

U.S. Policy in the Gulf Region

Mr. Lincoln Bloomfield



Emirates
Lecture
4

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The Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research

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U.S. POLICY IN THE GULF REGION

I 'm very happy and honored to have been invited to come this evening to the Emirates Center for Strategic Studies and Research, particularly as a result of the invitation extended to me by the Director, Dr. Jamal Al-Suwaidi.

My talk this evening will be about U.S. policy in the Gulf, but let me start by looking back and setting a bit of the context. In my view, there is a long and honorable lineage to America's involvement and its policy in the Arabian Gulf. It started with oil decades ago, which brought American companies to this region and began a technological and commercial partnership which has in the intervening years really evolved into a strategic, political and security partnership as well. The U.S. Navy has been here in the Gulf for quite some time beginning with its modest presence in the late 1940's, continuing under the name of the MIDEASTFOR (the Middle East Force) and more recently re-christened the Fifth Fleet. It has been protecting important sea lines of communication for quite some time. U.S. involvement accelerated after events of the late 1970's. Although the embargo of 1973 pointed out America's critical dependency on oil from this region, events later in the decade underscored the strategic importance in this region.

Tensions in the region were seriously increased as a

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result of such events as the invasion of 140,000 Soviet troops into Afghanistan and towards the Gulf, the unrest at the Holy Mosque in Mecca, and the revolution in Iran. Soon afterwards, of course, the Iraq-Iran war erupted, creating additional instability in the region. The United States responded with what it initially called the concept of a "rapid deployment force", and one witnessed the development of a strategic defense concept for Southwest Asia. This involved such things as access for military forces, pre-positioning of equipment and joint operational planning. The U.S. central command was created to focus on these strategic equities. In the late 1980's, when Iran mined the Gulf, Kuwaiti tankers were re-flagged by the United States. The U.S., and others, participated in a demining operation and escorting tankers through and out of the Gulf. Of course, the most recent and remembered event occurred in 1990-1991, when the U.S. along with a fellow thirty nation coalition reversed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In all respects, the point I am making here is that the U.S. was working together with the states of the Arab Gulf in defense of shared security interests and Americans were acting with a clear recognition of U.S. national interest.

Above all U.S. security policy in the Gulf has over time been characterized by two elements: (1) a practical sense of how the policy will address the problem at hand

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and (2) a vision of what a more stable region would look like if the policy were fully and successfully carried out.

Tonight, I would like to talk about the security problems at hand in the Gulf today and how they are being addressed and in particular what a more stable Gulf might look like in the future. As a preface, I think it is very important to place this discussion in the context of other agenda items that are occupying Washington's focus. Much has changed since 1991. Indeed it is hard to overestimate the effects of the end of the Cold War on the psyche of the American people as well as its government in Washington. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the end of the Communist threat to the freedom of states and their sovereignty everywhere and the threat of a U.S.-Soviet nuclear war, which was really a principle focus of the national security bureaucracy in Washington, has all but disappeared. The symbols of Presidential power in the United States, the "hot-line" to the Kremlin, the Superpower Summitry, are no longer the principle images that are cultivated by the American Presidency.

There has also been a generational shift in American politics. It is not just the new generation represented by President Clinton and Vice-President Gore, but if one looks at the Congress as well, Republicans as well as

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Democrats, one will find that there is a new generation that has no memory of the Great Depression of the 1930s or the mobilization of the American nation in World War II. There exists a different outlook. As a result, for now at least, Washington's interest in foreign affairs has declined. President Clinton, in my view, has played a historic role in changing the national agenda in Washington, away from national security to domestic issues. The current agenda items in Washington - health care, welfare reform, balancing the Federal budget, job security, education, and other local parochial issues - do not really reach far beyond the American shores. This is a genuine shift in political focus and Mr. Clinton is the transitional figure in the United States that embodies this shift, an American Gorbachev if you will. He has concentrated America's attention on the new domestic agenda - the concerns of its own schools, work places, households and communities - after a period of fifty years in which American presidents, the White House and the government in Washington spoke about an entirely different agenda and bearing the burden of national security and international security.

