

## GROWING AMERICAN INTERESTS

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**A**FTER THE UNITED STATES WON INDEPENDENCE in 1783, American merchants sought broader opportunities in every corner of the globe. Although Great Britain remained the predominant naval power in the Indian Ocean throughout the nineteenth century, enterprising Americans soon reached markets on the subcontinent of India, along the east coast of Africa, on the Arabian Peninsula, and in the Arabian Gulf. Because the fundamental mission of the United States Navy has always been to protect American interests around the world, U.S. warships followed the flag of merchant sailors who pursued dreams of riches in Asia. With Great Britain's Royal Navy and maritime law protecting free trade in the Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, and Arabian Gulf, the Navy only occasionally showed the flag in those waters during the nineteenth century.

The first U.S. warship to enter the Indian Ocean was the frigate *Essex*, which twice rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1800 to escort a convoy of merchant ships returning from the Dutch East Indies. The Navy conducted its first operation off the Arabian Peninsula in 1833, when the sloop-of-war *Peacock* and the schooner *Boxer* carried an American diplomatic mission to Oman, an important hub for Indian Ocean trade. The mission culminated in a treaty of amity and commerce with Sultan Saiyid Said of Muscat.

The steam sloop *Ticonderoga* became the first American warship to sail into the Arabian Gulf after transiting the Strait of Hormuz in December 1879. Her presence constituted a long-delayed response to an invitation from the Shah of Persia, with whom the United States had signed a trade treaty in 1856. Under Commodore Robert Wilson Shufeldt, who was en route to Asia on an ultimately successful mission to open Korea to American commerce, *Ticonderoga* stopped at Bushehr and Basra and steamed 70 miles up the Shatt-al-Arab. Shufeldt found that American commercial interests constituted two-thirds of Muscat's trade. He also discovered that Arabs, Turks, and Persians liked the idea of another power helping to ameliorate the effects of "aggressive" British policy in the gulf,

which Great Britain had developed in the context of its "great game" with Russia for imperial hegemony in the region to protect trade routes to India.

Western interest in the Middle East increased significantly during the twentieth century, when petroleum supplanted coal as the fuel of choice for industrial nations. In 1901, British financier William Knox D'Arcy gained an oil concession covering nearly all of Persia. The first major strike seven years later at Masjid-i-Suleiman in western Persia heralded the beginning of the oil age in the Arabian Gulf. The British government's interest in the region heightened on the eve of World War I, when Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, decided to base the country's "naval supremacy upon oil." Thereafter the Royal Navy began replacing coal-burning engines in its warships with more efficient and economical oil-burning engines. With no known oil reserves of its own, Britain's naval power came to rest on Middle East petroleum.

Although the United States produced most of the world's oil between the world wars, American companies invested in British petroleum concessions in Iran and Kuwait, took over the concession in Bahrain, and established an all-American concession in Saudi Arabia. Oil production in the region increased 900 percent between 1920 and 1939, as

Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq joined Iran as major producers. In 1920 less than 5 percent of the world's oil was produced outside the United States; by 1939 the figure had climbed to 14 percent.

American strategic interest in the region rose considerably during World War II, as German forces sought to drive east from Libya through British-controlled Egypt and link up with Nazi tanks driving south from the Soviet Union through the oil-rich Caucasus. After Britain, Russia, and Iran signed a treaty in January 1942, Iran served as a major corridor through which the U.S. government shipped supplies to the Soviet Union under the Lend Lease program. Approximately 4,159,117 tons of aircraft, vehicles, guns, ammunition, food, and other supplies



Saudi Aramco World/PADIA

Well number seven at Dammam, Saudi Arabia, spewing oil, 1938.

and equipment reached Russia through Iran, nearly 25 percent of the total cargo shipped to the Soviet Union from the Western Hemisphere during the war. British, Russian, and American troops occupied Iran for the duration, with the U.S. Army presence peaking at nearly 30,000

men. The United States provided Lend Lease support to Saudi Arabia as well.

