

**Whither Western Influence in the Middle East:
The Folly of Developing Military Strategy Absent Collective Policy in the Gulf Region**

by

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The 2014 Patuxent Defense Forum poses two serious questions for its participants to consider:
How can the U.S. help foster regional security while pursuing diplomacy aimed at encouraging democratic practices?

Are these diplomatic and military goals at odds or can they be reconciled through new defense policies?

These questions afford us participants an opportunity to discuss and seriously consider several difficult issues which are usually discussed in hushed tones behind secure doors, but rarely, if ever, in public fora. Unfortunately for the United States and perhaps for the Middle East as a whole, these issues will likely only remain discussed here and in selected hallways. Without a deliberate, rational and open discussion within and between NATO capitals about political goals in the Gulf region, it will be impossible for NATO, in general, and the US specifically, to develop any meaningful military strategy to encourage democratic practices or stability in the Middle East. And even if that debate is had and some goals are found to agree upon, there is no reason to believe that the change in Gulf states could proceed more rapidly than the change which occurred in the former Warsaw Pact countries now in NATO, if at all.

This difficulty of developing a coherent military strategy stems from two primary factors. First, military strategy must always follow from policy and in this case there is none. Before militaries can decide how to do something, they must be given the specifics of what it is they must accomplish. While many Western leaders believe they know what their Middle East policies are, it is rare to find a written or even consistently spoken policy within any single country, let alone within NATO. Two primary reasons for this fact exist. There are divergent aims among NATO members with respect to the region and there are divergent aims of the countries within the region. Second, Western countries are often caught between the realist desire for stability and the liberalist desire for democratic self-determination. More specifically, Western leaders most often say one thing while accepting something altogether different. This is the truth that is spoken of, but only in closed rooms and selected hallways. It is this inconsistency which makes it further impossible for NATO to develop a coherent military strategy for the Middle East. Exacerbating this divergence between the liberalist ideal and realist acceptance are unstoppable sociological forces in the Middle East and the willingness of Western leaders to accept what amounts to hypocritical positions on selected issues in the name of fairness and normalizing relations.

To flow this talk out to a conclusion, I will discuss the divergences of aims within the Middle East, then the issues tugging at a collective policy towards the region. Finally, I will discuss some potential steps NATO can take militarily to promote stability in the region.

As you've no doubt read about, or participated in within recent months, there is an increasingly open rift in the Gulf Cooperation Council between Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait on one side and Qatar on the other, with Oman brought in on sides depending on the issue being discussed. So first and foremost, it is impossible for NATO to develop a strategy for moving several countries in a particular direction when they can't agree that they even want to move or be part of the strategy.

Qatar's support for more radical Islamist groups in Syria, Iraq, Egypt and others across the region have deeply troubled the other Gulf monarchies, who value their stability and family rules over all other issues.¹ Al Jazeera, owned by the Qatari royal family, has aggressively supported Islamist rebels abroad and overtly and consistently criticized the Saudi royal family. The Saudi family cannot understand the Qatari willingness to support radical Islamist rebels, appealing to Western normative standards in the name of democratic self-determination, when such rebels pose direct threats to all the Gulf monarchies, Qatar included.

The Qataris seem to be playing a dangerous game in supporting groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and al Nursa to Western audiences as opponents to totalitarian regimes, in an attempt to build good will with the West to garner relative advantage within their region vis-à-vis their neighbors. Qatar won the bid for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, a major political feather and status booster in the region. They are frantically building a new airport expansion in Doha trying to unseat Dubai as the regional transportation hub through which a large percentage of people and goods will transit from Europe to south and East Asia. Those efforts are aimed at setting Qatar up for long-term political and economic relations outside the region.

