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Saudi Arabia as a Key Strategic Military Location

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Abstract

Should the United States consider Saudi Arabia a key strategic location? Saudi Arabia is located in the center of the Middle East and therefore, provides the United States a centralized location to react to any possible conflicts in the area. Today, with so much unrest in the Middle East in places like Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan, and especially with the possibility of war with Iran. It is critical to have a location to be able to stage forces for future missions. Additionally, the East and West borders of Saudi Arabia are on two of the most critical sea-lanes in the world. The Eastern border is along the Persian Gulf and is used to move much of the world's oil and gas exports out of the Persian Gulf region. The Western border is along the Red Sea and gives southern access to the Suez Canal in Egypt, which provides access for the world's shipping instead of having to travel around Africa's southern tip.

Saudi Arabia as a Key Strategic Military Location

Should the United States consider Saudi Arabia a key strategic location? Strategic is defined as, important in or essential to strategy, or in military terms, essential to the conduct of a war (Dictionary.com, 2007). The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is located in the center of the Middle East and therefore provides the United States a centralized location to react to any possible conflicts in the area. During the war to liberate Kuwait and the invasion of Iraq Saudi Arabia proved to be militarily important. Today, with so much unrest in the Middle East in places such as Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Afghanistan, and especially with the possibility of war with Iran it is critical to have a location to be able to stage forces for future missions. Additionally, the East and West borders of Saudi Arabia are on two of the most critical sea-lanes in the world. The Eastern border is along the Persian Gulf and is used to move much of the world's oil and gas exports out of the Persian Gulf region. The Western border is along the Red Sea and gives southern access to the Suez Canal in Egypt, which provides access for the world's shipping instead of having to travel around Africa's southern tip. Even though the United States maintains a presence in the Middle East, it should consider Saudi Arabia a key strategic location due its central location in the Middle East, its close proximity to Iran, and its borders on the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a monarchy (Central Intelligence Agency, 2007) located in the southwestern region of Asia. "Saudi Arabia was founded in 1932 by Abdul Aziz ibn Saud, and has been ruled by his decedents ever since" (U.S. State Department, 2007). Saudi Arabia's population is estimated at over 27 million people. Approximately 12.3 persons occupy a square kilometer. