generally supportive of the U.S. presence on the island, and no military service members were targeted.

While safety and security can never be assured, many military members often comment on “feeling safer” in Bahrain than when back home in the United States. In fact, the Kingdom of Bahrain has successfully mitigated security risks and the majority of U.S. military personnel and their families thoroughly enjoy their tour of duty in Bahrain. The military pay and compensation is generous due to Bahrain’s designation as a “combat zone,” and military pay is not taxed. Often, servicemen volunteer for an additional follow-on tour after experiencing the outstanding quality of life.

The Bahraini community offers a mix of local and Western lifestyle with quality housing, shopping, and numerous restaurants. Additionally, there is an outstanding Department of Defense school where American children study alongside children from the Middle East and Europe. There is no other base in the Middle East where large numbers of U.S. servicemen are integrated with the Muslim culture and community without significant problems. Qatar recently changed its policy to allow U.S. families to be stationed with their military sponsors; however, families are not present in large numbers. At other major U.S. installations in the Middle East, forces often live away from the local population and are isolated from the surrounding culture.

While not perfect, this integrated community is a model of cooperation. Its loss would send a sign of weakness and faltering U.S. support to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. This community serves as a “shining light” to the greater Middle East of American support, trust in the Bahraini people, and American families’ successful integration into a Muslim society.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Navy, “U.S. Fifth Fleet,” last modified January 10, 2013, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/about.html>, accessed January 10, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Bahrain,” Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, August 28, 2012, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm>, accessed January 21, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Commander Logistics Forces (COMLOGFORNAVCENT) Commander, Task Force 53 (CTF 53),” Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/agency/navy/ctf-53.htm>, accessed December 12, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> U.S. Navy, “Military Sealift Command Central,” last modified January 10, 2013, <http://www.msc.navy.mil/mscscnt/default.asp?page=org>, accessed January 10, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> “Naval Ship Repair Facilities Bahrain,” Global Security, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/facility/bahrain.htm>, accessed January 21, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> “US Fifth Fleet,” last modified January 10, 2013 at <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/about.html>.



# CHAPTER FIVE

## *Policy Responses*

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### **Plan for the Worst, Shape Policy for the Best**

As we've seen the scenarios for loss of access might range from unrest, regime transition, or in turn, a US unwillingness to continue in the midst of unrest or regime repression. Regardless of the exact political circumstances and events that could lead to a loss of U.S. strategic basing in Bahrain, it's obvious that the situation is extremely complex and losing access is a possibility. Contingency plans for permanent displacement is something the United States Navy should be prepared to execute.

Contingencies are what U.S. military planners do best and, if messaged properly, should not detract from the support and close friendship with the Bahraini government. Assuming that the United States will not lose Bahrain is not a sound course of action. Understanding the political landscape and thoroughly planning for the worst case scenario is essential for optimal force posture, fleet readiness, and long-term stability. Thorough planning in previous cases where access was threatened could have led to a smoother transition from Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Station in the Philippines. Similarly, a better understanding of the geopolitical situation in pre-revolutionary Iran might have led to a less adversarial post-revolution environment.

While losing Bahrain is not a foregone conclusion, the remainder of the discussion assumes that the United States loses access or is forced to reduce the footprint ashore and investigates viable alternatives as a hedge strategy against the possibility of repression or revolution.

### **Where would the United States Relocate if Bahrain were Lost Tomorrow?**

If the unlikely occurs and the United States loses basing in Bahrain tomorrow, options for military planners would be limited. *There is really no "optimal" alternative where the U.S. could immediately shift and still provide the same capabilities and support for the fleet.* This should give pause to anyone calling for the immediate removal of U.S. forces because of a lack of reform or slow pace of political change.

