

# CQ WEEKLY

JULY 22, 2013 | www.cq.com

CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY'S MAGAZINE ON GOVERNMENT, COMMERCE AND POLITICS



## A Royal Dilemma

Persian Gulf kingdoms like Qatar and Bahrain are reliable hosts to U.S. military bases, but managing the relationships has become trickier in light of the Arab Spring. **P.1258**

Secretary of State John Kerry speaks with recently abdicated Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani at Wajbah Palace in Doha, Qatar, on June 23.

COVER STORY

# Widening Gulf Of Concerns

As Persian Gulf states compete for influence and try to stave off the Arab Spring, the United States is restrained by its need for military bases in the region

BY JONATHAN BRODER

SOON AFTER THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD'S Mohamed Morsi was elected Egypt's president last year, the tiny but wealthy Persian Gulf emirate of Qatar showered his new Islamist government with \$8 billion in unconditional aid. The move angered not only Qatar's larger Persian Gulf neighbors, which regard the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat to their own monarchies, but also the United States, which saw it as undermining Washington's influence in Egypt.

The Egyptian military's ouster of Morsi earlier this month turned the tables on Qatar. Only hours after the coup, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates pledged a total of \$12 billion in cash and loans to the new transitional government in Cairo. But the new money, which dwarfs the \$1.5 billion in aid that the United States provides annually to Egypt, represents yet another challenge to U.S. power in the region.

The United States finds itself today in an increasingly awkward position with Persian Gulf countries, as they compete for influence in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. The rivalries — and the brash foreign policies the Gulf states utilize to pursue them — are weakening Washington's standing in the region. But with the United States so dependent on the military bases that certain Gulf leaders willingly provide to deter their common enemy in Iran, the region's rulers know that America cannot complain too loudly. Even criticism on Capitol Hill has been rel-



**ANGER:** Egyptian protesters tear a Qatari flag to show their displeasure with Doha's support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

atively muted, with lawmakers keenly aware of the tradeoffs. Relations have only grown more complicated as President Barack Obama, constrained by tight budgets at home, seeks to contain Iran and secure the Gulf's tanker routes, but with smaller U.S. forces and greater participation by the Gulf nations in the region's collective defense. Obama is also urging Gulf leaders to allow greater democratic freedoms, lest they too fall victim to the revolutionary currents of the Arab Spring.

So far, Washington's calls for Gulf leaders to liberalize have backfired, succeeding only in spreading doubts in their royal courts over Obama's commitment to their continued rule. In addition to issues of trust, Obama's approach faces major practical challenges involving sharing security burdens with Gulf allies, the questionable readiness of their militaries to confront Iran and corrosive suspicions among Gulf leaders themselves. Perhaps the thorniest issue is the long-term stability of the Gulf states themselves. Protests against the monarchs erupt daily across the region, although not yet anywhere near the scale of the demonstrations in Egypt.

In Bahrain, such protests have created a particular quandary for the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet, which relies on a base in the tiny island nation to support its operations in the Persian Gulf. Should the continuing unrest there make U.S. access to the base untenable, Navy commanders acknowledge that they have no long-term alternative in the region. (*Bahrain's special circumstances*, p. 1262)



**PARTNERS:** U.S. Marines participate in a multilateral military exercise in Qatar earlier this year.

“Our Plan B is to make sure Plan A works,” says Vice Adm. Mark I. Fox, the deputy chief of naval operations.

#### NO APPETITE FOR U.S. LECTURES

Close U.S. relations with the Persian Gulf date to the end of World War II, when an ailing President Franklin D. Roosevelt met with the father of Saudi Arabia, King Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud, aboard a U.S. destroyer anchored in Egypt’s Great Bitter Lake to agree on a bargain that provided the kingdom with U.S. protection — and investment — in exchange for guaranteed oil supplies at reasonable prices. As U.S. forces supplanted withdrawing British forces in the Gulf in the 1960s, that arrangement came to define U.S. relations with the region’s other oil-rich states as well.

