

Striking the Balance:

American Ideals, Interests and Weapons Sales in the Suppression of the Bahraini Uprisings

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of how U.S. arms sales to the Gulf Cooperation Council affect the ongoing uprisings in Bahrain and of the short- and long-term implications of these weapons sales in the context of American security policy in the Persian Gulf. Incorporating academic literature, journalistic articles, government documents, and non-governmental organizations' accounts, this paper draws on a variety of different sources to provide an inter-disciplinary study. While the United States government has spoken out against the suppression of the protests in Bahrain, the arms agreements it executes with the Gulf Cooperation Council strengthens the authoritarian regimes that continue to suppress the democratic uprisings in Bahrain. Considering how these weapons are being used, the United States must reconsider the balance between its ideals and interests in foreign policy and refrain from providing military aid to authoritarian regimes that use such equipment to maintain their control.

This thesis does not express the views of the University of Colorado at Boulder, the United States Air Force, the advisors of this research, or any of the other organizations with which the author is affiliated unless otherwise noted.

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Introduction

On February 14, 2011, men, women and children gathered in a small village just outside of the Bahraini capital, Manama,¹ demanding an end to the monarchy which had promised “sweeping liberal reforms” ten years before. Bahrainis adamantly rejected their government² and soon thereafter the demonstrations enveloped the entire country. One American newscaster described how “In just a few weeks the protests grew to the hundreds of thousands—nearly a quarter of Bahrain’s population.”³ Bahrainis in the streets declared that they would settle only for a new constitution, the establishment of free elections and the end to the al-Khalifa regime.⁴ The Bahraini Spring had arrived.

Bahrain, a small island nation in the Persian Gulf, plays a critical role in American foreign policy strategy. There, the United States maintains the U.S. Naval Headquarters of the Fifth Fleet, which is responsible for operations in the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and parts of the Indian Ocean.⁵ For this reason, the United States maintains a strong diplomatic and military relationship with the Bahraini government. Despite the political unrest and subsequent crackdown on these demonstrations, the Bahraini government remains a significant U.S. ally in the Persian Gulf.

¹ Bill Law, "Bahrain Protests Prompt Global Concerns," *B.B.C. News*(2011), <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12471243>.

² Cortni Kerr and Tobi Jones, "A Revolution Paused in Bahrain," *Middle East Report*(2011), <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero022311>.

³ Kelly McEvers, "The Crackdown," *Washington Monthly* 44, no. 3/4 (2012): 34.

⁴ James L. Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2012), 135-36.

⁵ U.S. 5th Fleet Commander, "About U.S. Naval Forces, U.S. 5th Fleet," U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/about.html>.

While protesters cried out for a new democratic constitution, the Bahraini government, led by King Hamad bin al-Khalifa, offered a different narrative to describe the protests. Spending over \$32.5 million on the services of American and British public relations firms,⁶ the Bahraini monarchy described the protests as Iranian attempts to subvert the Sunni government. The Bahraini Independent Commission of Inquiry—a third party committee tasked with investigating the protests and the Bahraini government’s response that released their report in December 2011—did not find any conclusive evidence to support these claims.

Regardless of their validity, these claims played on the demographic makeup of Bahrain. Although the Bahraini government has not released statistics on the number of Sunni and Shia Muslims in its country, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights estimates that Shiites could make up as much as 73% of Bahrain’s population.⁷ The Bahraini monarchy, which the British left in power in 1971, however, is Sunni. Ever concerned over the status of potential Iranian nuclear weapons and cognizant of Bahrain’s critical role in U.S. operations in the Middle East, President Barack Obama and his administration acknowledged the protests early on, but did not support the opposition groups as they had in the Arab Spring movements in Egypt or Libya.⁸

The ruling Sunni regime responded with overwhelming force. Working under the auspices of a supranational organization called the Gulf Cooperation Council, paramilitary and police personnel of the Peninsula Shield Force deployed to Bahrain with

⁶ "P.R. Watch: Keeping an Eye on the Kingdom's P.R.," Bahrain Watch, <http://bahrainwatch.org/pr/>.

⁷ "Religious Freedom for Shia in Bahrain: "Systematic Oppression and Marginalization"," Bahrain Center for Human Rights, <http://www.bahrainrights.org/node/1442>.

⁸ Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2012), 155-56.

tear gas⁹ and tanks from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.¹⁰ These forces killed more than one hundred and arrested thousands of Bahraini protesters in the following months.¹¹ The Bahraini monarchy also fired as many as 3,000 from their jobs for participating in the demonstrations.¹² James Gelvin, professor at the University of California, Los Angeles and author of the recently published book *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, described the events in Bahrain: “For the first time, an Arab uprising was put down by the military intervention of foreign powers,” referring to the Saudi and Emirati forces.¹³

While many American policy-makers insist that the United States can achieve security in the Middle East and low oil prices while simultaneously supporting democracy, human rights, and freedom, the events in Bahrain suggest otherwise. The circumstances in Bahrain require the United States to strike a balance between the pursuit of state interests and supporting democratic ideals. The United States has enjoyed a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia, thereby ensuring access to oil and containing Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf. To preserve this relationship, however, the United States meekly supported the Arab Spring uprisings in the Arabian Peninsula.

Like Bahrain, these other Gulf states are prominent U.S. allies and receive military-grade weapons, training, and equipment as a result. A report published by the Congressional Research Service refers to Saudi Arabia as the largest purchaser of U.S.

⁹ Rick Gladstone, "Bahrain Is Criticized for Its 'Torrent' of Tear Gas Use," *New York Times*, August 1, 2012.

¹⁰ McEvers, "The Crackdown," 35.

¹¹ Ibid; Reuters, "Bahrain: Opposition Activists Arrested," *New York Times*, August 3, 2012; Rick Gladstone, "Bahrain Is Criticized for Its 'Torrent' of Tear Gas Use," *ibid.*, August 1, 2012; Mehdi Hasan, "Lines of Dissent," *New Statesman* 141, no. 5123; Frederic Wehrey et al., *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2009).

¹² McEvers, "The Crackdown," 35.

¹³ Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*, 138.

weapons among “all countries except the United States, Russia, European nations, Canada, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand.” In 2011, Saudi Arabia spent \$33.4 billion on American weapons and military equipment. The United Arab Emirates ranked third after India, spending \$4.5 billion.¹⁴ These two countries are significant financiers and suppliers of the GCC and the Peninsula Shield Force.

There are several reasons why Bahrain is an ideal case study for such analysis. First of all, unlike the other Arab Spring movements in the Middle East, the United States has continued to support the Bahraini monarchy throughout the protests. In order to preserve its interests, the United States government has yet to call for the overthrow of the King Hamad ibn Isa al-Khalifa regime or align itself with the opposition movement in Bahrain. While American political leaders continue to call for further democracy in the Persian Gulf and the greater Middle East, they continue to sign various arms agreements with regimes that militarily suppress these movements. Considering the international, regional, and local interests at stake in Bahrain in relationship to the tension between American interests and ideals, Bahrain is an ideal case study to analyze the balance between interests and ideals that is inherent in American foreign policy.

Although U.S. arms agreements with GCC countries allow the United States to access inexpensive oil and to contain terrorist organizations and Iranian influence in the Persian Gulf, these agreements pose barriers to democratic movements in Bahrain. GCC regimes deployed military and security forces armed with American-made armored personnel carriers and other military equipment to suppress the protests in the island nation. While such agreements do achieve American interests in the short-term, they will

¹⁴ Paul K. Kerr and Richard F. Grimmett, "Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011," (Congressional Research Service, 2012).

create obstacles to building relationships with a future popularly elected Bahraini government.

Methods

While academics, analysts, activists, and journalists have published works on the uprisings in Bahrain, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and U.S. security policy in the Persian Gulf, no one has analyzed these three levels in relationship to one another. This thesis considers the implications of U.S. arms sales in the context of each of these three levels. Drawing from literature published by experts on each of these topics, this subsection sets the stage to discuss the influence and impact of American weapons sales to the Persian Gulf monarchies by outlining current academic literature that is relevant to the subject.

Because the Bahraini Spring began only a little more than two years ago, there is little academic research published that addresses the demonstrations. Lin Noueihed and Alex Warren, however, managed to publish an analysis of the Arab Spring uprisings in their book entitled *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution, and the Making of a New Era*. This book, which begins with the protests in Tunisia, moves chronologically through the protests and offers particular insight into the motivations for the protests, analyzing the role of social media and economic inequality within Arab countries.¹⁵

Aside from Noueihed and Warren, there are only a handful of academics that have published peer-reviewed works on the uprisings in Bahrain. Among them, James Gelvin—a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles—published a book

¹⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*.

called *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* in 2012.¹⁶ His account, which documents the demonstrations chronologically across each country, is a useful introduction to the protests and what they meant for the Middle East. Gelvin's book, however, does not address many of the details pertaining to the Bahraini uprisings.

Associate Professor at George Washington University, Marc Lynch wrote *The Arab Uprisings: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*. As the title suggests, Lynch offers an analysis of the Arab Spring while arguing that this movement will have important consequences moving forward. Lynch writes,

By February, the [Obama] administration was well into the process of formulating a doctrine making sense of America's position in the region. But then Bahrain and the Saudi-led counterrevolution threw a major wrench into the works. The American position on Bahrain is not difficult to understand. The administration had been working hard on nudging the Bahraini palace toward a deal on political reform with the opposition, and seemed close to achieving that goal. But when things went wrong, the U.S. found itself unable to reconcile its competing needs. The U.S. Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain, intense Saudi interest, and concerns about Iran make it overdetermined that the U.S. would back away from demanding change in Manama. No call that King Hamad had lost legitimacy and must leave would be forthcoming. Realpolitik generated an absolutely unavoidable hypocrisy, which then fatally crippled the administration's broader regional stance, especially with the young activists who saw the entire Arab uprisings as a unified narrative.¹⁷

Although Lynch does recognize how the uprisings in Bahrain differ from the other Arab Spring movements, he fails to provide sufficient detail. For example, Lynch does not describe the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia throughout the uprisings in Bahrain—an important part in understanding the American response to the events in Bahrain.

¹⁶ Gelvin, *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know*.

¹⁷ Marc Lynch, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2012), 228.

Jane Kinninmont, a research analyst at London's Chatham House and a regular contributor to *Foreign Policy* magazine, published a much more in-depth account of the uprisings in Bahrain. Her analysis extends beyond the realm of any one discipline, incorporating the historical, political, economic, and religious factors, which contributed to the frustration prior to the Bahraini uprisings.¹⁸ Although Noueihed and Warren, Gelvin, Lynch, and Kinninmont do reference the interests and role of the United States throughout the demonstrations, their primary focus is the uprisings themselves.

While few academics have published peer-reviewed analyses of the Bahraini Spring uprisings, a number of academics have turned to academic journals such as the *Middle East Report* published by the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) and *Jadaliyya*. These journals provide an avenue for scholars to post timely, in-depth essays on developments of the uprisings. Notably, Toby Jones, an associate professor at Rutgers University and specialist on Gulf politics, has published a handful of articles on the protests in Bahrain in the MERIP publication.

Despite little published material on the Bahraini Spring, considerable analysis of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Peninsula Shield Force exist. The most prominent scholar to have analyzed this subject is Anthony Cordesman—the chair of the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for International and Strategic Studies—who has written extensively on the military capabilities of this security organization.¹⁹ His works include *U.S. Forces in the Middle East*,²⁰ *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom*,²¹

¹⁸ Jane Kinninmont, "Bahrain," in *Power and Politics in the Persian Gulf Monarchies*, ed. Christopher M. Davidson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹⁹ "Anthony H. Cordesman," Center for Strategic and International Studies, <http://csis.org/expert/anthony-h-cordesman>.

²⁰ Anthony H. Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

and *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the U.A.E.: Challenges of Security*.²² While there are few individuals who have studied security issues of the Persian Gulf longer than Cordesman, his analysis does not call into question U.S. motives or the implications of American arms sales. In recently published online articles and essays, Cordesman focuses more on the security concerns of Persian Gulf states, rather than the political unrest in many of these countries.

Some scholars, such as Jon Michaels, professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, have documented how the American military industrial complex supports Persian Gulf militaries. Michaels recently published an article called “Private Military Firms, the American Precedent, and the Arab Spring” in which he describes how Persian Gulf monarchies work with American defense contractors to improve the capabilities of their national militaries and internal security forces.²³ He does not elaborate, however, on the impact these defense contractors have on the Persian Gulf countries themselves or the interests of the United States in facilitating these arrangements.

Within the body of peer-reviewed literature on American and GCC security policy in the Persian Gulf, there is no discussion addressing these security concerns in relationship to local politics—particularly the uprisings in Bahrain. Rather than analyzing the Peninsula Shield Force intervention in Bahrain, many academics have focused on the relative military capabilities of GCC countries and Iran. An analysis of U.S. arms sales

²¹ Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia: Guarding the Desert Kingdom* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997).

²² Anthony H. Cordesman, *Bahrain, Oman, Qatar, and the U.A.E.: Challenges of Security* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997).

²³ Jon Michaels, "Private Military Firms, the American Precedent, and the Arab Spring," *Stanford Journal of International Law*, http://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=2&ved=0CDwQFjAB&url=http%3A%2F%2Fpsm.du.edu%2Fmedia%2Fdocuments%2Frelated_resources%2Fmichaels_private-military-firms-american-precedent-and-arab-spring.pdf&ei=yhUsUcu_LKfXyAHZhYBg&usg=AFQjCNFwxwdd4w-SCEYsVgle5Epg2J3w0GQ&sig2=ipt-_xlq-R4OcNoT0n97Aw&bvm=bv.42965579,d.cGE.

and the role of the GCC in the Bahraini uprising, this thesis is meant to initiate a discussion centered on the impact of these security policies on local politics in Bahrain.

This thesis incorporates work from academics, journalists, governments, NGOs, and policy firms to understand the policies and interests of both the United States and the Gulf Cooperation Council in the context of the Bahraini uprising. By analyzing information from a variety of disciplines and sources, this analysis brings to light significant questions about the nature of U.S. foreign policy and the sale of American weapons in the Persian Gulf. By selling American-made weapons to Persian Gulf countries, the United States achieved many of its interests. Despite the success of these policies, however, the sales of such weapons contradict American ideals and will create challenges to achieving American interests in the future.

Thesis Overview

The first section of this thesis, “Historical Context: The Cold War–2003,” details American interests in the Persian Gulf, the establishment of the GCC and its security concerns, and the formation of the Bahraini monarchy. This section explains how U.S., GCC, and Bahraini interests evolved since the Cold War until the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq as background for the analysis of contemporary events.

In the next section, entitled “U.S Security Policy in the Persian Gulf after 2003,” I explain the three primary goals of American foreign policy in the region as they have developed since the invasion of Iraq. This military campaign, which removed a secular-Sunni regime, distorted the balance of power between the Shia and Sunni throughout the Middle East, having significant consequences for American interests in the region.

Additionally in this section, I examine how the United States responded as protests known as the Arab Spring exploded across the Middle East.

Subsequently, in the chapter called “Gulf Cooperation Council Security Policy,” I explore the security interests of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—a prominent U.S. Persian Gulf ally—in the context of the Arab Spring. These common interests led the Peninsula Shield Force, the GCC’s paramilitary, to intervene for the sake of maintaining order in Bahrain.

In the final chapter, I examine the impact of American and GCC security policies on the uprisings in Bahrain. After regaining relative control of his country, King Hamad established the Bahraini Independent Council of Inquiry to investigate the government and GCC response and to also propose reforms that represented the will of the people.²⁴ While some of these recommendations were implemented, others were left out. According to a Congressional Research Service report, “no senior official who might have ordered the use of excessive force has been charged.”²⁵ Protesters and Bahraini security forces continue to clash on the streets of the island state.

After the analysis listed above, this thesis concludes that American weapons sales to the Persian Gulf monarchies will challenge American interests in the future. Although these agreements achieved United States’ interests in the region, these agreements may push Bahraini protesters to cooperate with Iran in order to overthrow the al-Khalifa regime. Not only do these arms agreements contradict American ideals, they will create further challenges to achieving U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf down the road.

²⁴ Kenneth Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," (Congressional Research Service, 2012), 10.

²⁵ "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," (Congressional Research Service, 2012), 14.

Historical Review: The Cold War—2003

American Interests, Bahraini Independence, and The Gulf Cooperation Council

Since establishing itself as a superpower in the Second World War, the United States demonstrated that it pursues three interests in the Persian Gulf: 1) reliable access to reasonably priced oil, 2) domestic security and that of its allies in the region (Israel and Saudi Arabia, for example), and 3) a market for U.S. defense contractors and private military corporations.

During the Cold War, United States policymakers sought military agreements with Middle Eastern countries, particularly in the Persian Gulf, to contain the spread of communism.²⁶ After World War II, the British Empire could no longer afford to administer its colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. As a result, it gradually recalled many military forces from this region, forcing the United States to accept a larger role in containing the influence of the Soviet Union. Although the United States supported the independence of Middle Eastern regimes from European powers early on,²⁷ American policymakers pursued much more aggressive military arrangements with the regimes in the region to stop and prevent the spread of communism. Among these regimes, the United States established a strong relationship with the Saudi royal family—a monarchical regime that shared American disdain for communism and that could supply enormous oil supplies to devote to the American economy and the reconstruction of Europe after World War II.

²⁶ The United States did pursue military facility-lease agreements with Saudi Arabia as early as 1943, see {Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities*, 74.} for details; however, these agreements did not last and did not play an important role in US foreign policy until the Cold War.

²⁷ Jeffrey R. Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region* (London: Routledge, 2010), 52; W. Taylor Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 45-47.

In 1968, the British government published an announcement that it “intended to withdraw from its historic position East of the Suez [Canal]” in reference to its military and administrative presence in Bahrain.²⁸ The United States—which supported the newly independent Bahraini government as the British colonists departed—filled the void. To build relationships with these regimes, the U.S. offered arms deals and other aid. These military agreements provided a substantial market for the thousands of companies that designed and manufactured military equipment while supporting closer relationships with Middle Eastern regimes that desperately needed to establish national effective national militaries.

As Dr. Jeffrey Macris, professor at the US Naval Academy, describes in his book *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region*, the United States adopted a different strategy to counter the spread of communism in the Middle East throughout the Cold War. The United States sought to attract these states through economic and military aid in opposition to communist ideology. By supplying these regimes with such aid, the United States could maintain its influence and ensure that its partners would refrain from implementing communist government. Many of these regimes were authoritarian.

Specifically, US foreign policy revolved around a “Twin Pillar” strategy, a strategy whereby it developed close relationships with Iran and Saudi Arabia. These two countries shared many differences, but both played important roles in Middle Eastern politics. For example, Iran was (and remains today) primarily Shia, while Saudi Arabia is predominantly Sunni. Many American policymakers thought that by supporting the

²⁸ David Frank Winkler, *Amirs, Admirals and Desert Sailors: Bahrain, the U.S. Navy, and the Arabian Gulf* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 2007), 125.

regimes of these two countries and ensuring their stability, the United States would have greater influence in the region than its Cold War nemesis, the Soviet Union.²⁹

To the United States, Iranian and Saudi leadership both expressed significant opposition to communism. As the United States worked with the Shah and King Faisal, the Soviet Union sought similar relationships with the Baath or socialist parties in Iraq and Syria.³⁰ As a result, American policymakers eyed nationalist movements in the Middle East with suspicion and relied on the “Twin Pillars” to exert their influence in the region in order to prevent the spread of communism. In exchange, the U.S. government agreed to significant military and economic aid packages in the Middle East and throughout Europe. President Harry Truman signed the Mutual Security Act in 1951, a law that provided \$7.5 billion to foreign countries in order to stop Soviet influence and communism.³¹ As outlined by the Mutual Security Act, the United States also established the U.S. Military Training Mission in 1953—a program to facilitate closer cooperation and integration of Saudi and U.S. armed forces;³² in 1957, the United States reaffirmed its alliance with King Saud’s regime, providing \$180 million worth of economic and military aid.³³

With the help of Saudi Arabia and Iran, the United States sought to contain nationalist movements, particularly Egyptian President Jamal abd al-Nassir’s call for one

²⁹ Michael A. Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 88-89.

³⁰ Mazher Hameed, *Saudi Arabia, the West and the Security of the Gulf* (Wolfeboro, NH: Croom Helm, 1986), 18; Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 182.

³¹ "The Mutual Security Act of 1951," History, Art & Archives, United States House of Representatives, <http://history.house.gov/HistoricalHighlight/Detail/35416>

³² "United States Military Training Mission--Saudi Arabia," United States Military Training Mission, <http://usmtm.org/about.html>.

³³ Alexi Vassiliev, *The History of Saudi Arabia* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 352; Madawi al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 118-19.

unified Arab state, and greater Soviet influence in the Middle East. In 1955, the Egyptian president agreed to a “purely commercial” arms deal with Czechoslovakia to modernize the Egyptian military. The U.S. and Great Britain hurriedly offered competitive incentives, including funds for the construction of the Aswan Dam, a structure that would significantly improve Egyptian agricultural productivity. Later in 1955, at the behest of the United States and Great Britain, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Pakistan signed an agreement called the Baghdad Pact, collectively rejecting communism while working together to establish peace in the Middle East.³⁴ Nassir, whose popularity exploded across the region, rejected this treaty in an attempt to create a non-aligned movement in the Middle East, despite economic and financial support his country received from the West. After the United States and Great Britain withdrew their support in retaliation for Egypt’s recognition of the People’s Republic of China, Nassir nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956 to pay for Egyptian modernization efforts including the construction of the Aswan Dam without Western support.³⁵

While U.S. foreign policy strategy focused on Iran and Saudi Arabia, the United States also drew closer to the smaller nations in the Persian Gulf, such as Bahrain, that had recently gained their independence from the British Empire. A strategic base for military operations across the Middle East and firmly under Saudi influence, Bahrain played a critical role in American and British Cold War strategy. Realizing that it could no longer afford or justify its colonies in the Persian Gulf, however, the British Empire

³⁴ "The Baghdad Pact (1955) and the Central Treaty Organization (Cento)," Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, <http://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/CENTO>.