The only other port facility in the Persian Gulf that could currently support deep draft combatants would be Jebel Ali, United Arab Emirates. U.S. Navy combatants pull into Jebel Ali routinely for port visits to Dubai, to replenish stores, and conduct limited

maintenance; however, no ships are supported or permanently based out of Jebel Ali, and it could not duplicate the services and facilities the United States currently receives in Manama. It remains uncertain whether the United Arab Emirates would be willing to accommodate such a large increase in permanently based U.S. forces. Today in the United Arab Emirates, there is no existing status of forces agreement (SOFA), which limits service member presence in-country. Additionally, U.S. ships must wait for berths to become available when pulling into port. Jebel Ali is a commercial port and with ship berths at a premium, the more profitable choice is to host commercial vessels. Consequently, U.S. vessels do not always have top priority. Additionally, U.S. fleet schedulers have complete access to Bahraini port facilities, and consequently are able to readily respond to the dynamic demands of the fleet.<sup>1</sup>

### **Sea Base: An Acceptable Substitute?**

Sea basing is the ability of the U.S. Navy to project power and operate from a group of ships afloat (sea base) in international waters without attaining a host nation's permission or maintaining a large footprint ashore. Yet, when given the option of a sea base versus permanent basing ashore, the optimal choice will almost always be basing ashore. Why? Operating and sustaining a combat ready fleet requires extensive support ashore. The U.S. logistics effort located in Bahrain contributes immeasurably to U.S. fleet operational readiness. Ships are maintenance intensive and require routine and emergent repairs to maintain combat readiness. In today's austere fiscal environment, where ship maintenance is often deferred or scaled back, a robust logistics and maintenance infrastructure in a forward deployed location is all the more essential.

Retired Navy Admiral and former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair has advocated moving back aboard a command and control ship similar to the arrangement the USN had in the early 1990s. He argues that operations should be sustained from a sea base afloat and contends that sea basing – moving to a command, control, communications, computers and intelligence (C4I) ship off shore (or moored in port) – will help solve the problems in Bahrain. He advocates that a move afloat demonstrates America's displeasure with alleged human rights abuses but still shows a commitment to the country of Bahrain and allows for a quick departure should the unrest escalate.<sup>2</sup>

However, keeping naval forces overseas for a sustained period of time is no simple task and wouldn't be easily accomplished solely from a sea base. Whenever a sea base is utilized there is little room to accommodate everyone. An Amphibious Command Ship (LCC) has the capacity for approximately 930 personnel and could only accommodate the operational planning staff. However, the majority of 5,000 service members stationed in Bahrain would still be required to reside ashore.



Moving to a sea base in Bahrain might very well become the de facto Plan B if unrest continues to escalate. The primary benefit of a move to a C4I ship is that the Fifth Fleet staff could shift to operations afloat in a relatively short amount of time. While moving to a command and control ship would allow for continuation of operations if unrest escalated, permanently shifting to a C4I platform and reducing the footprint could further destabilize the situation and carries unintended consequences.

If the U.S. is reluctant to develop basing alternatives because it could be viewed as wavering in its support of Bahrain, then bringing a sea base in-country could be viewed with equal negativity. No matter how such a decision is framed, *Bahrain would ultimately see this move as the first step of an American withdrawal*. Operating from a sea base could reduce exposure between the U.S. Navy and the Bahraini Defense Force (BDF), thereby creating distrust and eroding the strong relationship between the two organizations. Second, in Iran, the arrival of a sea base could be viewed as provocative preparation for future conflict in the Persian Gulf. Finally, the Bahraini people would view the move as foundering U.S. support. The optic of waning U.S. support could embolden extremist elements on both sides of the issue and promote further unrest. Because the moderate Opposition prefers that the United States remain in the country, a move afloat could be interpreted as a closing window for reform. The perception of a shortened timeline could also prompt a push for reform, ultimately rushing the process and producing additional protests and unrest. Since the Opposition believes that U.S. forces have a moderating effect on the Bahraini government's posture and response to protestors, removing the American military presence potentially reduces this moderating effect.

Conducting afloat operations aboard a C4I platform such as an aircraft carrier (CVN) or (LCC) ship, in addition, has deep limitations due to communications bandwidth required for operations as large as NAVCENT and supporting staffs. Slow web speed aboard warships has been profiled in *Wired Magazine*. "Bandwidth limitations are a challenge — especially as newer intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance gear comes online to give the fleet more persistent pictures of what's over the horizon."<sup>3</sup> While LCCs are fitted with the best communications suite in the fleet, there are still limitations when operating at sea compared to operations ashore.

Sea basing also assumes maritime superiority (conducting operations afloat without significant interference from the opposing force) in a relatively benign area of operations. Operating in contested battle space with one or two primary C4I platforms against a credible and determined maritime threat could jeopardize the success of an entire operation. Operating in a contested environment assumes greater risk and requires combatants on station to provide protection.

Operating from a sea base in the littorals of the Persian Gulf presents unique challenges when compared to a protected port facility. Maintaining a base ashore

within the Persian Gulf is essential considering the looming threat of hostilities with Iran. Once operating inside the Persian Gulf, it would be highly undesirable for a U.S. combatant to exit the Strait of Hormuz to enter port for repairs or maintenance. Maintaining a protected port facility within the confines of the Persian Gulf becomes essential given the reduced operational environment in the Strait of Hormuz and the inherent vulnerability of any ship transiting through this critical chokepoint with the threat of mines, anti-ship cruise missiles, and small boat attacks.

Sea basing is ideal for short term contingency operations and in situations where access is prohibited or denied. However, when considering a sea base in Bahrain, the benefits from short term continuity of operations need to be carefully weighed against the many negatives.

## **Bahrain Liabilities**

Aside from the slow pace of reform and the ongoing unrest, Bahrain is not without its liabilities. Important to this discussion of Plan B alternatives is recognizing that the many attributes that make Bahrain invaluable also present the greatest risks.

Bahrain is a centralized military hub in the Middle East and presents a target rich environment for any adversary. Iran undoubtedly has the base targeted with ballistic missiles in the event of future hostilities. The presence of other U.S. dependents in-country also poses a significant vulnerability. While the U.S. would almost certainly move families back to the continental United States if tensions became too heated, American civilians are a liability nonetheless. Secondly, the centralized logistics, maintenance, and port facilities are a significant target.

In short, maintaining a majority of the U.S. maritime footprint in one geographic area creates a center of gravity an adversary would undoubtedly exploit.<sup>4</sup> While there is risk associated with many U.S. bases around the globe, few other U.S. bases are located in a region where tensions could quickly ignite into a regional conflict. Is the convenience of supporting forces out of Bahrain worth the associated risks?

## **Why Not Base Forces Solely in the United States?**

Some argue that the United States should “cut its losses” and base U.S. forces back home. While this is attractive in terms of costs, arguments that the United States military could be equally effective when based at home are problematic. Some of the biggest drawbacks with basing forces out of the U.S. are delayed response time (sailing at 16 knots from San Diego, CA to Bahrain, close to 7200 miles, would take approximately 19 days), decreased strategic influence of forces, diminished deterrence or stabilizing presence, and degraded security and reassurance to partners and allies. Loren Thompson of the Lexington Institute argues that the U.S. presence in the Middle

East will be rendered obsolete based on predictions of future U.S. energy independence.<sup>5</sup> However, a “U.S. only based strategy” is short-sighted and isolationist. This strategy fails to recognize that in a global economy, the world depends on Middle East stability and the free flow of energy in and out of the Persian Gulf via the maritime domain.

*Saudi Arabia and the other GCC allies need the assurance and confidence that the United States will maintain a long term security presence in the Middle East. Amid the U.S. pivot to Asia and future predictions of future energy independence, there is concern that the U.S. will greatly reduce its presence in the Middle East.*

Developing alternatives that maintain access and ensure a long term presence, however, is in the best interest of the U.S. and GCC allies. In the end, basing forces only in the U.S. breaks faith with Middle East partners, emboldens Iran, destabilizes the region, and reinforces a longtime stereotype that Americans don’t stand by their friends.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Military planner, interview by author, Pentagon, Washington, DC, October 25, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Dennis C. Blair, “False trade-off on Bahrain,” *The Hill’s Congress Blog* (blog), *The Hill*, February 12, 2013, <http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/282337-false-trade-off-on-bahrain>, accessed February 20, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer Ackerman, “On Navy Warships, the Web Slows to a Crawl,” *Danger Room* (blog), *Wired*, February 8, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/dangerroom/2012/02/navy-internet/>, accessed May 14, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Daly, e-mail message to author, May 4, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Loren Thompson, “What Happens when America no longer needs Middle East oil?” *Forbes*, December 3, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/lorenthompson/2012/12/03/what-happens-when-america-no-longer-needs-middle-east-oil/>, accessed May 14, 2013.