But with the region, there are serious issues. The very groups the Qataris are supporting outside their own country are groups the Saudis and other Gulf emirates have worked so diligently to destroy over the last decade. Furthermore, Qatar is cozying up with Iran and Turkey and determining its own path outside GCC channels. Qatar's ruling elite appears to be striking out on their own without their formerly dominant brothers in the region. But one senior intelligence official told me that the al Thani family is balancing between strengthening its internal position and hedging against a future US withdrawal which might leave them vulnerable to Iran. For their actions, Qatar has seen GCC ambassadors recalled and have been threatened with a shutdown of the border between them and Saudi Arabia. This act would certainly affect US military movements into and out of its major air base in Qatar and could affect NATO military operations in the region.

Besides the issues of political direction, there are some serious sociological issues facing the Gulf monarchies. It is in these issues that NATO and the West could find the greatest traction in strategies for achieving stability in the region. But it is also in these sociological issues that the monarchies might find the greatest cause for divergence, thus rendering any Western military strategies ineffective.

The Gulf countries expect to see a 40% increase in population by 2030. This figure, almost unthinkable in any Western country, comes in a region in which the countries import between 68% of their food on the low end (Saudi Arabia) and over 90% in Qatar and Bahrain.² This population explosion is critical in countries where the populations of those under 25 number 40% and whose employment prospects are dire.³ In addition, there are considerable Shiite populations of Iranian origin in all of the Gulf countries, with some being large majorities. The security services of these countries walk a fine line in allowing

¹ Bilal Y. Saab, "Breakup in the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, 6 Mar 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141006/bilal-y-saab/break-up-in-the-gulf>; "No One Is Happy," *The Economist*, 8 March 2014, <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21598718-americans-saudis-and-qataris-are-unusually-knotty-diplomatic-tangle-no-one>

² "How To Keep Stomachs Full," *The Economist*, 22 February, 2014. <http://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21596978-gulf-arabs-are-debating-how-best-feed-themselves-how-keep-stomachs-full>

³ Anthony Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia and the Arab Frontline States," Center for Strategy and International Studies, 4 November 2013. <http://csis.org/publication/saudi-arabia-and-arab-frontline-states>

legitimate commerce while thwarting Iranian influence and agitation of local populations. Bahrain's crackdown on opposition dissidents and Saudi military involvement show the degree to which the monarchies are more interested in stability than any democratic ideal. Furthermore, not one of these countries would be able to function as it currently does without a massive population of foreign national, in many cases a super majority of the population, performing tasks that native citizens deem beneath them.

Add to these demographic pressures the local effects of the influence of global information and connectivity and it is impossible to see how the governments can control their populations without force. This youth bulge and growing population is far more connected than their parents' generation and they are finding ways to talk and spread information, whether accurate or not. Add ubiquitous connectivity and information flow in a culture that has traditionally been skeptical of inquiry, seeing questions and inquisitiveness as subversive to authority and tradition, you have the potential for a pressure cooker looking for relief before explosion.

To Western sensibilities, one obvious way to relieve demographic pressures would be to have local populations undertake to perform many of the tasks done by foreigners every day. Unfortunately, culturally this is not tolerable in the region and technically, there is not a base of talent able to perform the tasks. For this reason, it is always a delicate dance between the Gulf monarchies and the West when issues of economics and human rights cross. While it may be in the region's long term interest to develop a population base ready to take on the tasks of maintaining the petroleum industry, building Riyadh's new subway system and develop technologies to sustainably farm to feed their populations. But these changes would require deep adjustments to cultural incentives locally. They would also disrupt Western business interests in the long term as Western firms and their investors would give up control of projects and the profits they bring.

This truth bridges us from the potentially divergent regional aims to the aims of the Western countries, NATO specifically. Established to collectively defend Western Europe from Soviet aggression after WWII, NATO received serendipitous operational opportunities the Soviet breakup. In the aftermath of Desert Storm, the breakup of Yugoslavia, Afghanistan and Iraq, NATO found ways to show its relevance in hotspots, none of which came close to existentially threatening any member country.