The 1973 Arab oil embargo, imposed because of U.S. support for Israel in the Middle East war that year, chilled relations briefly, but shared economic and security interests soon brought Washington and Gulf leaders together again. U.S. warships protected Kuwaiti oil tankers during the 1980-88 Iraq-Iran war, and more than 500,000 U.S. troops massed in Saudi Arabia before driving the invading Iraqis out of Kuwait in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

But the continued presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia after that war helped generate significant resentment against the United States and spurred the creation of al-Qaida. The Persian Gulf states supported the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, but they vehemently protested when it became clear that President George W. Bush planned to invade Iraq. They warned that the only long-term beneficiary of any such war would be Iran — a prediction that has been borne out after Iraqi strongman Saddam Hussein was toppled and elections brought to power a Shiite-led government in Baghdad that has become a close ally of Tehran. Gulf resentment toward the United States over the Iraq War continues to this day.

Suspicious among Gulf leaders about the depth of Washington’s commitment to their security were kindled in 2011, when Obama withdrew support for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak amid anti-

government demonstrations that quickly pushed him from power.

Former Defense Secretary William Cohen recalls being in the UAE when Mubarak fell. “One of the leaders there said to me, ‘Let me get this straight. Mubarak was your friend for 30 years. He had 18 days of demonstrations, and you threw him over the side. If we have 18 days of demonstrations, are you going to throw me over, too?’”

Since then, the kings, emirs and princes whose families have ruled the Persian Gulf countries for more than a century have shown little patience for U.S. officials lecturing them on the benefits of democratic changes to their rule — changes that, in their view, would only serve to bring to power the Muslim Brotherhood, other hard-line Islamists or, even worse, Shiites backed by Iran. They point to the ongoing political crisis in Egypt as prime evidence.

“The elites throughout the Gulf are not interested in change in any meaningful manner whatsoever, and they are hunkering down to prevent anything from happening,” says Andrew Hammond, a British author and expert on the Persian Gulf who has spent years in the region.

Hammond notes, for example, that in Bahrain, where majority Shiites are demonstrating for greater political and economic freedoms, a promised national dialogue between the ruling Sunni Al Khalifa family and opposition figures has “gone nowhere. The security crackdown continues.” In Saudi Arabia, several Muslim Brotherhood clerics critical of the royal family have been jailed. And in the UAE, more than 60 Islamists were imprisoned with long sentences after their convictions on sedition charges. Even in Oman, traditionally the most tolerant monarchy in the Gulf, the sultanate has put dozens of anti-government demonstrators on trial.

U.S. officials have had little success in convincing Gulf leaders to relax their repressive measures. The State Department still hasn’t replaced its human rights officer at the U.S. Embassy in Bahrain since he was withdrawn in 2011 following threats in the state-controlled and pro-government media. When Secretary of State John Kerry visited Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries last month, he carefully avoided public mention of the security crackdowns.

Virginia Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine, who recently visited the UAE as part of a congressional delegation, exhibited the politesse currently required as the Obama administration tries to balance its human rights concerns with vital U.S. interests in the Gulf. Speaking to reporters on a conference call earlier this month, Kaine termed the crackdown on Islamists in the country a “fact” with no further comment. Then, he praised the UAE as a crucial U.S. ally in the effort to contain Iran, as a moderating influence in Middle East politics and for its stability.

“I doubt there’s any place in that region where there isn’t some potential for unrest, but relative to the standard of the region, the UAE’s general level of civil peace is remarkable,” said Kaine, who serves on both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees.

Jane Kinninmont, a Persian Gulf specialist at Chatham House, a London-based research organization, says the United States is “caught between a rock and a hard place because the opposition groups see the U.S. firmly siding with the Gulf governments, while the governments are very sensitive to U.S. rhetoric about democracy promotion.”

As Kinninmont puts it, “The language of democracy makes the regime nervous while the opposition movements think that it’s just a fig leaf. The U.S. can’t really win.”