I mention all of this to add some context to my discussion of U.S. foreign policy prospects in President Clinton's second term. In order for the United States to regain the full measure of the vitality, prestige, and

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influence as a leader in the Post-Cold War world, it is my view that the new generation of political leaders, representatives and the American public as well, must be persuaded that there exists a necessary role and a worthy burden for America to bear. Right now, they are not persuaded. Mr. Clinton has made, in my view, a promising start in his second term by selecting his new foreign policy team lead by Secretary of State Madeline Albright and Secretary of Defense William Cohen. Their predecessors are not to be diminished by what I am saying and Warren Christopher, William Perry and Anthony Lake are highly respected on both sides of the political aisle and honorable individuals, but they were very soft spoken in the way they conducted policy. The Clinton White House did not appear, at least to this out-of-government observer, to want its foreign policy team to make too many headlines during its first term in office. The new team in the second term, however, will have a broader mandate to formulate and execute policy. I think this has already become clear from Mrs. Albright's inaugural tour as Secretary of State.

But what are the foreign policy priorities? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to again place Gulf priorities in the context of the other major issues I see facing the United States. Subsequently, I would list the priorities as follows:

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- (1) **Europe** - The issue of NATO expansion and the attendant concerns of managing the U.S.- Russian relationship will, in my view, be the paramount foreign policy agenda item in the coming months. This is not just because Secretary Albright is a European specialist of long standing, but this agenda has risen to the top and will require high level, including Presidential, involvement every step of the way. Besides NATO, there is also the issue of the Balkans and the former Yugoslavia, where the United States has removed one troop presence, IFOR, but substituted it with a new troop presence SFOR. On the one hand, there is a Dayton peace process that was nurtured in the United States and lead by American diplomacy, while on the other some neighboring states in the region such as Albania and Bulgaria are undergoing difficult economic times and some political instability. So I do think the Balkans, as part of the European picture, will be the first priority of this administration.

- (2) **A close second priority will be Asia.** Secretary Albright has acknowledged that although she does not have the same level of expertise and background in Asian security issues as she does with Europe, she will put her best effort forward to attend to this vital-

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ly important area, an area not only vitally important to the United States but to the Middle East as well. The passing of Deng Xiaoping in China has brought into focus the sensitivities that accompany China's emergence as the strong, growing new force in Asia. I think Secretary Albright and the Clinton foreign policy team will be occupied not only with the China relationship but also with the Korean peninsula where unification between North and South is very much a near-term prospect. Although one cannot predict when, this remains an extremely sensitive area not only because U.S. forces are based there but also since it represents the cornerstone of the security relationship between the U.S. and Japan.

- (3) Third, and not to denigrate its importance, but in the spirit of realism on this short list, is **the Middle East Peace Process**. It is very important in the wake of the belated but much appreciated Hebron solution, that the Israeli-Palestinian, Israeli-Syrian and Israeli-Lebanon track be pushed forward as rapidly as possible. This, I think, is a bi-partisan view in Washington and not a political issue. It is certainly my view, as well as of others, that progress in this area will require not only the direct involvement of Secretary Albright but the direct involvement of

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President Clinton. The peace process is not something that can be delegated and the fact that President Clinton is already receiving the principal figures in the Oval office bodes well for continued high-level involvement in the peace process.

These are three issues overseas. I have to add to them two other issues that Secretary Albright will cope with when she is home in Washington. First, she is going to be fighting for an increased budget allocation for foreign affairs, something the Congress has been reluctant to consider, but which in my view is likely to be worked out in some measure. Attendant to this will be the reform of the foreign affairs bureaucracy. There are several agencies that the Congress is considering folding into the State Department. Although this will have to be worked out and resolved, such plans will occupy Secretary Albright's time and she will expend political capital with Congress to reach a solution. Secretary Albright will also have to deal with the issue of a payment schedule for the United States to repay its delinquent dues to the United Nations, something to which she is directly and personally attached to as you all know.

The other issue which the Secretary flagged in her confirmation hearings was her belief that the United

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States should be an initial signatory and ratify the Chemical Weapons Treaty. Having staked her professional prestige on this issue, you will see her take a direct interest in the ratification process in the coming weeks and months.

So, the question is "**what about the Gulf**". I do believe that the Gulf region will be a focus in Washington and if one looks at the Department of Defense, one could argue that the Gulf actually represents the number one issue facing the Department of Defense in terms of foreign security problems. Secretary Cohen, like his very able and capable predecessor Secretary Perry, can be expected to play a very important role in engaging our friends and security partners here in the GCC, which, I believe, will be an important part of his portfolio. You will also see continued leadership on the part of the U.S. military, General Peay, CENTCOM as well as at the Joint Chiefs of Staff level. I think even Secretary of State Albright, with all of her duties, will exert some influence in this area having particularly in 1994 played a very crucial role in bringing to the attention of various states the situation in Iraq. Specifically, in regard to the lavish spending by Saddam Hussein and people in his circle at a time when the Iraqi people were undergoing and are undergoing terrible suffering, Mrs. Albright as the American delegate to the U.N. was able to very effectively recon-

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solidate the international consensus with respect to the U.N. policy in Iraq.

I think one should also briefly mention some of Secretary Albright's initial appointments. Ambassador Tom Pickering is universally regarded as a leading light, perhaps the leading light, in the U.S. Foreign Service. He has had ambassadorial duties in Latin America, Russia, India, Jordan and Israel making him an extremely knowledgeable and effective player in the State Department. Stuart Eisenstadt, whose foreign affairs background may not be as notable, is nevertheless recognized as an extremely capable player in the State Department bureaucracy. Putting together a team of such caliber, I think, bodes well for an engaged and effective U.S. foreign policy national security bureaucracy. Having said that, my advice would be not to measure the importance the United States attributes to the United Arab Emirates or to the Gulf in terms of who comes here and what level and how often. I think more importantly when our ambassadors in the region, when Ambassador Litt picks up the phone and calls Washington and registers a strong concern or puts something before the Washington administration, I think in some real contrast to the first Clinton term, you will find that there is an engaged, authoritative and active bureaucracy at the other end, one in which the White House has

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essentially delegated to move out and manage this foreign policy process. This is a statement I would not have made with respect to the first term, not because of the people who were in the bureaucracy, but because of the amount of latitude the White House appeared to give them.

That is the good news. I do, however, believe that current U.S. policy in the Gulf suffers from two faults. First, it is too unilateral, especially in respect to Iran. Second, it lacks a vision of where it would like to end up, in terms of what a more stable Gulf region might look like in five to ten years and based on a scenario where U.S. and Gulf Arab interest are secure without so many precious resources being, out of necessity, dedicated to defense and without a need for so called "dual containment."

Let me address the vision issue first. Every other point on the foreign policy agenda that I have mentioned consist of a goal defined by a clearly-defined vision. NATO expansion foresees a broader organization that brings some stability to Central and Eastern Europe, the new democracies of this region. The Dayton process in the former Yugoslavia envisions a solution by which there are institutional relationships and political processes that obviate and mitigate the tendency toward ethnic

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strife and violence. The U.S.-Russian partnership envisions further arms reductions that will lead hopefully to a multilateral process whereby missiles, weapons of mass destruction and other categories of dangerous threats to world peace can be brought under collective management. U.S. engagement with China envisions a very full agenda of agreements and disagreements between two great powers working through a cooperative track that allows for cooperation in the Security Council on bilateral issues and on regional issues of concern to both countries. The Korean peninsula envisions a united Korea and the Middle East peace process envisions comprehensive and total peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Everyone of those visions represents a policy, although not one has occurred in its full extent.

I see no evidence of a comparative vision in Washington's handling of the issue of Gulf security, either with respect to Iraq or Iran. For example, can we not imagine an Iraqi government complying with U.N. resolutions and removing this burden of international sanctions that it has brought on to the Iraqi people. I can. One day, sooner or later, sanctions will be lifted and the Gulf will establish a new *modus vivendi*. A U.S. policy, while pressing for Iraqi compliance with the respective UN resolutions, must look ahead beyond the sanctions.

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In my view, it is time America started thinking about what kind of new relations might be possible with Iraq once the resolutions are fulfilled, even if that day is still very far off.

Meanwhile, Iran is a policy issue which seems to paralyze U.S. officials and politicians. All Americans have somewhat of an emotional view based on two decades of difficulties between the United States and Iran. Iran's policy, for example, has been very unkind to American politicians. President Carter, during his term, saw the take-over of the U.S. embassy in Tehran and attempted a rescue mission called "Desert 1" which failed disastrously. Iran cost Jimmy Carter his presidency. President Reagan, during his term, was caught up in the arms for hostages affair, which was a misguided attempt to get hostages out of Beirut. He was also accused, albeit incorrectly, but investigated nonetheless, of having made a deal with the Ayatollah Khomeini during the elections in 1980, the so-called "October Surprise" according to which the hostages were held longer than would otherwise have been the case. President Bush did not escape the criticism and scrutiny on the Iran-Contra affair either. Even President Clinton has been politically challenged in Washington on the issue of whether he should have notified Congress when he heard that Iran was going to supply arms to the Bosnian Muslims. What

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this tells me is that in Washington politics, the issue of Iran is politically radioactive.

Now there exists ample evidence that Iran's behavior, and by this I mean the government of Iran, is unacceptable and violates values and principles of many nations. Iran is known to be engaged in state-supported terrorism, in assassinations, in bombings and is suspected of playing a role in destabilizing the Arab side of the Gulf. The problem is that the U.S. response to Iran's behavior is not a complete policy.

There is harsh criticism and there are unilateral sanctions, but is that the end of it? Can we Americans embrace Russia, engage China, unify Korea, befriend all of Israel's former enemies who make peace with Israel but see no road to a stable future with Iran? Evidently not. The result is a unilateral U.S. policy which is costly to the United States but not particularly costly to Iran. Let me be clear, I am not advocating a U.S. rapprochement with Iran. I do not think America particularly wants it and I do not believe Iran particularly wants it either. Instead, what I would like to see is a renewed consultation between the United States on the one hand and all states whose principles are violated or whose interest are threatened by Iran's actions on the other. That includes the Arab Gulf states, European countries,

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Japan as well as other Asian nations. There is an immediate need to first find out what each thinks about Iran's behavior and second to combine our wisdom and decide on appropriate policy responses. As part of such a process, I believe, an Iran policy also needs to clearly spell out the steps that Iran has to take in order to remove tensions from the region. The list might be very long or it might be short, but a real policy requires it.

That is what I mean by a vision, a U.S., GCC, European, Japanese concept of where one wants to go and where one wants to end up as partners with shared stakes in the future of this region. I am advocating a common approach rather than a unilateral one. If that means the United States has to give up some increment of its punitive sanctions against Iran in order to achieve a common set of measures, I believe it should be done.

In summary, America's friends in the Gulf have been very patient. They know that we have a long election season in the United States and they know that politically controversial foreign policy nuances are not going to be discussed during such an election season. Our friends in the Gulf have been patiently waiting for President Clinton to mobilize his team for the second term, and there are indications that he is now doing just that. In conjunction, it is time to review our common goals in

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the Gulf. The Gulf War was six years ago. The old coalition, as we saw last September, is showing a few cracks in its seams. Internal security in the GCC states is becoming a factor every bit as important to understand and to accommodate as external security. Every country among this group, although having a shared interest, is taking an independent approach with Iran. My recommendations are that the United States stop looking back to 1991 and look forward and articulate a vision for Gulf security and mobilize support for common objectives. Finally, here in the United Arab Emirates and other GCC states, I hope that you will do your part to ensure that this new generation of American leaders in the Congress as well as in the Executive branch, understand that we have a shared destiny and a very positive security partnership with many political, economic, cultural and social dimensions. I make all these observations and recommendations in the hope that we will truly reach a new plateau of stability and security at some point in the coming years.

Emirates Lecture List of Publications

1. Britain and the Middle East: Into the 21st Century
The Rt. Hon. Malcolm Rifkind
2. GATT and the impact of the GCC countries
Mohammed Saleem
3. The Media and the Gulf War: An Eyewitness Account
Peter Arnett
4. U.S. Policy in the Gulf Region
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