# CHAPTER SIX

## *Recommendations*

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### **Plan B Alternatives**

While replacing the capabilities of Bahrain couldn't occur overnight, understanding what's available and developing a Plan B is necessary to provide U.S. planners additional options and provide redundancy and dispersal for maritime forces. Considering no immediate alternatives exist, initiating the conversation and expanding brokering agreements with Gulf partners is imperative to ensure future access.

Strategically, alternative bases in the Persian Gulf are preferable to a location beyond the Gulf. A senior U.S. General stated that the only place to relocate would be west of the Suez.<sup>1</sup> However, a survey of ports inside the Gulf reveals there are two viable alternatives where the U.S. could develop arrangements similar to the current accommodations in Bahrain. New Doha Port, Qatar and Shuaiba, Kuwait are the strongest candidates for Plan B locations. Outside the Gulf, Diego Garcia, Duqm, Oman and Fujairah, Oman provide additional options; however, they are not optimal because of the required transit through the Strait of Hormuz to access the Persian Gulf.

**New Doha Port, Qatar.** New Doha Port is the best alternative port location. Qatar is developing and constructing this new port and plans to begin operations in 2016.

Designing Plan B around New Doha Port is practical and makes sense because the port is under construction, and the United States could broker arrangements whereby U.S. combatants could be serviced, replenished, or permanently stationed at the facility. Stationing naval forces in Qatar is quite feasible because a defense pact with the government already exists and the Qataris have been extremely accommodating when hosting the U.S. military. Qatar is home to Al-Udeid Air Base and the forward headquarters for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and United States Air Force Command (USAF).

Since the New Doha Port project construction is ongoing, infrastructure could be negotiated to accommodate the required logistics and maintenance facilities necessary to service combatants and support ships. The dredging for the port was recently contracted and plans call for the deepest port in the world.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, if the main channel and pier berths are dredged as planned, then accommodating U.S. combatants will not be an issue. Additionally, air logistics out of Al-Udeid Air Base or Doha International Airport could replicate the capacity of Bahrain International Airport.

Current plans have the New Doha Port accommodating 4,000 personnel from the Qatari Navy and visiting Navies. The base also plans to offer technical support, comprehensive logistic facilities, material support, and recreational services.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. military plans to eventually station forces in country in the future, plans that were mentioned by the U.S. Ambassador to Qatar while speaking at the Qatar-U.S. friendship reception: "...we look forward to bringing American military families to Qatar and deepening the relationships between our peoples."<sup>4</sup>

According to Christopher Blanchard from the Congressional Research Service, the relationship between U.S. and Qatari governments and militaries is strong. Since the first Gulf War the United States has expanded interaction and involvement with the Qatari government in many different facets. Sheik Hamad has begun defense cooperation initiatives in addition to political, economic, and educational reforms.<sup>5</sup> The Qatari government is stable and growing economically. However, like in Bahrain, there have been human rights concerns. "While there have not been mass protests, the country is not without its issues. Most of the alleged human rights violations involve human trafficking, forced labor, poor working conditions and restrictions on freedom of the press, freedom to assemble and right to a fair trial."<sup>6</sup> In reality, it is doubtful that any alternative country will have a spotless record in terms of human rights abuses and democratic reforms. But, despite these shortcomings, the New Doha Port is a leading candidate for Plan B because it offers the most in terms of maritime facilities, capacity, and a supportive host government.