#### QUESTIONABLE COMMITMENT

Gulf leaders fear the United States has been distracted by the Arab Spring when the real threat, as far as they’re concerned, is Iran, which they claim is stirring up Shiite Arabs in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

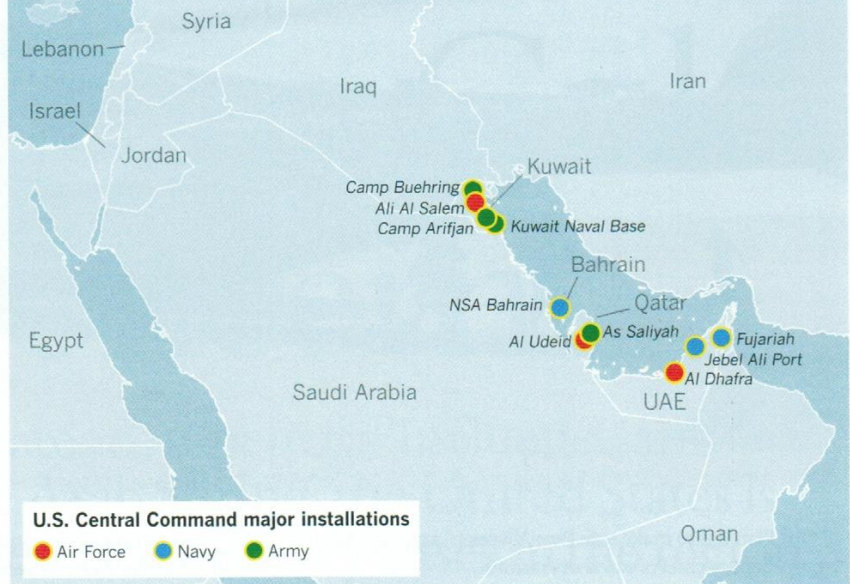
Despite Obama’s warnings that he will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, they worry that U.S. policy toward Iran is not tough enough. Earlier this year, Gulf diplomats expressed concern about the U.S. Navy’s decision to cut back the number of aircraft carriers in the region from two to one as a result of budget constraints.

Cohen, who travels frequently to the Middle East as head of the Cohen Group, a business consulting company, says that in his conversations with Gulf leaders, they cite Obama’s reluctance to get involved in Syria, the diminishing U.S. dependence on Middle East oil, and the president’s “pivot” to Asia as further reasons why they question America’s commitment.

“They are not convinced that Obama’s words of commitment are actually sincere,” says Simon Henderson, a Persian Gulf expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. To be sure, he says, “the Gulf states

## U.S. Bases in Persian Gulf

The U.S. military has built a string of bases in several Persian Gulf nations. The Navy’s Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, where the service has had a continuous presence since 1949. In 2003, the Air Force moved its major air operations command center from Saudi Arabia to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar.



appreciate the American security umbrella, which has been there for many years. But at the moment, they’re anxious about American policy, believing that far from confronting Iran, it is regarded by Iran as being weak. And if American policy is weak, the Gulf states fear they will become vulnerable.”

Optimally, Gulf leaders would like to see a far more aggressive U.S. policy toward Iran, including limited offensive actions to underscore the seriousness of Obama’s threat to use force if needed to stop Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. At the same time, however, these leaders are acutely aware that the United States might not succeed in deterring Tehran’s nuclear ambitions, even if war erupts. As a result, all the Gulf states quietly keep open their own lines of communications to Iran.

“They’re very conscious that the day after, they will still be living in the neighborhood and will continue to have to deal with Iran,” Henderson says.

Indeed, the channels between the Gulf countries and Iran include business ties that some lawmakers suspect of violating U.S. sanctions.

New Jersey Democrat Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has asked the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control to investigate the Kuwait & Gulf Link Transport Company, which has more than \$1 billion in

logistical contracts with the Pentagon, over questionable business dealings with Iran. The Treasury Department declined to comment on any investigation.

#### THE INFLUENCE OF QATAR

Meanwhile, some Gulf countries are moving to fill what they see as a vacuum created by Obama’s trimmed-down approach to the Middle East.

At the forefront is Qatar, which has pursued an unusually activist foreign policy across the region. In some cases, its initiatives have complemented U.S. goals, such as giving a green light for the Taliban to open an office in Doha for peace talks with representatives of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, an initiative that has subsequently stalled. Most important, Qatar also allows the United States to use Al Udeid Air Base, which has become the biggest U.S. Air Force facility and an essential forward operating base in the Gulf.

But in a push to raise its profile, Qatar also has taken steps that go against U.S. interests in the region. It was Qatar, in a bid to help the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, that financed and armed Ansar al Islam, the group suspected of attacking the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya, last September, killing four Americans. Doha also provides millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinian organization

Hamas, a group the United States and Israel consider to be terrorists.

Two House lawmakers — Republican Peter Roskam of Illinois and Democrat John Barrow of Georgia — are trying to take Qatar to task for its support of Hamas, the branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Gaza Strip. In a “Dear Colleague” letter for which they are gathering signatures, the lawmakers acknowledge Qatar’s strategic importance. “However,” they write, “we believe that Qatar’s relationship with Hamas empowers, legitimizes, and bolsters an organization committed to violence and hatred.”

The State Department, wary of angering Qatar, would prefer that they not follow through with plans to send the letter to Qatar’s ambassador to Washington, Mohammed Bin Abdullah al-Rumaihi.

U.S. officials say Qatar also is supplying millions of dollars in weapons to rebel Islamist groups in Syria, including the Nusra Front, which has ties to al-Qaida, and to other groups linked to the Muslim Brotherhood. Saudi Arabia, which has joined with the United States to arm moderate rebel groups, fears that these Qatar-backed Islamist fighters eventually will turn their weapons on the Gulf monarchies, while Washington fears terrorist attacks on the United States.

“Qatar and Saudi Arabia are trying to use their involvement in Libya and Syria as a way of taking control of this disturbing movement called the Arab Spring and leading it in another direction,” away from their own regimes, says Hammond. But in the process, he says, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, longtime rivals, have widened the breach between them, making any coordination with the United States against Iran or in Syria more difficult.

Qatar’s leadership changed last month with the abdication of Emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani and the ascension of his son, Tamin, to the throne. So far, all indications are that the new emir will pursue the same independent-minded — and for Washington, sometimes discomfiting — foreign policies pioneered by his father.

#### ARMED AND UNCOORDINATED

A major component of Obama’s Persian Gulf strategy involves large weapons sales to friendly Arab governments in the region.

Over the past few years, Congress has approved a series of major weapons sales to Persian Gulf allies and Israel worth tens of billions of dollars. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel, visiting the Middle East in April, said

\$10 billion in new proposed arms sales to Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel is meant to send a “clear signal” to Iran that military options remain on the table in regard to its nuclear program. Congress is expected to approve the sale, with includes F-16 fighter jets, KC-135 refueling tankers and advanced precision missile systems.

“The bottom line is that Iran is a threat, a real threat,” Hagel said during the visit. “The Iranians must be prevented from developing that capacity to build a nuclear weapon and deliver it.”

Yet current and former U.S. commanders say that as U.S. troops leave Afghanistan and the U.S. defense budget shrinks, there will be a “resetting” of American forces in the region, and a cutback of naval forces — the most visible U.S. military presence — will be part of that. “Probably one carrier full-time, and another coming in and out, with Iran the focus in the region,” says retired Vice Adm. Kevin J. Cosgriff, a former commander of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet.

As the number of Americans in the region declines, Obama hopes the military forces of the Gulf states will be ready to share the security burden by serving as a “tripwire” to repel Iran in those circumstances that fall short of full-scale war, such as possible Iranian incursions into disputed offshore oil fields, Iranian aircraft buzzing Gulf air space or mine removal activities.

“We’re entering into a period where we’re about to undertake one of the most grueling and difficult military operations, which is

open-ended containment, potentially of an opponent who is nuclear armed. And you need allies to do that,” says Michael Knight, an expert on the militaries of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“You can’t call the U.S. in to handle every push-and-shove incident — it’s too dangerous in terms of escalation, and it’s too costly in terms of our forward presence,” says Knight. “So you need the GCC countries to hold that tripwire and push back against these kinds of probing efforts that you tend to get from aggressive states like Iran, particularly if they’re operating under a nuclear umbrella.”

Saudi Arabia is at the center of U.S. efforts to build an Arab military counterweight to Iran. According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, Saudi Arabia has the largest military, with 240,000 men equipped with advanced armor, artillery, fighter aircraft and warships from the United States and Britain, while the other Gulf countries have smaller but equally well-equipped militaries. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are in talks with Germany about buying attack submarines to develop greater offensive capability. And all of the Gulf states have either acquired long-range cruise missiles or are looking to buy them.

But for all of the top-of-the-line hardware these countries have purchased, their militaries are still not effective fighting forces for any confrontation with Iran, military experts say. Some Saudi units saw limited action during the 1991 Persian Gulf War, while Qatar and



AL UDEID: American and Qatari troops at a 2009 ceremony to open a U.S. forward headquarters in Qatar.

the UAE provided logistical support to the 2011 NATO operation in Libya.

Today, roughly 50,000 U.S. troops are deployed on ships and in an archipelago of military bases running from Kuwait in the north to Oman in the south. The reason for such continued dependence on U.S. forces is “chronic security imbalances in the region,” said a June report by the Kuwait-based Gulf Center for Development Policies.

Most significantly, the Gulf countries, which are riven by deep distrust of one another, lack any kind of unified command to coordinate their forces. “All across the GCC, there’s nothing approaching a coherent military arrangement, absent what is brought to the table by the United States and its allies,” says Cosgriff. “Intra-GCC sharing does not come easily, and there’s no reason to believe it’s going to break out anytime soon.”

While Gulf militaries conduct joint exercises with U.S. forces under bilateral agreements with Washington, the absence of military cooperation and intelligence sharing among the states themselves presents a major challenge for Obama’s strategy. For example, military experts say, each of the Gulf countries has its own PAC-3 Patriot missile batteries, but there is no regional command and control for them. So, in the event of an Iranian missile attack, it’s not clear whether one battery or all of the Gulf batteries would respond.

Pennsylvania Democrat Bob Casey, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Middle East, says he would like more security cooperation among the Gulf countries, especially in light of the fiscal challenges that Washington is facing.

“It’s hard to see a path forward where we’ll have the resources” to continue bearing the full burden of Gulf security, Casey says.

There are also hard political limits to any U.S. strategy that relies on burden-sharing with the Gulf states. Franklin D. Kramer, an assistant Defense secretary for international security affairs under President Bill Clinton, says some cooperation is possible on a case-by-case basis as long as tensions with Iran remain at current levels. But in the event of a major confrontation between Iran and the United States, Kramer predicts the Gulf countries will avoid taking sides, each hoping to keep all of its options open.

“Like us, the Gulf countries don’t want Iran to have a nuclear weapon,” says Kramer, now an international security specialist at the Atlantic Council. “But in a scenario where the United States believes it has to go to war to stop Iran’s

nuclearization, there would be a lot of uncertainty among the GCC states to support such a war as part of a coalition. So, I don’t see common strategic convergence in a broad sense.”

#### LONG-TERM CONCERNS

Looming over any U.S. strategy for the Persian Gulf is the question of the stability of its Arab monarchies and sheikdoms.

Among U.S. military commanders, defense-minded lawmakers and regional specialists, no one suggests that the royal families of these countries are in immediate danger of being toppled. Until now, these leaders — with the exception of Bahrain’s ruling Al Khalifa family — have managed to use their immense oil wealth to buy off internal critics with greater domestic spending. And many experts believe

“Today, the Arab Awakenings pose the most significant test for the [Saudi] Kingdom since its creation.”

— Bruce Riedel,  
former CIA Middle East analyst

they can continue doing so as long as the price of oil remains high. “I have some concerns, but I wouldn’t say I’m worried” that the Gulf monarchies will fall, Casey says.

But many experts say the demands of young Arabs for jobs, a political voice, an end to official corruption and less reliance on the West — all amplified by their savvy use of social media — will eventually catch up with the Gulf state royals, challenging the durability of their partnerships with the United States. Some Middle East experts give the Persian Gulf monarchies five to 10 years before they face serious internal protests.