This conference asked us to consider how can the U.S. and NATO could help foster regional security in the Gulf while pursuing diplomacy aimed at encouraging democratic practices. Given the potentially divergent internal regional aims, it is not surprising that there would also be divergent aims from countries outside the region. The first and greatest of these would be to determine whether we genuinely want to encourage democratic practices and allow self determination to take the countries of the region where it will, or pursue stability in the region which may help both NATO countries and the Gulf region as well.

A key element required for any policy in the Middle East is an open discussion of whether NATO wants to follow the Wilsonian ideal of self determination of all peoples, and all the implications of that ideal, or whether we want to follow the realist policy of stability through state supremacy. It is no secret that the US and NATO have followed the realist position since WWII. However, it is difficult to be a world leader or for NATO to have a coherent collective policy when we say one thing publically and set in motion strategies to the other. The West cannot maintain legitimacy if it says that peoples within the region ought to determine their own futures and then disavow elections after they happen when parties not to

our liking are elected. The West turned away when Algeria invalidated elections won by Islamists. The same happened in Gaza with Hamas and in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood.

This Western turning away from local public sentiment plays into the hands of what Frances Flannery describes as a consistent simplified Muslim narrative of western subjugation since the Crusades. She discusses competing Western narratives of what it means to be Muslim in Bosnia, which has also played out in competing Western narratives of Islamic peace vice aggression since 2001.⁴ Exacerbating this competition in narratives both from within and from outside the Middle East is the reality that since the end of the Cold War, the US has exhibited what Bernd Kausser, Jonathan Keller, and Edward Yang call a “consistent pattern of bold claims and limited follow-through” which are practically counterproductive and theoretically unexplainable.⁵ This reality will necessarily affect any NATO or Western strategies towards democratization in the Gulf region if the populace sees the West as less than honest brokers.

NATO in general and the US specifically cannot urge countries to democratize if we are not prepared to accept the necessary implications of elections, whether those implications are easily foreseen or not. No NATO military strategy can be developed for the region until there is a policy that tells the military what to achieve. So this brings us to the issue of whether we genuinely value democracy more than stability. If it is stability, then democracy is neither necessary nor sufficient. If it is democracy, then stability will be necessary for the democracy to consolidate.

Those implications are well discussed in private meetings in chanceries, embassies and war colleges. They are rarely discussed in public and they need to be if we are to get to the point where we ask militaries to develop strategies to achieve diplomatic and political ends. If NATO and the West desire to push the Gulf monarchies to liberal democracy, then some of the results we should expect to see include guaranteeing freedoms, increasingly pluralistic societies, protecting minorities, and developing climates for business and growth. Yet one of the uncomfortable truths of the hard line rules of Saddam Hussein, Hosni Mubarak, and Bashar al Assad was the maintenance of pluralistic societies and protection of minorities. Furthermore, merely seeing rapid downward directed economic growth and building booms, such as in the UAE and Qatar, does not make for an open and free economy with protections under the rule of law.

I was one of those naïve idealists who said in 1990 that it is always better to let people determine their own destinies than to have them live in autocratic but stable regimes. Today I understand nuance and the need for structural institutions to protect individuals from masses before unleashing popular rule. The evidence of the past 30 years in the Middle East is one of continuing displacement of peoples, movement away from moderation to extremes and deep violence. I will not ever say that living under an autocrat is pleasant or the desired ideal. But neither should we look past known human tendencies in pushing for democratic self-determination as the model for the Middle East. The results are clear.

Iraqi Christians have all but disappeared. Christians in Syria were protected under Assad and have now all but been driven out of their homes in rebel-held territories. In the first week of March, Qatar negotiated with al Nursa rebels to release a group of nuns being held captive for months in Syria. Egypt’s

⁴ Frances Flannery, “Towards A New Social Memory of the Bosnian Genocide,” presentation at the *Intelligence and the Transition From War to Peace Conference*, James Madison University, 19-20 March 2014.

⁵ Bernd Kausser, Jonathan Keller, and Edward Yang, “Explaining U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Bosnia, 1993-95: New Evidence from Declassified Documents,” presentation at the *Intelligence and the Transition From War to Peace Conference*, James Madison University, 19-20 March 2014.