**Shuaiba Port, Kuwait.** Shuaiba is Kuwait's second major port and another good candidate for Plan B. It is strategically located in the Persian Gulf, approximately 33 miles south of Kuwait City, and is the only port in Kuwait with the depths necessary to support U.S. combatants (minimum of 12 meters) such as CVNs, Cruisers (CG), and Destroyers (DDG). The port handles commercial traffic, containers, and oil tankers and has 20 commercial and container berths.<sup>7</sup> The maximum draft for visiting ships is 12.5 meters; however the oil pier has a depth of 16 meters.<sup>8</sup> Additional dredging projects and construction of a maintenance infrastructure ashore would need to occur in order to support a CVN, large deck amphibious ship, CG, or a DDG.

On the diplomatic side, U.S. relations with the ruling Al-Sabah family are extremely good. According to a Congressional Research Service report on Kuwait by Kenneth Katzman, Kuwait played a major role in three wars: the Iran-Iraq War, the Persian Gulf War, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. In each of these conflicts, Kuwait went to great lengths to accommodate U.S. forces. Therefore, in September 1991, the United States and Kuwait signed their first ten-year defense pact and SOFA. In September 2001 the pact was renewed for another ten years.<sup>9</sup> It is currently up for renewal and expected to get approved. Military decision makers feel the Kuwaiti government is a gracious host, and generally very supportive of U.S. interests.

However, there are political concerns in Kuwait that need to be addressed as well. According to Katzman,

“...the Kuwaiti political system has been in turmoil since 2006, and is still deteriorating in 2012. The disputes produced five dissolutions of the National Assembly and new elections since 2006, the latest of which occurred on October 8, 2012, requiring new elections that were held on December 1, 2012. During 2011-2012, there were relatively small demonstrations in Kuwait by opposition groups over official corruption, security force brutality, citizenship eligibility, and other issues. However, protests expanded significantly in late 2012 to challenge Sabah regime efforts to shape the December 1, 2012 elections to its advantage.”<sup>10</sup>

Another negative involves perceived environmental concerns among those previously stationed in the area. Because all the oil refinery towers and chemical plants are in the port vicinity, troops who were stationed at Camp Spearhead in Shuaiba during the Iraq War called it “Camp Cancer.”<sup>11</sup> This slang reference should not detract from its value as a strong and viable alternative. A distinction should be made between living in a tent near an industrial area and permanently stationing combatants, and building permanent headquarters and living quarters in an area. Secondly, almost all ports in the Persian Gulf are located in the vicinity of industrial facilities, so ruling out this location based on proximity to industrial areas and chemical plants alone is unrealistic. Finally, U.S. troops have never been integrated in the local community when stationed in Kuwait.<sup>12</sup> While permanently stationing dependents could be negotiated, the current agreement does not allow family to accompany the service member. But, despite any negatives, Shuaiba, Kuwait remains another strong candidate for Plan B. It offers a robust maritime facility that could be modified to meet the needs of the fleet and a strong host government with a long history of cooperation with the United States.

## **Maintain Alliances, Develop Viable Alternatives**

Does development of these alternatives and future force diversification further destabilize Bahrain? Does it destabilize the region? Withdrawing U.S. forces from Bahrain would definitely create a vacuum, forfeit U.S. influence, and invite further political unrest. However, developing strategic alternatives and contingency plans with other GCC partners, particularly Kuwait and Qatar, shouldn't be considered out of the norm or detract from the United States' close friendship with Bahrain.

Alternatives are prudent from a strategic perspective. If messaged properly, developing alternatives accompanied with a message of renewed commitment to the strong U.S.-Bahraini partnership should have little impact. *However, if alternatives are developed with the sole purpose of removing the U.S. presence, then diversification would be viewed negatively and the strong relationship between the two governments could be jeopardized*



*altogether*. It's important that developing alternatives does not become a self-fulfilling prophesy that drives the U.S. away from Bahrain.

## The Way Ahead

*Bahrain is a major non-NATO ally, therefore the United States has an obligation to stand with Bahrain during challenging times while still encouraging reform.* Voluntarily removing the U.S. footprint from Bahrain would do little to improve the situation, potentially create a power vacuum, destabilize the region, and eliminate the moderating effect that U.S. influence has had on the Bahraini crisis. When encouraging democratic reform with allies, should the U.S. employ the carrot or the stick? Do friends that use sticks remain friends over the long term? The point is that influence and an incentive-based approach are best suited for major non-NATO allies. The U.S. should leverage elements of national power to promote positive change, understanding that it also has a moral obligation to stand on principle and strongly encourage democratic reform.