“I disagree with any suggestion that there’s a monarchical exception, that there’s some idea that monarchs are more legitimate or resilient,” says Marc Lynch, a Middle East specialist at The George Washington University. “I expect the challenges to continue. I expect the value of Western international cover to go down, the cost of exercising brutal force to go up, and the price of oil will maybe go down,” as Iraq increases its exports and U.S. shale oil reaches global markets.

In Saudi Arabia, for example, young Shiites living in the oil-rich but underdeveloped Eastern Province have managed to sustain a protest movement despite a government crackdown that has killed more than a dozen demonstrators and two police officers, says Ahmed Al Omran, a journalist, whose Saudi Jeans blog is one of the most widely read in the Gulf. Other dissidents include Muslim Brotherhood clerics who openly challenge the legitimacy of the royal Al Saud family, Saudi women protesting prohibitions on their driving, and the families of political prisoners demanding their release, he says.

While Saudi officials have tried to control such protests, they haven’t been able to control a steady flow of government criticism appearing on Twitter and other social media. Today, Omran says, Saudi Arabia has more than 4 million active Twitter users among its population of 27 million — a significant ratio.

“Today, the Arab Awakenings pose the most severe test for the Kingdom since its creation,” Bruce Riedel, a former Middle East analyst at the CIA and now a regional expert at the Brookings Institution, wrote in an open memo to Obama earlier this year. Similar protest movements are active in other Gulf states despite efforts to quash them.

Given the global economic stakes and the need for allies to help contain Iran, the United States may have no serious option in the event of revolution in the Gulf states other than to stand by these allies, even if that puts them on the wrong side of history. “As Americans, we would hope to see more representative governments over time, but that’s really for them to sort out,” says Cosgriff.

That, in effect, is what Obama is now doing in the Persian Gulf as economic and political imperatives dictate further drawdowns of U.S. forces in the Middle East and vital U.S. interests compel him to look beyond the chaotic struggles under way in the region and focus on the threat posed by Iran.

“It is very difficult to simultaneously reduce your military posture in the region, contain Iran and push democratic change in the countries that you’re relying upon to contain Iran for you,” says Lynch. “It just doesn’t really work that way.” ■

**FOR FURTHER READING:** *Fiscal 2014 State-Foreign Operations appropriations bill*, *CQ Weekly*, p. 1285; *fiscal 2014 defense authorization bill (HR 1960)*, p. 1052; *Syria debate*, p. 1086; *foreign aid to Arab world*, *2012 CQ Weekly*, p. 1928; *policy toward Arab Spring*, *2012 CQ Weekly*, p. 762.

# Navy's Future in Bahrain Questioned

OF ALL THE PERSIAN GULF COUNTRIES, Bahrain has seen the most turbulence from the so-called Arab Spring. And the likelihood of further confrontations there between protesters and the ruling royal family now has some in Washington questioning the future of a crucial U.S. naval base on the tiny, but strategic, island.

"I fully support efforts to address Bahrain's political unrest before the situation degrades further," Pennsylvania Democratic Sen. Bob Casey, who chairs the Middle East subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee, wrote in a previously undisclosed letter last week to Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel. "However, I am concerned that we apparently have not developed plans for an alternative contingency facility in this strategically critical and dynamic region."

The Navy's Fifth Fleet is based in Manama, Bahrain's capital, where American warships have been calling since the end of World War II. The port, with its deep draft, can handle the largest U.S. ships, including the aircraft carriers, cruisers and destroyers that patrol the Persian Gulf against Iranian aggression. All command and control for the Fifth Fleet is centered at the Bahrain base, which also serves as a logistical hub and dry dock. Under a bilateral security treaty, about 5,000 sailors and Marines, accompanied by family members, serve at the base, bringing the total number of Americans there to roughly 15,000.

"It's enormously powerful to be the Fifth Fleet commander and be able to say we've been here for over 60 years," says Vice Adm. Mark I. Fox, a former Fifth Fleet commander and now the deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans and strategy. "And, inshallah, we'll be here another 60 years."