The war highlighted the latent strategic importance of Middle East petroleum. In 1943, geologists estimated that the proven and probable reserves in Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran numbered approximately 25 billion to 300 billion barrels of oil. For Saudi Arabia alone, estimates ranged from 5 billion to 100 billion barrels. One leading geologist predicted that “the center of gravity of world oil production” would soon shift from the Gulf of Mexico to the Arabian

Gulf. Indeed, the postwar economies of the free world would come to depend on Middle Eastern oil.

On the way home from the February 1945 conference in Yalta, President Franklin D. Roosevelt entertained King Farouk of Egypt, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, and King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia. The meetings took place on board the heavy cruiser *Quincy* (CA 71), anchored in Egypt's Great Bitter Lake on the Suez Canal.

The meeting with King Saud, as President Roosevelt later put it, “was perfectly amazing.” The President had arranged for the destroyer *Murphy* (DD 603) to carry the King and his retinue from Jeddah, the port of the holy city of Mecca on the Red Sea, to the Great Bitter Lake. As the destroyer approached the cruiser, the sight of the royal entourage on the deck of *Murphy*, according to one observer, seemed like “a spectacle out of the past.” Royal bodyguards armed with long rifles and unsheathed scimitars lined the forecastle, while the King sat in an ornate antique French chair atop a great pile of Oriental rugs on the forward gun deck. A tent for housing the King and his retinue of more than forty people stood on the bow as a flock of sheep for their food milled about on the stern.

The meeting began amicably. King Saud, who had received nine wounds in battle and walked with a noticeable limp, expressed interest in Roosevelt's wheelchair. In a personal gesture, Roosevelt gave the King one of his wheelchairs, as well as a state gift of a C-47 aircraft. Ibn Saud bestowed upon the President rich robes, perfumes, and a sword in a diamond-studded scabbard.

Tension grew, however, as the discussion turned toward the settlement of Jews in Palestine because the two leaders held opposite views on the issue. Sensing that Arabs and Jews were on a collision course, Roosevelt planned to reevaluate America's Palestine policy in search of a formula to prevent warfare, but didn't live long enough to do so. Nevertheless, the meeting demonstrated to King Saud that the United States might well play a more prominent role in the region. The meeting came to symbolize America's growing interest in the Middle East.



U.S. Naval Historical Center

*President Franklin D. Roosevelt and King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud confer on board Quincy (CA 71). Their meeting symbolized the growing importance of the region to America.*

The Cold War ushered in a new sense of urgency in Washington with regard to Middle East diplomacy. During World War II, the United States had been allied with Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin against a common enemy, Nazi Germany. By the spring of 1946, however, U.S. leaders had concluded that Stalin was bent on exporting Communist revolution worldwide and on advancing historical Russian interests along the Soviet Union's European and Asian periphery. Determined to counter these threats to world peace, U.S. leaders adopted a strategy of "containment." America and its allies would oppose the encroachment of the Soviet Union and its allies wherever it might occur.

The Cold War's first crisis emerged in the Middle East. Stalin not only refused to withdraw his troops from Iran within six months of the end of World War II as he had promised, but also set up the Communist

Republic of Azerbaijan in northwest Iran. The United States and Britain pressured the Russians into pulling out of Iran by the end of May 1946, and the Soviet-sponsored Azeri regime soon collapsed.

The Iranian crisis marked a major departure in American foreign policy. President Harry S. Truman, who likened President Roosevelt's negotiations with the Soviets to appeasement, grew tired of "babying" the Russians and decided that it was time to "get tough." He convinced Congress that the United States should "support free peoples who are resisting subjugations by armed minorities or by outside pressure." Pundits dubbed this policy the Truman Doctrine.