Copts were deliberately targeted by the Muslim Brotherhood after Mubarak's fall. The displaced must go somewhere, and often they are not welcome in neighboring countries. If the West is not ready to accept these refugees, the decrease of plurality and the increase of homogeneity and the likely future struggles that homogenous and extreme populations will have with their neighbors, then we should perhaps consider policies of stability over democracy or at least slow and deliberate democratic transition.

Of course, accepting stability as a policy aim also brings necessary implications to which we have in the past, and would need in the future, turn a blind eye. Just as the logic of accepting democracy as the ideal requires us to accept the will of the people, even if it means displacement and pogroms, the logic of stability requires us to accept that those in power use means of state coercion to maintain that stability. Iraq had a pluralistic society with protection of Christians and Jews but under a reign of fear for the general population. Syria was a pluralistic society where the most ancient Christian churches were protected, where Druze, Sunnis and Shiites all lived in one country, but again, under tight control and without liberties we consider a matter of course in NATO countries.

The appalling working conditions of foreign nationals in the Gulf countries is well known and not discussed in major public fora for concern of alienating business deals with their leaders. In return for not poking these monarchies in the eye publically, we see some economic and security benefits of cooperation. Situations which would definitively be labeled human trafficking, slavery, or abuse of human rights if they took place in Europe are frowned upon, but accepted in the name of stability and security and access to influence.⁶ The international spotlight on workers' conditions in Qatar with the ongoing building of World Cup facilities has brought international visibility in the situation in ways which military strategy might never have been successful.

Oman's hosting of secret talks between the US and Iran in 2013 is an example of the US's continued interests in the region and of a Gulf country's vital role in cooperation. The US's large Naval and Air Force presence in the Gulf is now almost exclusively turned towards Iran. The Gulf States, especially Saudi Arabia have long maintained hostile relations, if at all, with Iran. A dialing back of tensions with Iran could potentially help all countries with interests in the region. Oman may prove as an example in another way. Furthermore, Sultan Qaboos's anti-corruption drive seems to be singular in the Gulf region.⁷ Sunlight is a great disinfectant and ending corruption is a step towards building lasting institutions that can weather a transition to democracy. But does Oman's example even register in the West and is it enough to keep NATO engaged? The fact that some influential thinkers in government and intelligence circles doubt Qaboos's actions will outlast his few remaining years, means that time for his reforms to take root is likely short.

Perhaps most important to this present discussion, there is an increasing fatigue associated with the Middle East in Western capitals after more than 20 years of military actions against Iraq, multiple failed attempts at peace between Israel and the Palestinian Authority, more than a decade of operations in

⁶ Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Arab Versus Asian Migrant Workers In The GCC Countries," United Nations Secretariat Population Division, 22 May 2006; James Dorsey, "Mounting Workers' Deaths Increase Pressure on Qatar, FIFA and Asian Countries," *Huffington Post*, 19 February 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-dorsey/mounting-workers-deaths-i_b_4819799.html; James Dorsey, "The Gulf: Foreign Workers' Rights," 2 January 2014, <http://www.faiobserver.com/article/gulf-foreign-workers-rights>

⁷ "Getting Rid Of The Graft," *The Economist*, 20 February 2014, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2014/02/oman>

Afghanistan with little tangible progress made in the county, and a failure of integrating Muslim immigrant populations across nearly all European countries regardless their origin. Add to this fatigue the recent crisis in Ukraine and the NATO countries are ready to change direction and turn their focus back on Europe. And although the United States still focuses tremendous resources on stability in the Middle East, it will be difficult for the US to keep a significant NATO interest in the Gulf region in the coming years.