But the Arab Spring protests that erupted in 2011 have shaken Bahrain's reputation for political stability. What began as a round of demonstrations aimed at securing greater political rights and economic opportunities for the majority Shiite community quickly turned violent as forces loyal to the ruling Sunni Al Kalifa family opened fire on protesters as they began to march on Manama's central financial district. As the protests grew, neighboring Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates sent in forces to help quell the disturbances.

To demonstrate what the government called Bahrain's return to stability, officials went ahead with the country's Formula One Grand Prix auto race in 2012. The race had been canceled in 2011 in response to the protests.

Despite such signs of normalcy, Bahrain's politics are anything but stable. A government report on the disturbances that included a series of recommendations to address Shiite grievances has been largely ignored. And what Bahraini leaders are calling a "national dialogue" among Shiite moderates, other groups and the royal family has made no progress. Protests persist almost nightly, but they are now confined to Shiite villages outside the capital.

"There is no doubt that Bahrain went through a difficult time

during February and March 2011. The legacy of this unrest remains with us to this day," says Bahrain's ambassador to the United States, Houda Nonoo.

## CONTINGENCY PLANS

In view of the continued instability in Bahrain, retired Admiral Dennis C. Blair, a former chief of Pacific Command and former director of national intelligence, says the Obama administration should start drawing up plans to move the Fifth Fleet's command and control functions offshore to a flagship.

"I don't say we should abandon the base in Bahrain," Blair says. But letting Bahrain know that the United States is drawing up such a plan "will send a message to the emir and to the Saudis that they have to be more serious about reform." Saudi Arabia, connected to Bahrain by a causeway, is the island's closest ally.

"These countries are not as stable as we'd like to believe," he says. "They may have avoided unrest in the short term, but in the long term their prospects don't look so rosy."

Blair's concerns are supported by a report published last month by the Brookings Institution. The author, U.S. Navy Cmdr. Richard McDaniel, argues that one possible consequence of Bahrain's continuing political unrest might be the Navy's loss of strategic-basing rights there.

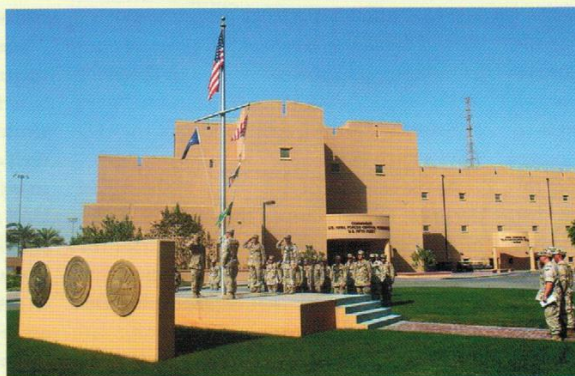
Such a scenario is possible if the monarchy once again cracks down hard on Shiite protesters, in which case the United States would be seen as complicit, or the ruling family is overthrown and hard-line Shiites, who resent U.S. support for the monarchy, come to power.

"We have no Plan B," says McDaniel, a destroyer commander who has spent his entire career with the Fifth Fleet. "The only Plan B is to make sure that Plan A works. And Plan A is to ensure that the security situation remains stable and that we retain our access in Bahrain. So with the unrest that's been going on in Bahrain for more than two years, I believe that we should develop strategic options."

Casey echoed the report's findings, adding that U.S. national security interests might be at risk "if we do not have a contingency plan that would allow U.S. operations in the region to continue unhindered."

Human rights groups have seized upon the basing issue as a way to force a change in U.S. policy toward Bahrain. But McDaniel sees the idea of developing options as purely a strategic precaution.

In his report, McDaniel cites two alternative sites for the Fifth Fleet — New Doha in Qatar, where a port facility, said to be the world's deepest, will be ready by 2016; and Shuaiba in Kuwait, site of Camp Spearhead, a U.S. military facility that includes port facilities that could accommodate frigates. McDaniel says further dredging would be needed to create the 13-meter draft needed for larger warships and aircraft carriers.



**BASE:** The United States has maintained a naval presence in Bahrain since 1949. The island is now home to the Fifth Fleet headquarters.