The security of the Middle East would remain one of America's primary strategic interests throughout the Cold War and beyond. +++

# ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MIDDLE EAST FORCE

WITH THE CREATION OF THE MIDDLE EAST FORCE (MEF) in 1949, the Navy assumed the role as the first line of defense for America's interests in the region. The founding of the Middle East Force also marked the transition of the Navy's presence in the Arabian Gulf from periodic to permanent.

In the years immediately following World War II, the Arabian Gulf became an area of vital concern to the Navy. American naval forces based in the Mediterranean and the Western Pacific after World War II burned fuel produced almost exclusively in the gulf region. As U.S. fleet oilers and chartered tankers began moving as many as 5 million barrels of petroleum products per month from the gulf to the Mediterranean and Pacific, the Navy perceived a need to establish facilities and a command and control structure to manage the traffic. Accordingly, on 20 January 1948 the Navy established Task Force (TF) 126 to control the dozens of ships plying gulf waters and operating out of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. In subsequent months, this command evolved through several iterations and, on 16 August 1949, it was designated the Middle East Force. The Navy has maintained a continuous presence in the region ever since.

Under the command of a one-star admiral, the Middle East Force soon included a flagship, a pair of destroyers, aircraft, and support vessels. Between 1949 and 1965, duty as MEF flagship rotated among seaplane tenders *Duxbury Bay* (AVP 38), *Greenwich Bay* (AVP 41), and *Valcour* (AVP 55), each painted white to deflect the intense heat of the Arabian sun. In 1950, the U.S. Navy leased office space from the British naval base at Juffair, located five miles southeast of Manama, the capital of Bahrain. After the Navy reclassified *Valcour* as a miscellaneous

command flagship (AGF 1) and homeported her in Juffair in 1966, the ship served for six years as command post, living facility, and communications center for Commander Middle East Force and his staff of 15 officers. That same year MEF ships made 128 visits to 34 ports located in 12 countries and 6 protectorates or possessions, while the flag aircraft logged 77,328 miles carrying the commander to

40 different cities. In the spring of 1972, the miscellaneous command ship *La Salle* (AGF 3) relieved *Valcour* as flagship for the Middle East Force. Painted white like her forbears, "The Great White Ghost of the Arabian Coast" steamed an average of 55,000 miles annually calling on ports in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. She served as the MEF flagship until 1993.

The Navy recognized that it not only needed to manage tanker traffic in the Arabian Gulf, but also might need to conduct combat operations to defend America's interests there. In March 1948, *Valley Forge* (CV 45) transited the Strait of Hormuz, becoming the first American aircraft carrier to operate in the Arabian Gulf. *Valley Forge* and other ships conducted extensive reconnaissance and scientific surveys, which indicated that shallow water, extreme heat and humidity, blowing sand, and other environmental conditions in the gulf posed significant operational problems. The carrier's visit included a port call to Ras Tanura, Saudi Arabia. Naval officers and enlisted men enjoyed Arab hospitality, while the show of naval strength impressed Arab leaders. Two months



Middle East Force flagship *Duxbury Bay* (AVP 38), mid-1960s.

U.S. Naval Historical Center



Courtesy CIA

Arabian Gulf Region.



U.S. Naval Historical Center

*Sheikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa, ruler of Bahrain, departs the flagship Valcour (AGF 1) after an official visit to Rear Admiral Earl R. Eastwood, Commander Middle East Force, 5 April 1967.*



U.S. Naval Historical Center

*Arabian guests, crewmen, and others observe flight operations from Valley Forge's island structure, 25 March 1948.*

later, the escort carrier *Rendova* (CVE 114) and destroyer *Charles H. Roan* (DD 853) entered the gulf. The carrier paid a 52-hour visit to Bahrain, the highlight of which was a dinner for 120 guests, including 45 U.S. naval officers, hosted by Sheikh Salman bin Hamad al-Khalifa, Bahrain's ruler. Various U.S. fleet units visited the region periodically throughout the next four decades.