³⁵ Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, 149.

left Bahrain with a Sunni government led by Isa ibn Salman al-Khalifa, despite a Shiite majority in the country.³⁶

Al-Khalifa and the rest of the Bahraini monarchy eagerly accepted military agreements with the United States after the country gained its independence in 1971. On December 31, 1971, American and Bahraini representatives signed the first of many military agreements which allowed “the U.S. to use 10 acres at Jufair to support its Middle East Force (MEF) in the Gulf–this included U.S. use of a transmitter and antennae, priority use of Berth 1 at the port, waterfront ship repair facilities, and land rights, and hanger and office space at Muharraq Airfield.”³⁷ By 1995, the United States Navy had moved its Central Command (NAVCENT) to the island country, establishing a naval headquarters in Bahrain to oversee all naval operations throughout the Middle East.³⁸

While the United States pursued various military agreements with regimes around the Persian Gulf, many American policymakers overlooked America’s dependence on Middle Eastern oil until 1973. As Mazher Hameed points out in his book *Saudi Arabia, the West and the Security of the Gulf*,

The oil crisis dramatically altered the lens through which U.S. leaders saw the Gulf. When the shortage was real, rather than potential, the American economy paid a heavy toll, even if it was less costly than Europe’s. As a result, U.S. policymakers began to look at the Gulf in terms of *the security of the flow of oil*.³⁹

³⁶ Omar Al-Shehabi, "Political Movements in Bahrain: Past, Present, and Future," *Jedaliyya*, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/4363/political-movements-in-bahrain_past-present-and-fu.

³⁷ Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities*, 69; Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992*, 94.

³⁸ "Our History," Naval Forces Central Command, <http://www.cusnc.navy.mil/about.html>.

³⁹ Hameed, *Saudi Arabia, the West and the Security of the Gulf*, 18.

In 1973, American policymakers realized the significance of the Persian Gulf as world oil prices rose by 70% in a matter of days.⁴⁰ Not only was this region strategically located, the oil which it produced directly affected the American economy.

Although Saudi Arabia profited enormously from the oil embargo, King Faysal—King Saud’s heir—continued to work closely with officials in the United States government, assuring them that the arrangement was temporary. Like his predecessor, Faysal staunchly opposed the Soviet Union and communist influence in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia was the first Arab nation to put an end to the embargo by increasing its oil production to 1 million barrels per day, single handedly accounting for the shortages in Europe and the United States.⁴¹ In return for Saudi Arabia’s cooperation, the United States agreed to sell \$270 million worth of missiles and other military equipment in April of 1974. Less than a month later, the U.S. and Saudi governments agreed to another arms deal worth—this one worth \$335 million.⁴²

The “Twin Pillars” strategy changed following the Iranian revolution of 1979. Iranians gathered in the streets to protest the regime. After the Shah fell, a Shiite cleric named Ayatullah Khomeini rose to power, eliminating his political opponents and establishing a Shiite theocracy in Iran. Vehemently against the United States, which had supplied the Shah’s regime with weapons and economic support, Khomeini and his emerging message of Islamic fundamentalism were a new threat to American power in the Middle East.

⁴⁰ Nadav Safran, *Saudi Arabia: The Ceaseless Quest for Security* (Cambridge, Massachusetts Harvard University Press, 1985), 161; al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 137.

⁴¹ Benson Lee Grayson, *Saudi-American Relations* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 114; al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 141.

⁴² Grayson, *Saudi-American Relations*, 115; al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 141-42.

In May of 1981, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates founded the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).⁴³ The GCC was formed in response to the Iran-Iraq War and the Iranian Revolution. By 1982, Iran had won four significant victories over the Iraqi army and threatened the GCC states. As a result of this organization, these states could coordinate a common defense in the event of an attack. Although the United States and the countries of the GCC publicly asserted their neutrality throughout the war, these countries sided with Iraq.⁴⁴

The stated goal of this organization, which was created in an effort to unite these countries based on their common Islamic values and “shared characteristics,” was the “complete unification of all six states.” Despite this aim, however, the G.C.C. dedicated itself to the common security issues of its members.⁴⁵ The United States supported the creation of the GCC. One American Navy commander described, “the United States helped bolster GCC naval forces in the region through military sales and agreements to conduct joint training exercises.”⁴⁶

As British forces left the region, the Persian Gulf became a priority in American foreign policy.⁴⁷ In his 1980 State of the Union Address, President Jimmy Carter described the U.S. attitude towards the Persian Gulf:

Let our position be absolutely clear: an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States. It will be repelled by use of any means necessary, including military force.⁴⁸

⁴³ *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 157.

⁴⁴ Bryan Gibson, *Covert Relationship: American Foreign Policy, Intelligence, and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010), 71.

⁴⁵ Turki Al-Hamad, "Imperfect Alliances: Will the Gulf Monarchies Work Together?," in *Crises in the Contemporary Persian Gulf*, ed. Barry Rubin (Portland, Oregon: Frank Cass Publishers, 2002), 21.

⁴⁶ Winkler, *Amirs, Admirals and Desert Sailors: Bahrain, the U.S. Navy, and the Arabian Gulf*, 129.

⁴⁷ Al-Hamad, "Imperfect Alliances: Will the Gulf Monarchies Work Together?," 22.

⁴⁸ Jimmy Carter, "State of the Union Address," (1980).

While President Carter was referring primarily to the Soviet Union when he gave this speech, American presidential administrations have maintained a similar stance since: the Persian Gulf must be protected.

Foreign ministers of each member state met in Riyadh to draft a charter which outlined the goals of the GCC. The *Historical Dictionary of the Gulf Arab States* by Malcolm Peck describes the four parts of the organization well:

- (1) the Supreme Council, composed of the heads of state, empowered to determine general policy and make binding decisions, and required by the charter to convene a regular session annually;
- (2) the Commission for the Settlement of Disputes, which makes recommendations to the Supreme Council on disagreements over interpretation of the charter or disputes between member states;
- (3) the Ministerial Council, made up of cabinet-level representatives of the member states who propose to the Supreme Council the means of implementing GCC programs; and
- (4) the Secretariat General, headquartered in Riyadh, with a secretary general who oversees six directorates—political, economic, legal, financial, and administrative, environmental and human resource affairs, and information. The secretariat prepares studies and monitors GCC decisions.⁴⁹

As Professor Mazher Hameed points out, the GCC was founded “largely at Saudi initiative”⁵⁰ and contingent upon military support and oil revenues from the Saudi Kingdom⁵¹ not long after Saddam Hussein ordered Iraqi military forces to invade Iran in September, 1980.⁵²

⁴⁹ Malcolm C. Peck, *Historical Dictionary of the Gulf Arab States*, ed. Jon Woronoff, Second ed., Historical Dictionaries of Asia, Oceania, and the Middle East (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2008), 111.

⁵⁰ Mazher A. Hameed, *Arabia Imperilled: The Security Imperatives of the Arab Gulf States* (Washington, D.C.: Middle East Assessments Group, 1986), 13.

⁵¹ al-Rasheed, *A History of Saudi Arabia*, 159.

⁵² Gibson, *Covert Relationship: American Foreign Policy, Intelligence, and the Iran-Iraq War, 1980-1988*, 22.

By 1987, the U.S. had solidified military agreements with Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates⁵³ among other arrangements it had already made with Bahrain and Saudi Arabia as a result of the ongoing war between Iraq and Iran. Echoing President Carter's State of the Union Address in 1980, President Ronald Reagan and his administration made it clear that the United States would ensure the security of Persian Gulf waterways, despite the increasing conflict between Iraq and Iran.⁵⁴ During this time, the U.S. military established and upgraded dozens of military installations throughout the region. These bases ensured that the United States would have the ability to protect oil resources in the region. Only several years later, these bases would become the foundation of American military operations in the Gulf War.

On August 2, 1990, Iraqi military forces executed the orders of Saddam Hussein to invade Kuwait.⁵⁵ In the days following the invasion, President George H.W. Bush set out to build an international coalition—composed primarily of European and Middle Eastern countries—to remove the invading forces. After assuring King Fahd of Saudi Arabia that unlike in previous American military operations in the Middle East,⁵⁶ the United States would “maintain a military presence until the crisis was resolved;” U.S. military forces then immediately deployed to the country,⁵⁷ and to other important U.S.

⁵³ Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities*, 70, 73, 76.

⁵⁴ Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America's Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833-1992*, 119.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁵⁶ Following a terrorist attack in October, 1983 on a Marine barracks in Beirut, Lebanon, the US Government made the decision to remove its military personnel from the country in order to avoid further bloodshed. In the days leading up to the Gulf War, the U.S. history of “backing out” posed a significant challenge to building Middle Eastern support for the international coalition in the days before the Gulf War.

⁵⁷ Robert J. Pauly, Jr., *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Persian Gulf: Safeguarding American Interests through Selective Multilateralism*, ed. Tom Lansford and Jack Kalpakian, *U.S. Foreign Policy and Conflict in the Islamic World* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 47.

allies such as Bahrain and Qatar.⁵⁸ As the President explained, “I am determined that Saddam [Hussein] will not get away with all this infamy. When we [the U.S.] work out a plan, once we are there, we will stay until we are asked to leave.”⁵⁹ U.S. military personnel remained in Saudi Arabia until September of 2003⁶⁰—over a decade since the conclusion of Operation Desert Storm⁶¹ and after transitioning to other military bases in the Persian Gulf.

Having successfully pushed Hussein and the Iraqi forces back to Baghdad, however, key U.S. officials decided against removing him from power. There were several important motivations for this critical decision. As senior American military officials have pointed out, an assault on Baghdad would have cost the United States many soldiers’ lives and enormous expense. Additionally, Hussein and his regime provided a barrier to greater Iranian influence and the spread of Islamic theocracy and fundamentalism. As Ali Allawi—author of the book *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*—describes, Saddam’s regime was “the single most valuable, albeit indirect, bulwark against the spread of revolutionary Islam into the Gulf region.”⁶² Although Saddam Hussein had threatened the balance of power in the Persian Gulf by invading Kuwait, U.S. policymakers allowed him to remain in power. While Hussein did threaten to upset the security balance of the Persian Gulf by invading Kuwait, the United States and the GCC member states perceived a far greater threat from Iran.

⁵⁸ Winkler, *Amirs, Admirals and Desert Sailors: Bahrain, the U.S. Navy, and the Arabian Gulf*, 113-14.

⁵⁹ George Bush and Brent Snowcroft, *A World Transformed: The Collapse of the Soviet Empire; the Unification of Germany; Tiananmen Square; the Gulf War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 330.

⁶⁰ Don Van Natta, Jr., "Last American Combat Troops Quit Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, September 22, 2003.

⁶¹ Pauly, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Persian Gulf: Safeguarding American Interests through Selective Multilateralism*, 51.

⁶² Ali Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 3.

After Operation Desert Storm officially ended, the country of Bahrain rejoiced, no longer living with the fear of Iraqi Scud missiles. The parties did not last long for the American admirals who led this operation because the operation revealed the important weaknesses of American military capability. In the following months, US officers continued the ongoing struggle to integrate the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines as a united force⁶³—implementing a new doctrine of American warfighting. By the fall of 1991, the governments of Bahrain and the United States signed the Defense Cooperation Agreement. This agreement meant that the United States could move many of its administrative and aerial operations to a “forty-thousand-square-foot hanger and office complex at Bahrain International Airport,” ensuring a larger and more enduring American military presence in Bahrain.⁶⁴ In the months following the removal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the Bahraini monarchy and the United States government would seek further agreements to ensure the security of the Persian Gulf.

Since the end of the Second World War, American policymakers realized the United States’ significant military and economic interests in the Middle East. As Gary Sick explained in his essay, “The United States in the Persian Gulf,” the U.S. pursued its own interests “to ensure access by the industrialized world to the vast oil resources of the region” and “to prevent any hostile power from acquiring political or military control over those resources” in the Persian Gulf.⁶⁵ In pursuit of these interests, the United States

⁶³ Winkler, *Amirs, Admirals and Desert Sailors: Bahrain, the U.S. Navy, and the Arabian Gulf*, 125.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁶⁵ Gary Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," in *The Middle East and the United States: A Historical and Political Reassessment*, ed. David W. Lesch (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2007), 315.

military developed extensive capabilities and became a “Persian Gulf power in its own right” by the end of the 20th century.⁶⁶

When four commercial airliners were hijacked over American skies on September 11, 2001, the agreements the United States had made with its allies in the Persian Gulf became much more important. An immediate invasion of Afghanistan would require the use of military bases in the region, particularly the headquarters of the Navy 5th Fleet in Bahrain, to execute an operation in response to the attacks. In terms of Persian Gulf politics, however, September 11th did not affect the region so much as the second major military campaign of the President George W. Bush administration: the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

⁶⁶ Sick, "The United States in the Persian Gulf: From Twin Pillars to Dual Containment," 315.