**ALLIES:** Bahraini Prime Minister Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa meets with Fox in 2010, after he became the commander of the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain. Fox is now a deputy chief of naval operations.

“We have good relations with Kuwait and Qatar,” he says. “With the right negotiations, they would be willing to host alternate locations where we could establish bases if we needed to move the footprint due to unrest.”

#### INSIDE INFLUENCE

Fox, who has a major say in any decisions about Bahrain, says the way to head off any scenario in which the U.S. Navy might lose its Bahrain base is to work from the inside to soften the ruling family’s resistance to political change.

“We have strategic skin in the game,” says Fox, who is “unwilling to cede the Persian Gulf” to Iran. The base “shows that we’re there, that we’re part of this society. And that we want to be a force for good.” He adds, “That’s how we’re going to influence this.”

He also cites the issue of cost in a time of declining defense budgets. “If you’re going to say, ‘Get out of Bahrain,’ you better come with a few billion dollars of infrastructure that we would need to invest to create the capacity that I have here today,” Fox says.

Senior members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, such as Rhode Island Democrat Jack Reed and Arizona Republican John McCain, see no need to consider alternatives for the Bahrain base, also citing cost issues. Even Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden, a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee and an outspoken critic of Bahrain’s harsh treatment of Shiite protesters, says the best way to deal with the situation isn’t to draw up plans for an alternative basing arrangement in another Gulf country, but to keep applying pressure to get Bahrain’s leaders to liberalize their rule.

“I have always said that Bahrain is important because that’s where the fleet is located,” Wyden says. “I don’t see a lot of other options in the region, which drives home how important it is that we keep focusing on reform.”

Both the Pentagon and the State Department also worry about the signal that would be sent to Bahrain and Saudi Arabia if the

United States were to let it be known that it was developing a contingency plan for the Bahrain base. Officials say that instead of nudging Bahrain and Saudi Arabia toward liberalizing their monarchies, such a move would only deepen their fears that U.S. security guarantees aren’t worth as much as they thought.

The administration has reason for such concerns. Last year, the Pentagon moved ahead with a \$69 million weapons sale to Bahrain but refused to sell Humvees and other equipment that might be used to suppress protests. In response, Bahrain bought vehicles and equipment from Turkey.

“It’s clearly a political decision with military ramifications,” says retired Vice Adm. Kevin J. Gosgriff, a former commander of the U.S. Navy’s Fifth Fleet, of any move to consider an alternative naval base in the Gulf.

#### OPEN EAR ON THE HILL

Still, several lawmakers in addition to Casey have begun to pay attention to the arguments of Blair and McDaniel. Georgia Democrat Hank Johnson, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, authored an amendment to the fiscal 2014 defense authorization bill that would have ordered the Defense secretary to produce a report on contingency planning for the relocation of the Fifth Fleet base in Bahrain “should the political stability in Bahrain make their presence in the nation untenable.”

The amendment was withdrawn because the House Foreign Affairs Committee claimed jurisdiction over the issue. But Johnson says he will offer it again when the House takes up the fiscal 2014 State-Foreign Operations appropriations bill later this year.

Meanwhile, Florida Republican Marco Rubio, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, asked McDaniel for a copy of his report, and the Navy commander sat down with a senior Rubio aide to discuss it. McDaniel says they talked about the possibility that Rubio might propose language on developing a contingency plan for Bahrain in the Senate version of the defense authorization bill. The Rubio aide declined to comment.

Some Persian Gulf experts rule out the possibility that Bahrain might become so unstable that the Navy would have to move the Fifth Fleet headquarters elsewhere.

“There is no way — ever — that the Saudi royal family will permit Shias to come to power in Bahrain, ever,” asserts Bernard Haykal, a Middle East expert at Princeton University. “So, given that, I don’t see why Americans have to worry about the base.”

Such confidence may be justified for the short term. But the business of military strategists is to engage in long-term planning, no matter how unlikely the possibilities. After all, the U.S. military had contingency plans for an invasion by Canada until just before World War II.

— JONATHAN BRODER