American diplomacy and deployment of large fleet units played a major role in preventing a protracted war across the region that otherwise might have arisen from crises like Iran's nationalization of Western oil fields in the early 1950s, the Suez Crisis of 1956, the Iraq coup of 1958, and the Lebanon intervention of 1958. Although no shots were

fired, such crises often had a direct and sometimes hair-raising impact on American naval forces. In 1963, MEF destroyers deployed to the Red Sea when friction developed between Saudi Arabia and Egypt over civil strife in Yemen. In an "extremely provocative gesture," as the MEF command history put it, Egyptian fighters and bombers with open bomb bay doors flew over the carrier *Essex* (CV 9) as she transited the Suez Canal. In April and May 1967, MEF ships helped evacuate American citizens from Yemen and patrolled off troubled Aden.

The Navy's presence during difficult times demonstrated its permanence in the region and reaffirmed America's intention to defend its allies and interests in the Middle East. +++

# CREATION OF CENTRAL COMMAND AND NAVCENT

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**D**URING THE 1970S AND EARLY 1980s, the United States supplanted Great Britain as the predominant Western power in the Arabian Gulf and Arabian Sea. At the same time, threats to peace and stability in the region skyrocketed. As the danger increased, so did America's commitment to the region's security. This commitment culminated in 1983 in the establishment of a new unified command, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), and its naval component, Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT).

In January 1968, British Prime Minister Harold Wilson announced that Great Britain would end its defense commitments "east of Suez" and would withdraw its forces from the Arabian Gulf by 1971. The British government conceived the withdrawal as a money-saving measure. In effect, it swept away the last vestiges of the British Empire in the Middle East.

Bahrain had been a British protectorate since 1880, when the British government assumed responsibility for the island's defense. On 14 August 1971, Sheikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa declared Bahrain's independence and signed a new treaty of friendship with Britain the next day. Through an agreement with the Bahraini government, the U.S. Navy took over part of the former British naval base at Juffair, naming the facility Administrative Support Unit Bahrain.

The British withdrawal created a great power vacuum in the Arabian Gulf, once considered a British "lake." Determined to fill the void in the region, the Soviets sent a task force into the Indian Ocean and launched diplomatic initiatives to secure

permanent bases in countries in and around the gulf. The Soviet navy maintained a continuous presence in the Indian Ocean throughout the 1970s.

The United States was in no position to counter the Soviet moves.

With America engaged in the Vietnam War and President Richard M. Nixon committed to extricating U.S. forces from Southeast Asia, the administration sought to avoid new commitments. In 1969, the President announced



*Two RH-53 Sea Stallions from the carrier Nimitz (CVN 68) participate in the ill-fated mission to rescue American hostages in Iran, 24 April 1980. Operational difficulties underscored the need to improve how the armed forces worked together.*

a strategy dubbed the Nixon Doctrine, which envisioned transferring many security responsibilities to regional U.S. allies. In the Arabian Gulf, the Nixon Doctrine resulted in the so-called Twin Pillars policy, which depended upon Iran and Saudi Arabia to provide security for the region and to constitute a bulwark against Soviet expansion there. As a result, American military assistance flowed to Iran and Saudi Arabia for most of the 1970s.

The Twin Pillars policy dovetailed neatly with the plans of Muhammad Reza Pahlavi, the



SSgt Bill Thompson, USA

*Somalian Brigadier General Mohammed Hashi Gani welcomes Lieutenant General Robert C. Kingston, commander of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, as he arrives to participate in Exercise Bright Star '82, 1 November 1981.*

Shah of Iran, who sought to make his country the preeminent power in the gulf. Emboldened by the surge in oil prices during the mid-1970s and the flood of arms from the United States, the Shah plunged Iran into a pell-mell national modernization program that resulted in waste, inflation, and widespread corruption.