U.S. Security Policy in the Persian Gulf After 2003

The 2003 invasion of Iraq had significant consequences for Persian Gulf politics. Although GCC member states had strained relationships with the Iraqi dictator, Saddam Hussein, they accepted him as a political and religious barrier, ensuring that the Sunni Arab regimes maintained their power without a direct threat from Shiite Iran. When Saddam Hussein and his Baathist regime fell from power in Iraq, Iran funded many development projects in the transitioning state. The Iranian state took advantage of the power vacuum in Iraq.

In the fall of the Hussein regime, tension between Shiites and Sunnis exploded. Although the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) sought to build consensus among the leaders of Iraq's diverse populations, political parties formed largely along ethnic and sectarian lines. Mona Damluji—a doctoral student at the University of California at Berkeley—described how “a series of political interventions enacted or facilitated by the CPA helped produce a political structure that empowered sectarian parties” in an essay entitled ““Securing Democracy in Iraq’: Sectarian Politics and Segregation in Baghdad, 2003–2007.”⁶⁷ As Sunni militants from across the Middle East arrived to carry out attacks and suicide bombings on Coalition forces and Shiite neighborhoods,⁶⁸ scores of Shiites formed militias and joined the Iraqi security and

⁶⁷ Mona Damluji, ““Securing Democracy in Iraq”: Sectarian Politics and Segregation in Baghdad, 2003–2007,” *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* XXI(2010), iaste.berkeley.edu/pdfs/21.2g-Spr10Damluji.pdf.

⁶⁸ Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, 181-85.

defense forces.⁶⁹ Wrought with sectarian violence, the situation in Iraq spiraled out of the control of United States military and Coalition forces.

From the beginning, the American-led CPA encountered significant resistance from prominent Shia cleric Grand Ayatullah Ali al-Sistani. A religious scholar with significant ties in Iran, many Shiites saw al-Sistani as the Shiite religious leader of Iraq.⁷⁰ As the CPA attempted to hand-pick representatives to write Iraq's constitution, al-Sistani issued a *fatwa*, a non-binding legal opinion, rejecting these actions. In June of 2003, al-Sistani stated:

These forces have no jurisdiction whatsoever to appoint members of the Constitution preparation assembly. Also, there is no guarantee either that this assembly will prepare a constitution that serves the best interests of the Iraqi people or that it expresses their national identity whose backbone is sound Islamic religion and noble social values. The said plan is unacceptable from the outset. First of all there must be a general election so that every Iraqi citizen who is eligible to vote can choose someone to represent him in a foundational Constitution preparation assembly. Then the drafter Constitution can be put to a referendum. All believers must insist on the accomplishment of this crucial matter and contribute to achieving it the best way possible.⁷¹

The U.S. government officials expected Shiite populations and their leadership to show overwhelming support for the liberators who brought an end to the treacherous rule of Saddam Hussein. In the aftermath of the invasion, however, Shiite leaders such as al-Sistani challenged American oversight in the creation of a new Iraqi government.

Further complicating U.S. attempts to establish a democratic government in Iraq, Hizbullah—a Shiite political party based in Lebanon—seized two Israeli soldiers on July 12, 2006, starting a war with Israel. Hizbullah's aggression towards Israel and Shiite challenges to American authority in Iraq contributed to growing concern of the “Shiite

⁶⁹ *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace*, 139.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

crescent,” a term used to describe the increased political influence of Shiism in the Middle East. Authors such as Vali Nasr and Deborah Amos discuss this rise of Shiite power and influence as a threat. This view became popular among senior American foreign policy-makers.

Although the regimes on the Arabian Peninsula are all Sunni, the eastern reaches of the Peninsula have considerable Shia populations. Each of these regimes has emphasized a national identity or sectarian differences within their countries for political purposes over the course of their rule. Today, as Iranian aggression has become a significant concern amongst actors in the international community, these regimes have reiterated sectarian differences and the rise of the “Shia” as a means to justify the suppression of Arab Spring movements in their countries. The United States and the rest of the international community, historically concerned about the threat of Iran and the rise of Shiite influence, especially since 1979, seem to accept this justification.

These concerns significantly influenced the American response to the Arab Spring movements, particularly in Bahrain. Fearful of the continued spread of Islamic—particularly Shiite—fundamentalism, the United States only supported some of the democratic movements. When American officials recognized these movements, they did so with caution. In the case of Egypt, for example, the United States did not publicly endorse the opposition movement until it was clear that President Mubarak had lost legitimacy and effective control of the country. Behind the American response to the Arab Spring, there are several interests, which American policies set out to achieve.

There are three primary motivations for American security policy in the Persian Gulf: 1) access to oil; 2) security of the United States and its allies in the region from

terrorism and Iran; and 3) a continued market for the “military industrial complex.” Following examination of each of these three motivations, I analyze these motivations in the context of the Arab Spring protests to explain the reasons for the United States’ security policy in the Persian Gulf.

Three Motivations for American Security Policy in the Persian Gulf

Persian Gulf Oil and the Security of Global Crude Oil Prices

Since World War II, access to oil has been a primary motivation for U.S. security policy in the Persian Gulf.⁷² After 70 years, 22% of the 18.8 million barrels of oil consumed daily in the United States comes from Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Kuwait.⁷³ All of these countries, with the exception of Iraq, are members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. Although the United States has decreased its reliance on foreign oil in recent years,⁷⁴ this region remains an important source. The Persian Gulf significantly impacts global oil prices, accounting for 1/5 of the oil consumed around the world every day.⁷⁵

One of the United States’ many interests in the Persian Gulf is to secure access to this oil. To accomplish this, the United States has influenced the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (O.P.E.C.). In his book *The Oil Kings*, Andrew Cooper discusses how the United States under President Gerald Ford and Saudi Arabia agreed to remove the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran from leadership of O.P.E.C.⁷⁶

⁷² Fain, *American Ascendance and British Retreat in the Persian Gulf Region*, 3.

⁷³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "How Dependent Are We on Foreign Oil?," http://www.eia.gov/energy_in_brief/article/foreign_oil_dependence.cfm.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ "World Oil Transit Chokepoints," <http://www.eia.gov/countries/regions-topics.cfm?fips=WOTC#hormuz>.

⁷⁶ Andrew Scott Cooper, *The Oil Kings: How the U.S., Iran, and Saudi Arabia Changed the Balance of Power in the Middle East* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011), 7.

Maintaining a low price of crude oil is a principle aim of U.S. security policy in this region.

Today, oil from the Persian Gulf remains a key strategic resource for the United States. In the globalized economy of multinational corporations, the United States' interest in securing access to this oil extends beyond its own needs. Any barrier to the crude oil supplied by this region would have a significant impact on world prices for crude oil—not only harming the American economy, but the global economy as well. As a result of the increased interdependence of states and their economies, the U.S. has interests in ensuring low prices across the world oil market—not only for itself.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and the U.A.E. also depend heavily depend on this waterway. Constituting the vast majority of the G.C.C., these five countries export most of their oil resources through the 34 mile-wide passage. Out of concern for maintaining steady revenues from the supply of crude oil, these countries readily support United States' efforts to police and to protect this area.

Domestic Security, Protecting American Allies, and Iran

After the United States deposed Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq, Iran gained significant influence in Iraq. Many in Southern Iraq looked to Iran for religious leadership. In the absence of Saddam Hussein and an effective Iraqi national government, millions turned to Iran for financial and political support as well. As Noueihed and Warren describe,

From the point of view of Saudi Arabia and the region's other Sunni rulers, the biggest winner from the 2003 invasion was Iran, which enjoyed booming trade, good relations with the Baghdad government, and influence among Shiite Islamist groups and militias that it had supported

during decades in exile. In 2004, Jordan's King Abdullah spoke with concern about the rise of what he described as a 'Shiite crescent' stretching from Iran through Iraq all the way to Lebanon on the Mediterranean coast.⁷⁷

This dialogue resonates with American government officials and the Gulf Cooperation Council as Iran threatens to close the Strait of Hormuz and denies inspectors to investigate its nuclear capabilities.

The vast majority of this oil produced in the Persian Gulf flows through this 34-mile waterway between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, called the Strait of Hormuz. This strategic passage is a highway for nearly 40% of the world's tanker borne fuel.⁷⁸ The Iranian government threatens to shutdown the strait to these oil tankers and other foreign navies; many analysts and academics agree, however, that such an operation is far beyond Iranian naval capability.⁷⁹ Although the Iranian Navy could not sustain a long-term closure of the Strait of Hormuz especially in a confrontation with the United States, any disruption to that waterway could raise world oil prices.

While the Iranian government threatens to close one of the most economically important passageways, the United States, Israel and a host of other countries also remain concerned over the status of potential Iranian nuclear weapons development. Iran Watch, a non-governmental organization devoted to "research and public education to stop the spread of nuclear weapons, chemical/biological weapons, and long-range missiles,"⁸⁰ actively collects and analyzes data on the status of Iran's weapons program. In a status report uploaded in December of 2012, an Iran Watch analyst describes Iran's growing

⁷⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 148.

⁷⁸ "Iran Threatens to Block Strait of Hormuz Oil Route," *B.B.C. News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16344102>.

⁷⁹ Mark Thompson, "Can Iran Close the Strait of Hormuz?," *Time*, <http://nation.time.com/2011/12/28/can-iran-close-the-strait-of-hormuz/>.

⁸⁰ "About Iran Watch," Iran Watch, <http://www.iranwatch.org/aboutus/>.

stockpile of enriched uranium,⁸¹ which may be used to build a nuclear weapon. But despite American and European insistence to the contrary, Iranian leadership still asserts that it intends to develop nuclear power to lower its dependence on oil (which it can sell abroad) and to create reactors for medicinal purposes.⁸² Between Iran's threats to close the Strait of Hormuz and claims that the Islamic Republic is developing a nuclear weapons capability, the United States and GCC countries perceive the Islamic theocracy as a threat.

Islamic fundamentalist groups such as al-Qaeda on the Arabian Peninsula also challenge U.S. and GCC security interests in the region. These terrorist organizations challenged the authority of monarchical and authoritarian regimes across the Middle East. Sharing this threat with many of the reigning governments in the Persian Gulf, the United States found numerous allies that eagerly supported the Global War on Terrorism. As Cofer Black, Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism in the President George W. Bush administration, described, "I would cite Saudi Arabia as an excellent example of a nation increasingly focusing its political will to fight terrorism. Saudi Arabia has launched an aggressive, comprehensive, and unprecedented campaign to hunt down terrorists, uncover their plots, and cut off their sources of funding."⁸³ Like Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf countries played an active role in gathering intelligence and attacking terrorist organizations throughout the region. Not only did these groups represent a counter-movement of Western conceptions of democracy and human rights, they also challenged

⁸¹ Valerie Lincy, "More Talks with Iran Set for January," Iran Watch, <http://www.iranwatch.org/update/index.html>.

⁸² "Iran's Nuclear Program (Nuclear Talks, 2012)," New York Times, http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/iran/nuclear_program/index.html.

⁸³ Anthony Cordesman, "Saudi Arabia: Friend or Foe in the War on Terror?," in *Testimony to the Senate Committee on the Judiciary* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2008).

the Gulf regimes that had built strong relationships with the U.S. and that avoided significant confrontation with Israel.

In an effort to prevent and to respond to potential Iranian and terrorist aggression in the Persian Gulf, the United States and the GCC established numerous arms agreements. Fearful of Iranian hegemony in the region, these regimes (and by extension, the GCC) spent eagerly billions of dollars in exchange for a variety of state-of-the-art American weapons systems. The *Wall Street Journal* reported on September 12, 2010 on the single largest arms transaction to a foreign government in United States history. This \$60 billion, 10-year deal with the Saudi government included the following combat equipment:⁸⁴

- 85 F-15 Fighter Jets and a plan to upgrade 70 of these aircraft already owned by the Saudi government;⁸⁵ nicknamed “the Eagle,” this aircraft is designed “to gain and maintain air supremacy over the battlefield,” according to a website operated by the United States Air Force.⁸⁶
- 70 Apache Helicopters;⁸⁷ according to Boeing—the manufacturer of this aircraft—this aircraft is an “advanced multi-role combat helicopter,” equipped with machine guns and missiles.⁸⁸
- 72 Black Hawk Helicopters;⁸⁹ also known as the UH-60, this helicopter is a “utility tactical transport” aircraft that can quickly move between 8,000 and 9,000 pounds worth of equipment and personnel to a target.⁹⁰
- 36 Little Bird Helicopters;⁹¹ designed in either an attack or transport variant, this helicopter can transport up to six passengers or engage targets with a variety of machine guns and missiles.⁹²

⁸⁴ Adam Entous, "Saudi Arms Deal Advances: White House to Notify Congress Soon of \$60 Billion Package, Largest Ever for U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal*, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704621204575488361149625050.html>.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ "F-15 Eagle," United States Air Force, <http://www.af.mil/information/factsheets/factsheet.asp?fsID=101>.

⁸⁷ "Saudi Arms Deal Advances: White House to Notify Congress Soon of \$60 Billion Package, Largest Ever for U.S."

⁸⁸ "Ah-64d_Overview.Pdf," ed. Boeing (2012).

⁸⁹ "Saudi Arms Deal Advances: White House to Notify Congress Soon of \$60 Billion Package, Largest Ever for U.S."

⁹⁰ "Black Hawk Fact File for the United States Army," United States Army, <http://www.army.mil/factfiles/equipment/aircraft/blackhawk.html>.

⁹¹ "Saudi Arms Deal Advances: White House to Notify Congress Soon of \$60 Billion Package, Largest Ever for U.S."

A year later, Congress and President Obama executed the agreement and gave the authority to Boeing to sell the 85 planes and upgrade another 70 of the current Royal Saudi Air Force fleet. According to the *New York Times*, this deal was worth an approximately \$29.4 billion.⁹³ Within a year of the initial signing, the U.S. government had fulfilled half of the agreement.

Although there were American legislators who opposed the deal initially, primarily because it would decrease Israel's relative military hegemony in the region, the deals passed. Not only would such agreements promote a U.S.-Saudi relationship, they also contributed to regional defense against Iranian aggression. As Professor Gregory Gause III stated, "I see this more in the longer-term effort by the administration to signal that even with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the U.S. is still committed to the defense of its allies in the gulf and to the containment of Iran."⁹⁴ Despite the end to its combat operations in Iraq, the United States will remain a significant military force in the Persian Gulf.

Professor Gause also pointed to another important dynamic in U.S.-Saudi relations. As the Arab Spring spread across the Middle East, undemocratic Arab regimes—such as the Saudi royal family—grew uncomfortable, especially once the United States government began supporting popular protests. These governments understood that what happened in Egypt or Libya could happen in Saudi Arabia or the U.A.E. Gause

⁹² "Ah/Mh-6 'Little Bird'," Military.com, <http://tech.military.com/equipment/view/89722/ah-mh-6-%27little-bird%27.html>.

⁹³ Mark Lander and Steven Lee Myers, "U.S. Agrees to \$30 Billion Arms Deal, U.S. Bolsters Saudi Ties," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/30/world/middleeast/with-30-billion-arms-deal-united-states-bolsters-ties-to-saudi-arabia.html>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

explains, “After some tension-filled months this year over Egypt and Bahrain, both sides have agreed to disagree on that [support for popular protests for democratic reform], and agree on their common interests.”⁹⁵ The U.S.-Saudi arms deal, which passed just last year, presented an opportunity for the two countries to refocus on the threat of Iran.

From the perspective of the Saudi government, the newly acquired munitions would serve a variety of purposes. Shortly after the announcement of this historic arms deal, senior officials from the Departments of State and Defense described the Saudi government’s intentions for the new weapons. As the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs described,

The procurement of the new F-15SA, which stands for Saudi Advanced aircraft and the conversion of the Saudis’ existing F-15S fleet to a common configuration and the possible training contingent in the continental U.S. will provide sustained professional contacts as well as common training support into the 21st century. As for the helicopters – the Apaches, Blackhawks, and Little Birds – we believe that these versatile platforms will be able to conduct a number of critical missions in Saudi Arabia that are essential for the Kingdom’s self-defense. We foresee these helicopters providing area security for Saudi military forces, protecting the borders, and defending critical energy infrastructure sites and installations.⁹⁶

Andrew Shapiro, the Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs explained how—in accordance with the Arms Export Control Act—“the Secretary of State is responsible for providing continuous supervision and general direction of arms sales. This includes determining whether proposed arms sales or export of defense articles and services are authorized and ensuring that they best serve U.S. foreign policy,”⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Lander and Myers, "U.S. Agrees to \$30 Billion Arms Deal, U.S. Bolsters Saudi Ties."

⁹⁶ Andrew Shapiro and Alexander Vershbow, "Briefing on Pending Major Arms Sale," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/t/pm/rls/rm/149749.htm>.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

suggesting that such weapons would only be used to further U.S. interests in the Persian Gulf.

Although much smaller in scale, the United States has made a variety of other arms agreements with the rest of the states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. In December of 2011, Congress agreed to sell the United Arab Emirates “an advanced antimissile interception system,” worth \$3.5 billion.⁹⁸ At the end of last year (2012), the U.S. government also approved the sale of a missile defense system produced by Lockheed Martin Corporation to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.⁹⁹ Then, in May of 2011, the State Department released a statement that it would resume the sale of military equipment to the government of Bahrain, emphasizing that the items would only be used in defense of external threats. As one senior official explained, “We’ve made this decision mindful of the fact that there remain a number of serious unresolved human rights issues in Bahrain which we expect the Government of Bahrain to address.”¹⁰⁰

As the United States military pulled back troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and Iran threatened Arab regimes, U.S. and G.C.C. governments continued to find common ground. Their mutual concern over the threat of potential Iranian aggression in the Persian Gulf led to some of the largest arms deals that the United States—and even the world—has ever seen. The threat of Iran united the governments of the United States and the G.C.C. countries more than any other threat or opportunity. As these governments continue to negotiate arms deals, each emphasizes “interoperability” and the

⁹⁸ Jim Wolf, "U.S. In \$3.5 Billion Arms Sale to U.A.E. Amid Iran Tensions," *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/12/31/us-usa-uae-iran-idUSTRE7BU0BF20111231>.

⁹⁹ "U.S. Clears Sale of Lockheed Missile Defense System to U.A.E., Qatar," *ibid.*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/11/06/us-lockheed-missiles-mideast-idUSBRE8A507J20121106>.

¹⁰⁰ "Senior Administration Officials on Bahrain," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/05/189810.htm>.

compatibility of the militaries operating with one another. With every deal, the United States government solidifies its alliances with the GCC and the regimes, which make up the organization. As is evident in its relationship with Iran, the United States continues to ensure its own defense and the defense of its allies—such as GCC member states and Israel.

The Rise of the Military Industrial Complex

In addition to oil access and security, supporting the military industrial complex is another important motivation for American security policy in the Persian Gulf. As American military forces return home from Iraq and Afghanistan, many of these veterans find work in private defense corporations whose primary customer is the U.S. Department of Defense. Faced with a tremendous budget deficit, however, the American federal government has withdrawn money from the Defense Department, decreasing the amount of business available to such contractors.

The Arab allies of the Persian Gulf present yet another important opportunity for the United States government. In the era of “fiscal cliffs,” deficit reduction, spending cuts, and tax reform, many policymakers have been forced to make significant cuts to the defense budget. For example, due to a host of technological flaws and its enormous price tag, the F-35 and many other defense development projects may face an untimely end.¹⁰¹ Americans who work for businesses such as Lockheed Martin Corporation, Boeing, or Northrop and Gruman depend on the \$553 billion budget of the Department of

¹⁰¹ Christopher Drew, "Costliest Jet, Years in Making, Sees the Enemy: Budget Cuts," *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/29/us/in-federal-budget-cutting-f-35-fighter-jet-is-at-risk.html?pagewanted=all>.

Defense.¹⁰² Cuts to defense spending may require that the Defense Department modify or end its contracts with such defense contractors, which could lead to additional layoffs and higher unemployment rates.

As the United States military spends less on personnel and equipment, elected officials seek to capitalize by selling American weapons systems to the friendly Arab regimes in the Persian Gulf. These oil-rich governments present a direct opportunity for American defense contractors to sell their products, thereby continuing to employ thousands of Americans. In a statement released by the White House, Principal Deputy Press Secretary Joshua Earnest explained how the \$29.4 billion arms deal to Saudi Arabia—the first episode of a \$60 billion agreement—“will support more than 50,000 American jobs, engaging suppliers in 44 states, and providing \$3.5 billion in annual economic impact to the U.S. economy.”¹⁰³

Former commander of the U.S. 5th Fleet and retired Vice Admiral Charles Moore, now the Regional President of Lockheed Martin for the Middle East and Africa, published an editorial in the *Washington Times* describing how “the United States and its allies need Bahrain more than ever.” He argues that the Bahraini government plays a critical role in helping the United States achieve its security interests.¹⁰⁴ The United States’ Arab allies in the Persian Gulf not only provide a first line of defense against Iran and a steady stream of oil, they also present a market for defense contractors—like Mr.

¹⁰² "Department of Defense: The Federal Budget, Fiscal Year 2012," The White House Office of Management and Budget, http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/factsheet_department_defense.

¹⁰³ "Statement by Principal Deputy Press Secretary Joshua Earnest on U.S. Sale of Defense Equipment to Saudi Arabia," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/29/statement-principal-deputy-press-secretary-joshua-earnest-us-sale-defens>.

¹⁰⁴ Charles Moore, "Moore: Bahrain, a Vital U.S. Ally," *The Washington Times*, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2011/nov/30/bahrain-a-vital-us-ally/?page=all>.

Moore's current employer, Lockheed Martin¹⁰⁵—who desperately seek new sources for their products. Because of these agreements, these Arab governments receive some of the most advanced weapons systems that may be used to defend against Iranian aggression and to maintain internal security within their countries. Concern over the G.C.C. countries' access to the international oil market, defending against Iranian aggression, and the sale of weapons systems and military equipment are each significant areas where the interests of the United States, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain and the U.A.E. overlap.