**Plan with a sense of urgency!** When asked if Plan B is desired, lead military planners responded with "not sure."<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, senior decision makers sense little urgency with the situation. Most U.S. policy makers share the consensus that Bahrain will not fall into greater civil unrest that would threaten U.S. access. In their minds, any unrest will likely be managed by the Bahraini government. The unwavering U.S. commitment to Plan A has resulted in decision makers not readily responding to calls for contingency planning.

In reality, the situation in Bahrain could deteriorate very rapidly, leaving the U.S. without a key maritime hub in the Middle East. Taking into account the ongoing unrest and slow progress of reform, contingency planning should begin immediately to assess optimal locations for basing alternatives. In the best case scenario, alternative ports would offer dispersal and redundancy and provide additional options for logistics and maintenance. In the worst case scenario, alternative ports would be the essential element that sustains maritime activity in the Persian Gulf and Fifth Fleet area of responsibility during a time of crisis.

**Conduct a Bahraini war game simulation.** Construct a scenario in which viewpoints from Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and the Opposition are all represented to test possible scenarios during unrest and potential outcomes to determine if U.S. access would be jeopardized. Follow the initial war game with another simulation wherein the U.S. maintains a strong presence in Bahrain with viable basing alternatives. Examine the U.S. response and force posture in view of viable alternatives. Through a close analysis of the environment and influences in Bahrain, the decision maker could better understand the circumstances and influences impacting

U.S. access. This understanding would ultimately provide insight and result in policies that ensure future access, maintain stability, and reassure allies.

**Conduct site analysis on Plan B alternative locations.** Begin discussions and negotiations with GCC partners to broker long term agreements with Kuwait and Qatar to establish a viable Plan B. Communications with GCC members should detail plans that state the U.S. will maintain maritime forces in Bahrain but intends to develop alternatives to provide long term security for the region as a hedge strategy against the possibility of future unrest. The U.S. Navy conducted numerous site surveys in the Pacific prior to World War II that later proved invaluable. Similar site surveys and host nation discussions and negotiations should begin to determine specific modifications, required costs, and associated timelines needed to develop port facilities equipped to accommodate and service the U.S. fleet. The required infrastructure necessary to support U.S. and coalition ships cannot be duplicated overnight; developing a suitable port facility could take years to build or modify. Therefore, the sooner these arrangements are finalized the better off the U.S. fleet readiness and regional security will be.

**Perform vulnerability assessments on U.S. strategic bases worldwide to determine where access is threatened.** Examining the broader global picture of U.S. strategic access, there are additional bases where U.S. forces could run into future access challenges. One need not look far for instances in recent history in which the presence of U.S. forces and installations faced opposition from the host government and/or surrounding population. The protest against American troops in Okinawa, the closing of the naval base in Manta, Ecuador, the removal of troops from Saudi Arabia in 2003, and the inability to come to an agreement in post-war Iraq are all recent examples of when access was challenged or denied. Undoubtedly, the American military will continue to face similar future trends. If countries view an American presence as a liability rather than strength, then identifying those “vulnerable” areas is useful to tailor policies to mitigate and develop strategies to better assure future access.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> General officer, speech given at John Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, Washington, DC, November 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Shane McGinley, “New Doha Port awards US \$ 1.2bn contract,” *Arabian Business*, March 14, 2012, <http://www.arabianbusiness.com/new-doha-port-awards-us-1-2bn-contract-449827.html>, accessed March 4, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> State of Qatar, “New Port Project,” <http://www.npp.com.qa/overview.html>, accessed March 4, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> “Ambassador Joseph LeBaron Remarks at the Qatar-U.S. Friendship Reception December 14, 2010-12-13,” Embassy of the United States, Doha, Qatar press release, December 13, 2010, [http://qatar.usembassy.gov/pr\\_121610.html](http://qatar.usembassy.gov/pr_121610.html), accessed March 21, 2013.