Disgusted with the Shah's seeming disregard for traditional social and religious values, Iranians from all walks of life turned against him and his pro-American government. In 1978, labor strikes, street demonstrations, and riots spread across Iran with increasing frequency and violence. A revolution coalesced around fundamentalist Iranians led by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The Shah went into exile on 16 January 1979. He first went to Egypt, then to Morocco, the Bahamas, Mexico, the United

States, Panama, and then back to Egypt, where he died on 27 July 1980 of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Soon after the Shah left Iran, Khomeini entered Tehran in triumph and established an anti-Western Islamic theocracy. He and his followers expressed the desire to spread Shiite extremism throughout the Arabian Gulf and expunge Western influence from the region. The Iranian revolutionaries harbored a particularly deep hatred for the United States because Washington had been the Shah's leading supporter. On 4 November 1979 Iranian zealots seized the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took its staff hostage, marking the beginning of a 444-day crisis.

The situation in the region worsened that December when Soviet forces invaded Afghanistan in support of indigenous communists. Not since World War II had Moscow carried out a military action on



this scale. U.S. leaders feared that the Soviets hoped to capitalize on the American-Iranian crisis to secure a warm-water port on the Indian Ocean and to gain control of Arabian Gulf oil resources.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, following hard on the heels of the Iranian revolution, convinced American leaders to take a firm stand in the Arabian Gulf. "Let our position be absolutely clear," President Jimmy Carter declared before Congress on 23 January 1980. "An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force." This policy, dubbed the Carter Doctrine, committed American military forces to the defense of the region.

This new policy, inspired by the threats to the Arabian Gulf from the Iranian revolution and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, spurred President Carter to create the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF). Established on 1 March 1980, the RDJTF was a component of what was then called U.S. Readiness Command, and its mission was to rush to the gulf area in the event of a military crisis. The first commander, Marine Lieutenant General P. X. Kelley, was hampered by a lack of bases and forward-positioned equipment, as well as the long distance from the theater. He also didn't "own" any forces and in a crisis would have to "borrow" them from other commands on short notice.

Defense officials in President Ronald Reagan's administration considered the rapid deployment force a poor solution. Accordingly, on 1 January 1983, the Department of Defense replaced the task force with a new unified command: U.S. Central Command, headquartered at MacDill Air Force Base near Tampa, Florida. Initially, its area of

responsibility (AOR) comprised 19 countries, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Gulf, and its mission was to protect free trade, help defend friendly nations, and preserve regional stability. CENTCOM eventually got its own assigned component forces and a four-star commander, putting it on an even footing with European Command, Pacific Command, and Southern Command.

The original 19 countries in Central Command's AOR included Egypt and Sudan in northeast Africa; Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, and Somalia on or near the Horn of Africa; the Yemen Arab Republic, the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen, and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on the Arabian Peninsula; and Jordan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan on the Middle Eastern and South Asian mainland.

By 2005, changes to the Unified Command Plan, which governed the organization of operational



*Bradley fighting vehicles parked on the pier beside the fast sealift ship USNS Antares (T-AKR 294) at Savannah, Georgia, during Exercise Bright Star '97. The capability to deploy combat-ready forces quickly across vast ocean distances enables Central Command to exist.*

DAC Don Teft



S/A Sarah E. Shaw, USAF

*Aerial view of the Indian Ocean island of Diego Garcia, 9 December 1998. Naval Station Diego Garcia serves Central Command as a vital air hub, logistics hub, and base for Maritime Prepositioning Squadron Two.*

joint forces, had expanded the AOR to 27 countries. On 22 May 1990, the Yemen Arab Republic united with the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen and became the Republic of Yemen. Eritrea came under Central Command's purview after the country gained independence from Ethiopia on 27 April 1993. Because of its cultural and political similarities to the East African mainland, the island nation of Seychelles was added to the AOR on 1 January 1996. Because of their proximity to and political interaction with Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, the five former Soviet Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan became part of Central Command's AOR on 1 October 1999. On 10 March 2004, Syria and Lebanon were shifted from European Command's jurisdiction to Central Command's jurisdiction because of American concern about Syrian-based terrorists operating in Iraq.

