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Time to Disband the Bahrain-Based U.S. Fifth Fleet

By Toby C. Jones

The massive American naval base provides legitimacy for the autocratic Bahraini regime, reinforces our problematic reliance on the Gulf, and may be strategically unnecessary



U.S. Navy

After months of popular protests against the regime, Bahraini officials are desperate to convince anyone who will listen, and most importantly to their long time allies in Washington, that the Persian Gulf island nation is returning to normal. On Tuesday, Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa visited the White House, where he offered assurances that the regime is serious about political reform and engaging in a "national dialogue" with the country's beleaguered opposition. Although it has directed muted criticism toward the Bahraini government, the Obama administration has offered repeated reassurances that it intends to stand by the ruling family. The White House appears to believe, or is banking on hope, that the Crown Prince is both willing and able to shepherd the country through the current crisis. But it may be time for the U.S. to reconsider its largest commitment to the Bahraini monarchy -- the massive U.S. Fifth Fleet docked on the island -- and the complicated relationship of mutual dependency that got us here in the first place.

Whatever opening there was for real dialogue in Bahrain, it appears to have closed. While the Crown Prince is busy touring Europe and the U.S. promoting himself as a force for moderation, it's the hardliners in the royal family who currently hold power. Rather than reconciliation, their priority continues to be to oppressing -- and often punishing - the protesters calling for a more representative government. The regime has taken extreme, frequently violent measures to destroy the country's political opposition and defeat the forces of democracy.

Over the last few months, as the regime's security forces have cracked down ever more brutally, the prospects for meaningful reform may well have passed. Since mid-March, when Saudi Arabia sent a contingent of its National Guard into Bahrain to help violently clear the streets of protesters, Bahrain has been the scene of terrible suffering. Hundreds languish in the country's dungeons, where they are subject to horrifying torture and the humiliation of being paraded in front of military tribunals. Thousands of others have been sacked from their jobs.

The island's Shiite majority, long politically marginalized and discriminated against, is paying the heaviest price. They have been stunned into silence by the vicious behavior of the Sunni regime. Bahraini politics have been polarized by sectarianism and the country's rulers are systematically creating an apartheid state. Reconciliation, let alone accountability for those responsible for the violence, is a remote possibility. So deeply ingrained are mutual antagonisms that, if this conflict continues, the most likely outcome may be an enduring hostility and the potential for perennial violence.

American officials are, of course, well aware of all of this. Their reluctance to condemn Bahrain is the result of a deeply ingrained belief in Washington that the U.S. needs Bahrain to help it preserve regional stability and to protect friendly oil producers in the Persian Gulf. Most important is Saudi Arabia, which is connected to Bahrain by a short causeway. The U.S. has had military ties to Bahrain since the 1970s, when its Navy first began using old British imperial facilities there. Since the mid-1990s, Bahrain has been home the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which positions the island at the center of a sprawling military presence in the region. The base at Bahrain, from which the Fifth Fleet projects American force across the Middle East, South Asia, and East Africa, occupies a key physical and political place in U.S. geostrategic calculus.

The fleet carries the burden of patrolling the stormy waters of the Gulf as well as the Arabian and Red Seas, and according to conventional wisdom, for ensuring the flow of oil to global markets. It also serves as a not-so-subtle reminder to Iran that the U.S. is willing and able to protect its "vital interests" in the Gulf with overwhelming firepower.

It is widely believed that the Fifth Fleet has served American interests well. There may have been a time when this was true. Today it is not.

There are a number of reasons why the Fifth Fleet may well have become a political liability, irrelevant,

or possibly even both. The cost of maintaining a large military presence in the Gulf drains American resources and limits the United States' flexibility in dealing with regional crises. Most importantly, its presence enables regional allies to act recklessly. Saudi Arabia would almost certainly not have sent its troops into neighboring Bahrain - a sovereign country - if the Saudi and Bahraini leaderships did not assume they were protected by their patrons in the U.S. military.

It's time for the Fifth Fleet to go. It is not enough that the fleet and its massive base be moved. Rather, it should be eliminated, its personnel and material incorporated into other existing fleets. The United States has effectively been able to monitor the Gulf without having a direct military presence the region in the past. There is no shortage of American military and even naval facilities outside the Gulf that are capable of providing a quick military response if necessary. After all, we survived just fine before the Fifth Fleet was recreated in 1995. With the Iraq war winding down, it is time to draw down the overall U.S. presence in the region. The Fifth Fleet would be a good place to start.

Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have long sought the comfort of American security guarantees. The Arab Gulf states have never possessed the military ability to protect themselves from regional threats and so depend on the U.S. Their domestic security interests have been served as well. As absolute monarchies with small social bases of support, they face the permanent prospect of domestic challenges to their power. They have built powerful domestic security apparatuses, which still receive American weapons sales and training.

Bahrain and Saudi Arabia appear to be taking their relationship with the U.S. for granted, assuming that American dependence on oil allows them to operate from a position of strength. By failing to criticize Saudi Arabia's regional counterrevolutionary efforts or Bahrain's brutality, the Obama administration seems to be currently unwilling to risk upsetting that relationship. The effect is that U.S. has not only been paralyzed by its inability to speak truth to Saudi and Bahraini excess, but has enabled their dangerous behavior as well.

The Arab Spring should make clear that the old autocratic political order is neither stable nor secure. The oil rich monarchies have so far weathered the regional upheaval, but they too are vulnerable. And they know it. Their shared sense of anxiety, urgency, and vulnerability is at the heart of Saudi and Bahraini responses to events at home and abroad.

Aside from enabling brutal behavior, the logic behind our heavy military presence in the Gulf may be outdated. Ever since President Jimmy Carter outlined a strategic doctrine that stated the U.S. would "use any means necessary, including military force" to protect its "vital interests" in the Persian Gulf, the United States has seen its military commitments to the region intensify.

Since the mid-1980s, the U.S. has in a sense been engaged in one long war in the Gulf. It helped intensify the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, led Desert Storm in 1990 and 1991, imposed no-fly zones over Iraq in the 1990s, and invaded Iraq in 2003, all to some extent on the basis of the Carter Doctrine. If security and stability are measured by the absence of conflict, the American military approach to the

Gulf has not been much of a success.

But the Gulf, after all, is a tough neighborhood, and the U.S. has maintained the oil access it's sought. Had the world not intervened in 1990, Saddam Hussein could well have used his captured of Kuwaiti oil fields for political leverage against his many enemies. Iran could try the same using its own vast energy resources. But these anxieties are based on a fundamental miscalculation -- that oil is in tight supply and that its distribution or flow must be protected. These fears are rooted in the oil crises of the 1970s, when Arab oil embargoes and the Iranian revolution shook the world economy and helped tip the U.S. into recession.

The reality is that, today, there is not too little oil. There is too much oil. There has been ever since the 1970s crises led oil producers to develop new energy resources in deep-water wells, oil sands, shale, and heavy crude, all of which have drastically expanded the global energy supply. But oil producers, following the example of oil companies in the 20th century, have been committed, especially recently, to manufacturing scarcity. They do so in order to drive up prices and revenues, a significant share of which they redistribute at home in an effort to buy the favor and the quiescence of their subjects. This is especially true in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Since the late 1960s, oil states have viewed the provision of cradle-to-grave social services as a basic part of their ruling contract. But as they've expanded services and wealth, they have eliminated opportunities for political participation. It is an expensive arrangement, one that depends on sufficient revenues. As a result, the regimes are dependent on their prize for survival.

For all the geostrategic considerations that surround protecting oil, the bottom line is that energy producers have to sell their product. They cannot drink it. Given this, and given that fears of instability drive prices up even further, it is not necessary for outside powers like the U.S. to protect them. In the long run, protecting the oil producers has only entrenched a system in which "friendly" oil powers limit production and, rather than serve global markets, work against them. It is unfavorable but predictable, an arrangement that Washington has accepted for decades. Although successive presidents have come under pressure to end American dependency on Middle Eastern oil, since the early 1970s, billions of petrodollars have recycled through the U.S. economy.

The cost of this arrangement is increasingly high. Just as we have acknowledged that the status quo must end in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, it may be time to match up American values to interests in the Persian Gulf. And that means and engaging with the people of the region, rather than the tyrants who terrorize them. The Fifth Fleet serves only to empower -- and increase our reliance on -- the latter.

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