<sup>5</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, "Qatar: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, May 16, 2011, p. 11, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL31718.pdf>, accessed March 4, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kuwait Government Online, "Sea Transport," [http://www.e.gov.kw/sites/KGOEnglish/Portal/Pages/Visitors/TourismInKuwait/TravellingToKuwait\\_TravelSurfing.aspx](http://www.e.gov.kw/sites/KGOEnglish/Portal/Pages/Visitors/TourismInKuwait/TravellingToKuwait_TravelSurfing.aspx), accessed March 6, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Inchcape Shipping Services, "Shuaiba Port," <http://www.iss-shipping.com/Microsites/Document%20Library/Shuaiba%20Port%20Information.pdf>, accessed March 8, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Kenneth Katzman, "Kuwait: Security, Reform and U.S. Policy" Congressional Research Service, December 6, 2012), <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>, accessed March 8, 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Mike Francis, "Camp Spearhead at Kuwait's Shuaiba Port: Home to many soldiers in 2003," *Oregon Live* (blog), *The Oregonian*, October 22, 2012, [http://blog.oregonlive.com/oregonatwar/2012/10/camp\\_spearhead\\_at\\_kuwaits\\_shua.html](http://blog.oregonlive.com/oregonatwar/2012/10/camp_spearhead_at_kuwaits_shua.html), accessed March 6, 2013.

<sup>12</sup> Military planner, interview by author, Pentagon, Washington, DC, October 25, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Conclusion*

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*“The strong do what they can, the weak suffer what they must” -- Thucydides*

Ignoring the tenuous political situation in Bahrain and the numerous possible scenarios that could ensue goes against the vector of history and current trends in the Middle East. Developing a viable Plan B is the smart and prudent course of action.

The United States is not operating from a position of strength in its relationship with Bahrain or strategically across the Middle East. Viable alternatives will restore the U.S. position of strength and consequently encourage democratic reform. Shifting operations to a sea base or withholding Foreign Military Sales is not the ultimate answer and does little to promote long term reform or guarantee access.

*One of the most significant benefits is that creating a viable Plan B restores the moral high ground for the United States. Critics’ most damning argument against US policy now is that the only reason the U.S. supports the Al-Khalifa family is to protect vital U.S. interests- the naval base and Fifth Fleet headquarters. Developing options while still remaining in-country demonstrates that the United States is not acting in a hypocritical manner and is instead remaining to promote regional security, prove loyal to an ally, and strongly support democratic reforms.*

Another benefit of developing viable alternatives is that it will aid in promoting further dialogue and reform between the Al Khalifa family and the Opposition. The subtle reality that viable alternatives exist should assist the U.S. in reinvigorating the moderate voice of the King, the Crown Prince, and moderates in the Opposition. A consequential exchange between the Al Khalifas and the Opposition that promotes real reform leading to a constitutional monarchy, empowers Bahraini Shia, and ensures the ruling family is able to make incremental changes without their legitimacy being threatened is critical for long term success.

Alternatives are also important in that they provide military options in scenarios even if nothing changes in Bahrain. Viable alternatives give military planners more options for contingency planning and flexibility when conducting operations. It’s also noteworthy that diversifying the footprint and dispersing the force greatly complicates targeting by an adversary in any future conflict. Developing mature sea ports as alternatives would ready the fleet logistically; increase force survivability, sustainability, and redundancy.

In the end, the absence of alternatives could leave the United States without a key maritime base during a critical juncture of heightened tensions in the Middle East. Are military leaders absolutely confident that the United States can maintain the status quo in Bahrain? Unfortunately, the circumstances presented here show otherwise and should make any leader doubt whether they can respond with 100 percent certainty.

Considering the imminent threat posed by Iran, any failure to develop a Plan B incurs a much greater risk of sustaining strategic access in the Middle East. A lack of port redundancy and inability to disperse the force gives Iran numerous strategic advantages if a future conflict arises. Repeating the mistakes of lost access in the Philippines and pre-revolutionary Iran is completely unnecessary and preventable. However, without developing a viable Plan B, that is exactly what the U.S. could soon face. Forewarned is forearmed.

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