CENTCOM's naval component commander was designated Commander U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (COMUSNAVCENT).

Commander Middle East Force, who had reported to the Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Europe during the 1970s, was reassigned under Commander in Chief, Central Command (CINCCENT).

The new unified command faced enormous difficulties. None of the countries in the Arabian Gulf region allowed the United States to base ground forces or land-based air forces permanently on their soil. U.S. military leaders knew they would have to deploy sizable, combat-ready forces to the Arabian Gulf region fast enough to cope with an emergency. The problem was how to do so.

The solution they chose was "maritime prepositioning," a concept that had emerged during the Vietnam War. In this approach, the Defense Department maintained equipment, supplies, and vehicles on board Military Sealift Command (MSC) ships that served as floating depots in forward areas. In an emergency, these ships would steam as close as possible to the crisis spot and unload their cargo, even at ports with only rudimentary facilities. Meanwhile,

long-range transport aircraft of the Air Force's Military Airlift Command would fly troops to an airfield near the ports where they would "marry up" with their equipment. Planners envisioned a virtual bridge of ships and airplanes to deploy strong forces to the theater and keep them supplied.

The Navy invested \$7 billion in strategic sealift programs during the 1980s to make maritime prepositioning a reality. Thirteen specialized roll-on/roll-off prepositioning ships were built or converted from existing hulls. These ships were divided into three maritime prepositioning ship squadrons (MPSRONs) based in the Azores in the eastern Atlantic (MPSRON-1), Diego Garcia (MPSRON-2), and Guam (MPSRON-3). Each squadron contained the equipment and 30 days' worth of supplies for a Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB) of 16,500 men. The Army, Air Force, Navy, and Defense Logistics Agency stowed materiel in 11 other prepositioning ships based at Diego Garcia.

In addition, the Defense Department converted eight Sea-Land Corporation container ships (SL-7 class) into fast sealift ships (FSS) capable of making 30 knots and able to load and unload cargo quickly at unimproved ports. These ships were intended to embark a full U.S. Army mechanized division at East Coast ports, transport the unit to a global hot spot, and return to the United States for follow-on ground forces. Moreover, the Department of Transportation followed Navy Department recommendations and expanded its Ready Reserve Force fleet from 36 to 96 cargo ships, tankers, and other auxiliaries.

To improve coordination among the Military Sealift Command, Military Airlift Command, and the Army's Military Traffic Management Command, the Defense Department in 1987 created the joint U.S. Transportation Command, headquartered at Scott Air Force Base, Illinois. These measures went far to ensure swift deployment of combat-ready forces to Southwest Asia.

Although Central Command was responsible for the Arabian Gulf, the Navy's leadership viewed

the region as an extension of the Pacific Basin. The Indian Ocean, Arabian Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Gulf of Oman had long fallen within Pacific Command's area of responsibility, and remained so throughout the 1980s. On 30 December 1983, the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed CINCCENT to coordinate with Commander in Chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC) for contingency plans to integrate the Middle East Force into Pacific Command's Indian Ocean battle force, Task Force 70, during certain crises. For the rest of the 1980s, the Middle East Force flagship remained home-ported in Bahrain, while COMUSNAVCENT headquarters stood in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.



*A U.S. Marine guides a light armored vehicle down the ramp of the container and roll-on/roll-off ship M/V Cpl. Louis J. Hauge Jr. during the buildup for Operation Iraqi Freedom, 16 January 2003. This ship had served with Maritime Prepositioning Squadron Two since 1984.*

By the late 1980s, the United States had committed itself to the defense of the Arabian Gulf region, created a unified command to carry out the mission, and invested heavily in programs to ensure its success. The entire commitment hinged upon the Navy's ability to control the sea. Events soon tested the structure and capabilities of the new unified command and its naval component, as well as the very sincerity of America's commitment. +++