The U.S. Response to the Arab Spring

On December 17, 2010, Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself in front of a government building in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid. Protests erupted throughout his country and soon ignited in countries throughout the Arabic speaking world. Less than two months after December 17th, President Ben Ali fled the country.¹⁰⁶ After decades of oppression, thousands gathered in the streets regardless of religion or gender and overthrew the authoritarian regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Since that famous day, the U.S. government pledged military support to some movements, while focusing less attention on others. As American political leaders voice their support for the democratic ideals of such movements while calling for Middle Eastern governments to accept greater reform, the United States only seems to support these uprisings when it can ensure its interests in the region are not at jeopardy.

¹⁰⁵ Moore, "Moore: Bahrain, a Vital U.S. Ally."

¹⁰⁶ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 63.

Within several months of the initial protests in Tunisia, demonstrations erupted in the streets of Cairo and other major cities across Egypt, a country that is home to more than 83 million people and often regarded as the center of Arab art, culture, politics.¹⁰⁷ While Egypt's GDP grew steadily in the years before the Egyptian uprising, Egyptians experienced growing inequality.¹⁰⁸ Men, women, and children gathered in the streets to protest and the Egyptian Ministry of Interior's secret police met them.

As the secret police brutally attempted to suppress the protests, the goal of the protests changed. Egyptians began to call for the end of President Hosni Mubarak's regime. The situation had escalated to such a degree that Mubarak's administration ordered the Egyptian military to maintain order in the cities. Despite their orders, however, the Egyptian military did not attack the protesters.

On February 11, 2011, Mubarak gave a televised speech in which he pledged to establish a new government with new ministers and political reform. He did not give any indication that he would step down. The thousands of protesters gathered in Tahrir Square continued to protest and President Obama responded to the speech saying, "The Egyptian government must put forward a credible, concrete, and unequivocal path toward genuine democracy and they have not seized that opportunity." As Noueihed and Warren suggest, it was clear that "Mubarak had lost US support."¹⁰⁹ In a matter of days, Mubarak stepped down and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took over the country until elections could be held.

¹⁰⁷ "Egypt," Central Intelligence Agency, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/eg.html>.

¹⁰⁸ *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 100-01.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

The implications of this message were enormous and—to the monarchies of the Persian Gulf—menacing. After a few weeks of internal protest, the United States withdrew its support for a government, which had been an ally for decades. What assurance did the governments of countries like Qatar or Bahrain have that the United States would not withdraw its support at the first sign of internal unrest? The U.S. withdrawal of its support for Egypt caused significant tension in its relationship with Saudi Arabia in particular. The Saudi monarchy “reportedly threatened to prop up Mubarak rather than see him ‘humiliated’ as the U.S. withdrew its support.”¹¹⁰

Given Saudi Arabia’s critical role as a primary oil supplier to the United States, the U.S. government could not afford to abandon its relationship with the Saudi monarchy. While the discussions between the U.S. and Saudi governments during this time are secret, it seems that American policymakers agreed not to focus much attention on the Arab Spring in Bahrain and the Eastern regions of Saudi Arabia. In doing so, the U.S. government maintained its strong ties to the Persian Gulf, thereby ensuring its access to oil.

The U.S. government also refrained from taking a strong position on the uprisings in Bahrain. Despite voicing initial concern over the protests, President Obama’s administration has withheld its support for the calls to overthrow the al-Khalifa regime. As international concerns grow over the status of Iran’s nuclear weapons program, the United States also maintains the U.S. Naval Headquarters of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, which is responsible for operations in the Arabian Sea, Red Sea, Gulf of Oman, and parts

¹¹⁰ Nicolas Kitchen, *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East? The Contradictions of Hegemony: The United States and the Arab Spring*, L.S.E. Ideas (London: The London School of Economics, 2012).

of the Indian Ocean.¹¹¹ A center of recent political unrest since February 2011, the Bahraini government is also an important U.S. ally in Persian Gulf region.

Bahrain's importance to the United States is not the only factor that made the uprisings unique. While protesters cried out for a new democratic constitution, the Bahraini government led by King Hamad bin al-Khalifa advanced a different narrative. Spending millions of dollars on the services of American and British public relations firms,¹¹² the Bahraini monarchy described the protests as Iranian attempts to subvert the Sunni government. The official claims of the Bahraini regime played on the sectarian differences, which have been present since the country's formation. Although the Bahraini government has not released statistics on the number of Sunni and Shia Muslims in its country, the Bahrain Center for Human Rights estimates that Shiites could make up as much as 73% of Bahrain's population.¹¹³ Ever concerned over the status of the Iranian nuclear weapons and wary of the Bahrain's critical role in U.S. operations in the Middle East, President Barack Obama and his administration acknowledged the protests early on,¹¹⁴ but did not support the uprisings as they had during the Arab Spring movements in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia or Syria.

As Nicolas Kitchen, a doctoral student at the London School of Economics writes, "The United States has had to tread a fine line between support for its values—and what it conceives as its long-term interests—represented by political reform in the region, and the protection of what it perceives as its core regional interests."¹¹⁵ As a result, the U.S.

¹¹¹ Commander, "About U.S. Naval Forces, U.S. 5th Fleet".

¹¹² "P.R. Watch: Keeping an Eye on the Kingdom's P.R.".

¹¹³ "Religious Freedom for Shia in Bahrain: "Systematic Oppression and Marginalization"".

¹¹⁴ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 155-56.

¹¹⁵ Kitchen, *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East? The Contradictions of Hegemony: The United States and the Arab Spring*.

government's response to the uprisings in Bahrain has been muted, even in the face of what some have called "the worst human rights violations of the Arab Spring."¹¹⁶ To protect and promote its interests in the Persian Gulf, the United States has supported the al-Khalifa regime and the GCC's Peninsula Shield Force, two organizations, which continue to suppress the democratic protests in Bahrain.

¹¹⁶ Kitchen, *After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East? The Contradictions of Hegemony: The United States and the Arab Spring*.

Gulf Cooperation Council Security Policy

The Peninsula Shield Force and the Bahraini Spring

Since the Arab Spring erupted in Bahrain in February 2011, the Gulf Cooperation Council and its paramilitary organization, the Peninsula Shield Force, attempted to downplay the protests in Bahrain. The role of the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF) was critical to the suppression of the uprisings in Bahrain. Although American interests differed from those of the GCC, the PSF intervention achieved both parties' interests. This section analyzes how these interests overlap.

One of the primary interests of the GCC is the common defense of its member states from Iranian aggression. As previously discussed, this motivation has been the guiding *raison d'être* for the organization since its founding. When protesters organized in the streets of Bahrain, the GCC labeled the demonstrations as Iranian attempts to subvert Arab authority by framing the unrest in sectarian language. To date (1 February 2013), the protests that have occurred in GCC countries took place in regions with Shia majorities or significant Shia populations.

While the GCC member states share common interests with regards to the Arab Spring, tensions arose within the organization over how to handle the protests in Bahrain. Omanis and Kuwaitis threatened to go on strike, should their governments send in their national militaries to suppress the uprisings.¹¹⁷ As a result of significant domestic opposition, Kuwait sent its warships to protect the coasts of Bahrain without deploying

¹¹⁷ "Different Kinds of Intervention: Groups Respond to G.C.C. Troops Entering Bahrain," *Jedaliyya*, no. 25 February 2013, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/906/different-kinds-of-intervention_groups-respond-to-.

ground forces.¹¹⁸ Despite the similarities of its member states, the protests in Bahrain illuminated some of the tensions within the GCC.

The Peninsula Shield Force and the GCC framed the political unrest as an “external” threat to Bahrain and the rest of the region, suggesting that the uprisings were a result of Iranian intrigue. By labeling the threat as external, the GCC justified the deployment of Peninsula Shield Forces to maintain order in Bahrain. In spite of this narrative, Kuwaitis defiantly opposed sending in the Kuwaiti national military to maintain order on the ground in the Bahrain.

On March 15, 2011, around 4,000 troops of the Peninsula Shield Force rode over the King Fahd Causeway in military armored personnel carriers to Bahrain.¹¹⁹ While these forces mobilized to support coalition forces in the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, this was the first time the PSF deployed unilaterally. In an interview with a reporter from the London-based newspaper *Asharq Alawsat*, the commander of the PSF Major General Mutlaq Bin Salem al-Azima described the role of the troops in Bahrain:

We have repeatedly confirmed that our mission is to secure Bahrain's vital and strategically important military infrastructure from any foreign interference. Everybody knows that when a state becomes preoccupied with its internal security, this increases its need to secure its international borders. Bahrain is part of the Gulf region, and its forces make up part of the Peninsula Shield, this means that our undertaking of this task is an important and vital part of the role being played by the Peninsula Shield, according to the conventions agreed upon by the G.C.C. states. This is our role. We understand that the Bahraini security forces – and this is something that history attests to – are highly efficient and disciplined, to

¹¹⁸ Martin Chulov, "Bahrain Hospitals under Siege as Soldiers Maintain Manama Crackdown," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/20/bahrain-hospitals-under-siege-manama>; "G.C.C. Troops Dispatched to Bahrain to Maintain Order," *Al Arabiya News*(2011), <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/03/14/141445.html>.

¹¹⁹ Muqbil al-Saeri, "A Talk with Peninsula Shield Force Commander Mutlaq Bin Salem Al-Azima," *Asharq Alawsat*(2011), <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=24676>; "Peninsula Shield Forces Enter Bahrain to Maintain Order," *ibid.*, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=1&id=24509>.

the point that this situation did not require the utilization of the Peninsula Shield Bahraini special forces, which are stationed in certain areas to protect the Bahraini borders. This confirms that our forces did not come [to Bahrain] due to the internal affairs in the country, but for a more important reason [to protect the borders].¹²⁰

General al-Azima made it clear throughout the interview that the role of the PSF was exclusively to defend Bahrain from foreign threats and “to help the [Bahraini] government to bring goodness, peace, and love to Bahrain.”¹²¹

Contrary to General al-Azima’s insistence that the PSF did not intervene in Bahrain because of “internal affairs,” these forces played a critical role in supporting the Bahraini security and military forces that were tasked with suppressing the uprisings. By guarding significant government buildings and infrastructure, the PSF allowed Bahraini defense and security forces to devote more equipment and personnel to clear protesters out of the Pearl Roundabout, the symbolic center of the Bahraini protest movement. On March 14, 2011, the PSF arrived in Bahrain and by March 18, the Bahraini security apparatus had regained control of the capitol.¹²²

Contrary to the statements of the GCC, however, there is little evidence to support the claims that the uprisings in Bahrain are in any way organized by or connected to Iran. Although many of the protesters *are* Shia, sharing the same faith as many Iranians, opposition groups have called for democratic reforms rather than any kind of Shiite theocracy. Although the Bahraini regime labeled the demonstrations as “Shia,” the demonstrations—which included Sunnis as well as Shiites—called for regime change and a

¹²⁰ "A Talk with Peninsula Shield Force Commander Mutlaq Bin Salem Al-Azima," *ibid.*, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=24676>.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy."

new constitution.¹²³ When meeting with senior Bahraini government officials, U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said that he “expressed the view that we had no evidence that suggested that Iran started any of these popular revolutions or demonstrations across the region.”¹²⁴ The Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, a third party review of the protests and the Bahraini government’s response, also found no link between the opposition groups and Iran, quoting Supreme Leader of Iran Grand Ayatullah Ali Khomeini who compared the unrest to other Arab Spring movements across the Middle East.¹²⁵ There is still no evidence to support the claim that the protesters had an Iranian agenda.