So where does this leave us with respect to actual military strategy in the Gulf Region? I think it unlikely that the NATO countries would give the NATO military headquarters a coherent policy from which to develop a strategy in the Gulf. And the US military specifically is no stranger to being asked to develop strategies from weakly designed or non-existent policies. So in this case, I would recommend a strategy that would lead to continued stability first while establishing a strong military institution that could ease in the transition to democracy should that ever occur in the region. Avenues for this strategy would be increased security cooperation on a NATO model, continuing to bring Gulf States officers to NATO staff colleges and war colleges for full year long programs and not merely for short visits, and developing and expanding regular and annual exercise exchanges between Gulf countries.

Given the perceived threat from Iran and the more real threat of Islamist influence on the populations, a regional military cooperation structure not run by NATO, but open to the lessons NATO has learned over 60 years would be a good starting point for future stability in the region. If the monarchies are as concerned about their own succession plans as Christopher Davidson says they ought to be,⁸ they have far more to gain through strong institutional structures than they do going it alone against both Iran and Islamic extremists. This is not to say that NATO should in any way support authoritarian institutions. But it does accept the realist view of stability as an interim step towards the liberalist democratic ideal. And it is important to put on the table that the liberal ideal is a genuine goal we ought to push the monarchies towards, and not merely empty words and perpetual acceptance of a stable, undemocratic status quo. It took a generation in some former Warsaw Pact countries to genuinely change their political and socio-economic atmospheres and institutions to liberal ones. We cannot expect less in the Gulf states.

Doug Gibler and I showed in our research that countries that send their officers to year-long Professional Military Education programs in the West, meaning War College and Staff College, wherein they sit in seminar with their American and NATO counterparts, there is a small, but measurable increase in the country's likelihood for democratization.⁹ The numbers held up over the period from 1947 to 2001 and covered over 6,600 officers by country by year at US PME institutions. The effect is also shown at NATO PME schools. We contend that officers who attend these programs are carefully selected because of their likely upward advancement and that the lessons they learn in their seminars influence their actions when they become senior leaders. They are less likely to engage in coups and are more likely to support democratic transitions.

The numbers in the Ruby-Gibler study were aggregated across all PME participant countries, but there is no reason to believe they don't hold up for the Gulf countries. Education and socialization are key. The more officers from Gulf countries that can go through our programs and those of NATO countries, the

⁸ Christopher Davidson, "The Arab Sunset," *Foreign Affairs*, 10 October 2013, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/140096/christopher-davidson/the-arab-sunset>

⁹ See Tomislav Z. Ruby and Douglas Gibler, "US Professional Military Education and Democratization Abroad," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (Fall 2010)

better the chances for developing a large cadre of senior leaders who will respect democratic processes. And were the Gulf countries to establish a Gulf Military Academy, I am confident that they would receive assistance in not only setting up the curriculum but in teaching courses from dedicated assigned faculty from wide group of NATO countries. And as those officers retire, they may be more likely to move on to other influential positions within their countries. Developing a genuinely professional officer corps with regular performance-based annual assessments and promotions based on performance and expected leadership at the next level would add a military transparency similar to what Oman is doing politically today. The Gulf monarchies have long been known as havens for royals to play with expensive equipment. This image would have to end through professionalization and genuine merit-based promotion. This is one solid path for NATO militaries to take when developing a strategy for stability.

Within any collective military organization, it would be important for officers from the various Gulf countries to move into and out of joint military positions in the Gulf States as NATO officers do periodically in their careers. In several of my trips to the Gulf region I remember officers from one country asking me to say hello to an officer in another country should I run across him. This is a natural human social response, but it seems to me more prevalent among professional officers than it otherwise would be in the general public. I think that one extremely beneficial, and understudied, effect of joint assignments is to increase knowledge of the “other” and teach people who are or will be in positions of authority that they have less to be concerned about when they know each other.

I recall being in Warsaw for an exercise at the Polish National Defense University several years back and seeing the old former Warsaw Pact officers from several countries, all in NATO now, sitting together in a corner drinking primarily vodka and speaking in Russian. The younger officers were all in a different part of the picnic area, speaking in English and drinking beer. The point is less about the differences between age groups than the commonalities that enabled them to interact with those of other countries not just in uniform but in a social setting. This surely goes on in the Gulf region on an informal scale, but it would strengthen regional cooperation if NATO were to assist in formalizing personnel exchanges.

However, I must add a caveat to this recommendation by saying that I think it would only work if there was a push from the political leadership and general popular will onto the military towards a particular direction. The anecdote I just mentioned of young and old officers in Warsaw was driven by their political leaders and the general public will. A RAND series published in the early 1990s explored the militaries of the former Warsaw Pact countries and showed that there was a necessary component of militaries being driven by the political leadership to change their world view.¹⁰ The differences between young and old Eastern European officers in Warsaw show that it can take a generation to change world views even under political pressure. We should expect the same timeline in the Gulf states and that is only if the monarchies direct the militaries to change and if the militaries are open to change world views.

Finally, regularly scheduled, formalized joint exercises and formal training programs should be encouraged by NATO as part of this strategy. The Gulf Fighter Weapons School in the UAE is one good place to start. The concept of the Weapons School is that the best of the best train to become the senior instructors in an aircraft weapons system. In the US, this has been expanded to the space, command and control and ISR communities with Weapons School curriculums. These programs focus on real and very painstaking assessment of performance that is objective and not based on rank or status. It teaches

¹⁰ See Thomas S. Szayna, “The Military in Postcommunist Poland”, *Rand Corporation*, 1991; Thomas S. Szayna, “The Military in Postcommunist Czechoslovakia,” *Rand Corporation*, 1992.

officers to think beyond their narrow specialty, to plan and to critically and accurately assess their performance. Truth and accurate assessment are great motivators in all professional militaries. Expanding the Gulf Fighter Weapons School to all Gulf countries and integrating all their top officers as instructors with officers from NATO equivalent schools on their faculty would be a great starting point.

Another element of this strategy would be to have the Gulf states develop annual training exercises such as ones run out of the various NATO staff and war colleges. Of course, those, Gulf officers attending US PME courses already participate as do their NATO classmates. But some NATO country institutions send additional officers in exchanges with each other to maximize exposure to each others' exercises and to expand the thought processes of their officers. The Führungsakademie in Germany and the National Defense University in Poland both host international joint planning exercises against notional threats in which officers from many countries augment the students in the PME courses for the two weeks of the exercises. Unlike many exchanges where politeness is valued more than genuine lessons, these exercises can serve as models for Gulf countries to emulate as they force critical thinking, genuine assessment and honest feedback.

One positive benefit from exercise exchanges is that the exercises always start with an objective that is handed to military planners from political authorities as the basis from which to develop strategy. NATO PME courses stress the fact that policy necessarily precedes strategy. Obviously accounting for the outliers in any group, it is ingrained in most NATO officers' minds that they don't just use their militaries to use them. They are the tool of the state, not any individual commander. There are a few perhaps who are not old enough to remember then Secretary of State Madeline Albright asking General Colin Powell regarding the Balkans on what good is the strongest military in the world if we don't use it. That was in response to Powell asking for specific policy from which to develop strategy.

In conclusion, it will be difficult for NATO's military command to develop any strategy for the Gulf states to foster democratic practices. That is the role of the diplomatic corps and national leaders. But NATO militaries can foster security and stability and slowly build a culture from which respect for democratic institutions could take root and hopefully flourish. First, Western leaders must discuss with their populations and with each other whether they genuinely want to unleash the consequences of self-determination in the Middle East. It is very difficult to argue in the normative against this position. If so, they should carefully construct a strategy based on collective cooperation and exchanges over a long period of time as the NATO countries themselves have done for 60 years.

Should the Gulf monarchies be willing participants, it might work in the long run. However, as one senior government official told me, "I fear the regional actors don't have the military minds to carry this out." He fears they are so consumed by maintaining their power base within their own borders that they will hesitate to act collectively. Furthermore, he sees no NATO countries being eager or perhaps even willing to follow this strategy in the Gulf given their own European security issues. For such a strategy as this to work, the Gulf states will have to lead instead of being pushed by the US.