After the Peninsula Shield Force intervened in Bahrain, the United States remained carefully neutral, asking that all security forces respect the human rights of Bahrainis while making it clear that the GCC intervention in Bahrain was “not an invasion.”¹²⁶ Senior U.S. government officials declined to answer specific questions on the nature of the PSF intervention in Bahrain. While the diplomatic discussions between the United States and Saudi Arabia during this time were not publicly published, it seems likely that the Saudi government would not tolerate American criticism for this intervention. The U.S. government, fearful of jeopardizing its relationship with one of its strongest allies in the Middle East, accepted this position.

¹²³ Law, "Bahrain Protests Prompt Global Concerns".

¹²⁴ Elisabeth Bumiller, "Gates Tells Bahrain's King That 'Baby Steps' to Reform Aren't Enough," *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/13/world/middleeast/13military.html?_r=0.

¹²⁵ "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," ed. Mahmoud Cherif Bassiouni (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011), 385.

¹²⁶ " Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jay Carney, Nuclear Regulatory Commission Chairman Greg Jaczko and Deputy Secretary of Energy Dan Poneman," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/14/press-briefing-press-secretary-jay-carney-nuclear-regulatory-commission->.

While the GCC and the PSF maintain that their interests are the security of their member states from “external” threats, their current military capabilities do not match those of Iran. In a report, which he submitted to the U.S. Naval War College in 2000, U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Glen Kuffel examines the PSF’s capabilities. He writes,

The Peninsula Shield Force must more fully develop its capabilities as a military force before it is able to unilaterally defend the Gulf Cooperation member-states’ borders. Until then reliance on foreign intervention, namely from the United States, will continue to be required to support the Gulf Cooperation Council’s security needs.¹²⁷

Since this report was published, the Peninsula Shield Force has still not developed the capabilities to defend the GCC member states from potential Iranian aggression. Officials of the GCC reported that they expanded the paramilitary organization to 30,000 soldiers,¹²⁸ while the latest estimates suggest that there are over 1 million in the Iranian military.¹²⁹ Even if the PSF responded to a confrontation with Iran, the chances of this organization winning would be very slim without the support of the United States.

To compensate for their lesser size, Gulf states have augmented their military capabilities by turning to private defense contractors. Jon Michaels, a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles, analyzes this trend extensively in a 2012 paper, “Private Military Firms, The American Precedent, and the Arab Spring.” He describes how the United Arab Emirates turned to the C.E.O. of Blackwater, Erik Prince, for help establishing a special operations force. Bahrain also turned to private military

¹²⁷ Glen P. Kuffel, Jr., "The Gulf Cooperation Council's Peninsular Shield Force," (Newport, Rhode Island: Naval War College, 2000).

¹²⁸ "Gulf States Agree to Expand Regional Force of 30,000 Troops," *World Tribune*, <http://www.worldtribune.com/2012/05/29/gulf-states-agree-to-expand-regional-force-of-30000-troops/>.

¹²⁹ Anthony H. Cordesman and Khalid R. Al-Rodhan, "The Gulf Military Forces in an Era of Asymmetric War: Iran," 7.

corporations to hire additional security forces, including thousands of Sunni Pakistanis,¹³⁰ to suppress the political unrest there. As Michaels rightly suggests, the rise of these non-state militaries could pose significant problems for democratic movements like the Arab Spring,¹³¹ considering that these multinational corporations offer their services internationally without oversight from any one state.

Since the PSF intervention in Bahrain, the GCC has continued to organize joint military training exercises for the national militaries of its member states.¹³² Additionally, the supranational security organization has advanced initiatives to further consolidate the GCC's member states by establishing an economic, political, and military union of Gulf countries. Analysts such as David Roberts of *Foreign Policy* find this arrangement unlikely to come about in the near future, but Bahrain—which is currently struggling economically as a result of spent oil reserves—and Saudi Arabia—which is eager for greater influence in its neighboring countries—may create a precursor to such a union.¹³³

Regardless of the internal politics between its member states, the Gulf Cooperation Council has ensured that the al-Khalifa regime remains in power. This has been primarily a function of Saudi financing and military support. Whether or not the member states the GCC seek further cooperation, it seems that the organization will not allow for a transition to democracy in Bahrain. Honoring its relationship with Saudi

¹³⁰ Mujib Mashal, "Pakistani Troops Aid Bahrain's Crackdown," *Aljazeera*, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/07/2011725145048574888.html>.

¹³¹ Michaels, "Private Military Firms, the American Precedent, and the Arab Spring".

¹³² "B.D.F. Contingents Partake in Conclusive Phase of the Peninsula Shield Drill9," *Bahrain News Agency*, <http://www.bna.bh/portal/en/news/548014>.

¹³³ David Roberts, "Gulf Disunion," *Foreign Policy*, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/02/gulf_disunion.

Arabia, the United States government has called on the GCC to respect basic human rights without significantly challenging its policies.

The Bahraini Spring

While the U.S. and the GCC have considerable interests in the outcome of the political unrest in Bahrain, the motivations for Bahraini opposition groups differ drastically. Many academics and journalists increasingly refer to the protests in Bahrain as a failed attempt to overthrow the al-Khalifa regime and implement authentic democratic reform. Despite these claims, however, the protests continue and opposition political organizations such as *al-Wefaq* continue to demand further reform from the Bahraini government.

To explain the frustrations of Bahraini protesters and how these demonstrations came to fruition, this section begins by analyzing the years leading up to the protests. As Noueihed and Warren describe, “the 2000s had been a decade of hope and frustration for [many] Bahrainis.”¹³⁴ In March 1999, Shaykh Isa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, the King of Bahrain at the time, passed away. His son, Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, inherited the throne after promising reform in the years prior to his reign.¹³⁵ Many Bahrainis anticipated his ascension and King Hamad lived up to their expectations early on in his rule. He showed no hesitation in visiting neighborhoods that were havens of rebellion throughout the 1990’s. He allowed the creation of *al-Wasat*, an opposition newspaper whose name in English means “the Center,”¹³⁶ and instituted the National Action Charter, “a constitutional declaration that promised to protect individual freedoms and equality, to restore the rule of law and to work towards a constitutional monarchy with a bicameral

¹³⁴ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 144.

¹³⁵ Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 1.

¹³⁶ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*.

parliament and separation of powers, ending the strife that had convulsed the country since 1994.”¹³⁷ According to a report published by the Gulf Research Center,

The Charter . . . made Bahrain a constitutional monarchy, Shaykh Hamad the King, and the al-Khalifa family the hereditary rulers of the island. A parliament was to be established with two chambers having equal legislative powers: the Council of Deputies consisted of 40 members elected by popular vote. A consultative council, the Shura Council, also composed of 40 people but was appointed by the King. The executive, the legislature, and the judiciary were to be separated. All citizens were made equal in the eyes of law, regardless of their religion, sect or social class. A Constitutional Court and Audit Bureau were to be established and enjoy full independence.¹³⁸

The National Action Charter was a document unlike anything else in Bahrain’s young history; it decreed the country’s first concrete steps towards democratic government.

As King Hamad’s “honeymoon” wore on, however, his regime faced increasing challenges. As opposition “societies”¹³⁹ such as *al-Wefaq*—or the Islamic National Accord Association¹⁴⁰—won seats in parliament, they exposed cases of corruption within the Bahraini government and called for further reform. This exacerbated tensions between the Shia and the Sunni as the societies who made such claims were primarily Shia.¹⁴¹ Among other hardliners within the al-Khalifa family, King Hamad’s uncle Khalifa bin Sulman al-Khalifa, the Bahraini Prime Minister since the country gained its independence from Britain in 1971, adamantly opposed reform.¹⁴²

¹³⁷ *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 145; Gianluca Paolo Parolin, "Generations of Gulf Constitutions: Paths and Perspectives," in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, ed. Abdulhadi Khalaf and Giacomo Luciani (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2006), 65-70.

¹³⁸ Andrzej Kapiszewski, "Elections and Parliamentary Activity in the G.C.C. States: Broadening Political Participation in the Gulf Monarchies," *ibid.*, 108-09.

¹³⁹ Political parties are outlawed in Bahrain. Instead, political societies are allowed to run after they receive the necessary licenses from the Bahraini government.

¹⁴⁰ Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 3.

¹⁴¹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 148.

¹⁴² Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 1.

Al-Wefaq and other opposition groups made allegations that the Bahraini government implemented an unfair naturalization policy by opening the borders to Sunnis in preparation for the next election cycle¹⁴³ and refusing Shiites employment in the Bahraini Defense Force.¹⁴⁴ Amid the calls for reform, the Bahraini monarchy withdrew some of the freedoms it had promised and the political situation in Bahrain seemed tense when the Arab Spring broke out in Cairo and Tunis.¹⁴⁵ Many laws proposed by the Bahraini National Assembly stalled between 2006 and 2010 due to “lack of consensus,”¹⁴⁶ causing further frustration and laying the framework for political unrest.

Ten years after King Hamad decreed the National Action Charter on February 14, 2011, hundreds of Bahraini protesters gathered at the Pearl Roundabout,¹⁴⁷ a symbol of Bahrain’s history as a pearl exporter in the heart of the capitol city, Manama.¹⁴⁸ The Bahraini government responded to the protests by sending in security forces, which fired tear gas canisters and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds.¹⁴⁹ Although King Hamad authorized the annual \$2,700 stipend to Bahraini citizens, the use of violence enraged the protesters.¹⁵⁰ On the first day of the demonstrations, one protester had been killed; the following day, security forces descended on the funeral procession, leaving a second

¹⁴³ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 148-49; Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 4.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁴⁵ *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 151.

¹⁴⁶ Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 3.

¹⁴⁷ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 152; Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 7.

¹⁴⁸ "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 7.

¹⁴⁹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 152.

¹⁵⁰ Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 7.

dead.¹⁵¹ The situation escalated and the demonstrations swelled with thousands of angry Bahraini protesters.

On March 8th, the opposition groups *al-Haq* (The Right), *Wafa* (Fidelity), and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement held a news conference at the Pearl Roundabout, calling for “the overthrow of the regime and the creation of a democratic republic.”¹⁵² The Bahraini government, which was running out of finances to devote to the expensive suppression, met with the GCC, which promised \$10 billion to help the monarchy regain some control of the country.¹⁵³ Unsatisfied with the progress, however, the GCC mobilized Peninsula Shield Forces to intervene to restore order and “King Hamad declared (Royal Decree Number 18), a three-month state of emergency.”¹⁵⁴ Freed up by the Peninsula Shield Forces, which protected strategic locations, Bahraini security forces managed to clear the protesters with batons, shields, tear gas, sound bombs, rubber bullets and shotguns from the Pearl Roundabout and to destroy the monument at the center by March 18th.¹⁵⁵

Although the U.S. government opposed the crackdown, it did little to stop the intervention. Concerned that an overthrow of the regime or inaction from the al-Khalifa regime would give Iran greater influence in Bahrain, U.S. officials implemented a policy whereby they condemned human rights violations without challenging Saudi interests. Throughout the uprisings, the U.S. government did not sell missiles, Humvees, tear gas

¹⁵¹ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 152; Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 7.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 153-54.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 155; Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 9.

¹⁵⁴ "Peninsula Shield Forces Enter Bahrain to Maintain Order"; Muqbil al-Saeri, "A Talk with Peninsula Shield Force Commander Mutlaq Bin Salem Al-Azima," *ibid.*, <http://www.asharq-e.com/news.asp?section=3&id=24676>; "G.C.C. Troops Dispatched to Bahrain to Maintain Order"; Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 9.

¹⁵⁵ "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 9; "Report of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry," 258.

canisters, tear gas launchers, stun grenades and other small arms that were used to suppress the protest.¹⁵⁶ However, the military equipment previously sold to Bahrain and other GCC countries played an important role in the suppression, as NGOs documented. According to Bahrain Watch, the PSF and the Bahraini security forces used 12 gauge #2 and #8 birdshot, tear gas, M113 Armored Personnel Carriers, and possibly M4 rifles all of American origin.¹⁵⁷ Although the U.S. government attempted to prevent Bahraini security forces from using American military equipment, it could do little to stop previous shipments of such weapons. Furthermore, the U.S. did not withhold weapons from the other GCC countries, which intervened in Bahrain.

While opposition estimates range into the hundreds, at least 30 protesters were killed from February to May and thousands of Shiites had lost their jobs as a result of their participation in the protests. In April, the Bahraini government shut down the opposition paper, *al-Wasat*, and arrested a variety of well-known human rights activists and opposition group leaders. The GCC Peninsula Shield Force began to depart on the 1st of June, the same day that King Hamad ended the state of emergency in Bahrain. Beginning on July 1st, the King was offering “unconditional dialogue with the opposition.”¹⁵⁸

In the aftermath of the protests, King Hamad established “a five-person ‘Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry’ (BICI), headed by highly regarded international legal expert Dr. Cherif Bassiouni, to investigate the government’s response to the unrest

¹⁵⁶ "U.S. Resumes Bahrain Arms Sales Despite Human Rights Concerns," *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/05/12/us-usa-bahrain-idUSBRE84A11R20120512>; "Senior Officials on Bahrain," U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/05/189810.htm>.

¹⁵⁷ "Arms Watch: Tracking the Governments and Arms Dealers Fueling the Bloodshed," Bahrain Watch, <http://bahrainwatch.org/arms/>.

¹⁵⁸ "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 9-10.

that began in February, and to file a report by October 30, 2011.”¹⁵⁹ Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle Eastern Affairs at the Congressional Research Service, lays out the core principles of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry’s (BICI) findings in his report “Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy.” According to Katzman, the BICI report recommended

- An elected parliament (lower house) with expanded powers, including the power to confirm or reject a nominated cabinet; the power to confirm or veto the government’s four-year work plan; the right to discuss any agenda item; and the power for the full Council of Representatives to question ministers on their performance or plans. In addition, the overall chairmanship of the National Assembly should be exercised by the elected Council of Representatives, not the Shura Council.
- A government reflecting the will of the people.
- “Fairly” demarcated electoral boundaries.
- Reworking of laws on naturalization and citizenship.
- Combating financial and administrative corruption.
- Efforts to reduce sectarian divisions.
- 82 economic recommendations, including new mechanisms to provide food subsidies to only the most needy citizens.¹⁶⁰

After the report was published, King Hamad also pardoned some of the approximately 2,700 protesters who had lost their jobs as a result of their participation in the protests in the spirit of reconciliation.¹⁶¹

The Bahraini government did implement some of the recommendations made by the BICI. It hired former Miami Chief of Police John Timoney and former Assistant Commissioner of the UK Metropolitan Police to help reform the Bahraini security forces. The police chief’s critics, however, “say Timoney’s handling of protests and gatherings in each of the cities he’s served in are wrought with examples of police abuse, illegal

¹⁵⁹ "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 10.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 10-11.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 11.

infiltration tactics, fear-mongering and a blatant disregard for freedom of expression.”¹⁶²

According to opposition groups such as al-Wefaq, Bahraini government’s attempts at reform have been nothing more than publicity stunts.¹⁶³

Protesters continue to protest the Bahraini government, calling for regime change and respect for human rights.¹⁶⁴ Despite the calls of the opposition, “The sectarian dimension taken on by the conflict poisoned Bahraini society in 2011, even though divisions in the country had not been simply sectarian in nature,” as Noueihed and Warren explain;

Demands for more political rights had crossed religious divides. Historically, both Sunnis and Shiites had been involved in union and nationalist movements. In the 1990’s, Sunnis had joined the calls for the restoration of the constitution. But in the battle for the aftermath of Bahrain’s own spring, people who had previously called for unity found themselves pressured to join one or another camp.¹⁶⁵

The sectarian divisions that currently exist in Bahrain came about as a result the policies of the GCC and the Bahraini monarchy. The United States, which sought to maintain its own interests without giving Iran greater influence in the region, remained as neutral as possible while its allies enforced their autocratic rule throughout the mass protests for democratic reform.

¹⁶² Ryan Devereaux, "John Timoney: The Notorious Police Chief Sent to Reform Forces in Bahrain," *The Guardian*, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/feb/16/john-timoney-police-chief-bahrain-protests>.

¹⁶³ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 160.

¹⁶⁴ Bill Law, "Bahraini Dies after Being Struck by Tear Gas Canister," *B.B.C. News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-21547109>; A.F.P., "Bahrain Opposition Plans Revolt Anniversary Protests," *France 24*, <http://www.france24.com/en/20130212-bahrain-opposition-plans-revolt-anniversary-protests>.

¹⁶⁵ Noueihed and Warren, *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*, 161.

Conclusion

While protesters continue to demonstrate in Bahrain risking death and injury, many journalists and scholars increasingly refer to the Bahraini Spring as a failed attempt at regime change. The Bahraini security forces regularly clash with protesters, but the situation receives little attention in the United States or internationally. Indeed, considering the support the al-Khalifa regime has received from the GCC—particularly Saudi Arabia—the chances of Bahraini protesters overthrowing the al-Khalifa regime seems unlikely in the near future.

Despite the challenges in Bahrain, however, the Arab Spring forever changed the Middle East, whether or not governments realize the democratic ambitions of their peoples. From Morocco to Bahrain, people stood up to long-standing regimes that failed to pursue their interests. Using new social media in addition to traditional mechanisms of protest, Arabs defiantly rejected authoritarianism. The movement showed that through collective action and organization, people across the Arab world can quickly topple regimes with considerable military capabilities by nonviolent protests.

Despite Arab rejection of authoritarianism, however, the United States has maintained many of the same policies it implemented during the Cold War, such as siding with dictatorial and monarchical regimes rather than supporting democratic movements or supplying regimes weapons in exchange for “good behavior.” In an era of satellite mobile phones, Internet, and social media, the international community may reject the United States’ insistence on sacrificing principles to achieve larger interests or grandiose goals as American armored vehicles disrupt democratic movements abroad.

Furthermore, this policy of selling weapons to the monarchies in the Persian Gulf assumes that these regimes will remain in power. This assumption, however, is shortsighted. The King of Saudi Arabia, for example, is approaching 90 years old; as the *Economist* described in an article published in 2010, there is evidence of tension within the family over who will succeed him.¹⁶⁶ Perhaps political instability resulting from an event like a tumultuous transition from the reign of King Abdullah to that of another Saudi king could rapidly alter the balance of power in the region.

As anyone with a cell phone or computer connected to the Internet has the ability to upload photos and video of an American-made armored personnel carrier or American ammunition, the United States must take into consideration the value of its brand. While U.S. policymakers frequently promote ideals such as human rights and democracy in their speeches and press releases, American policies reflect tangible U.S. interests much more than such ideals.

During his 2013 Inaugural Address, President Barack Obama declared,

America will remain the anchor of strong alliances in every corner of the globe. And we will renew those institutions that extend our capacity to manage crisis abroad, for no one has a greater stake in a peaceful world than its most powerful nation. We will support democracy from Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Middle East, because our interests and our conscience compel us to act on behalf of those who long for freedom.¹⁶⁷

In the Persian Gulf, however, American interests—such as access to oil and the defense against Iranian influence—do not align with these ideals or the interests of the protesters in Bahrain. At least in the circumstances of Bahrain, the United States must balance

¹⁶⁶ "The Saudi Succession: When Kings and Princes Grow Old," *The Economist*, <http://www.economist.com/node/16588422>.

¹⁶⁷ "Inaugural Address by President Barack Obama," The White House Office of the Press Secretary, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/01/21/inaugural-address-president-barack-obama>.

between its interests (such as access to oil) and the ideals upon which the country was founded upon. These goals, however, are contradictory. To support Bahraini protesters opens the door to greater Iranian influence, while to support the GCC and Saudi Arabia stands against self-determination and democracy in Bahrain.

American policy-makers must be mindful of this balance between interests and ideals. Since the Cold War, the United States has justified many policies to ensure its interests or agenda; the sale of American weapons to authoritarian regimes amidst the protests in Bahrain could cause significant problems for future U.S. foreign policy in the Persian Gulf. Despite its attempts to ensure that American-made weapons were not used to suppress democratic movements in the region, the U.S. government could not control the paramilitary and security forces, which deployed with such weapons and military equipment. If Bahrainis do achieve their goals of overthrowing the al-Khalifa regime and implementing a democratic government, they will be much more inclined to support Iran—a country with similar religion and history—as a result of the U.S. military alliance with the Bahraini monarchy.

Limitations and Counter-Arguments

Currently, there is little research or published information that explains how the Gulf Cooperation Council and its paramilitary Peninsula Shield Force use the weapons and equipment bought from the United States in theaters outside of Bahrain. This subject, in addition to further analysis of the military capabilities of the PSF, deserves more attention. By gathering greater information on the training, posture, and capabilities of these forces, the academic community will learn more about the intended use of these forces moving forward.

While the Bahraini opposition opposes U.S. military sales to the monarchy and to the other forces that have suppressed their demonstrations, they may never topple the al-Khalifa regime and institute a democratic government. Because of the considerable amount of money that Saudi Arabia spends in order to ensure order and stability under the monarchy in Bahrain—there is little chance that the opposition could gather enough domestic and international support to topple the al-Khalifa regime. Instead of supporting the opposition movement, perhaps the United States should continue to provide weapons to the Bahraini regime and the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council to achieve its interests in the Persian Gulf. If the chances are so slim that the ongoing protests in Bahrain do lead to the overthrow of the country’s leadership, then why should the United States deviate from its current strategy if that requires jeopardizing its relationship with Saudi Arabia, one of its strongest allies in the Middle East?

Or, rather than choosing between the opposition and the regime, the United States could continue to supply weapons and military equipment while calling for democratic reform through the current political structure in Bahrain. As an analyst at the Congressional Research Service summarized,

The [President Barack Obama] Administration has not called for the Al Khalifa [regime] to yield to a political transition. The Administration asserts that there is no justification for doing so because Bahrain’s use of force has been dramatically less severe than that used by Muammar Qadhafi in Libya or Bashar al-Assad in Syria, and that the Bahrain government has a long record of reform. The Administration asserts that it has been consistently critical of Bahrain’s use of force against protesters and its continued imprisonment of dissidents.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ Katzman, "Bahrain: Reform, Security, and U.S. Policy," 17.

By maintaining this strategy, the United States may continue to ensure its interests while promoting democracy in Bahrain. Each of these policy options present pros and cons and have been considered.

While these policy strategies achieve United States' interests in the short term, the sale of American weapons to the Bahraini monarchy and the GCC raise serious long-term concerns. Although American policy-makers attempted to ensure that the equipment sold to Bahrain and the GCC in previous arms agreements were not used to suppress the demonstrations, American Armored Personnel Carriers rolled through the streets of Manama in support of the Bahraini monarchy's security forces. This infuriated and demoralized many Bahraini protesters calling for a democratic transition.

Even if the Bahraini opposition does not succeed in overthrowing the al-Khalifa regime and implementing a democratic government, however, images of these Armored Personnel Carriers send powerful messages about the intentions of American foreign policy around the world, perhaps suggesting that the spread of democracy is not as important as the containment of Islamic fundamentalism. As Arabs continue to struggle for democratic governance, U.S. weapons sales to the Bahraini government challenge the ideals on which the United States was founded and they will challenge American interests in the future.

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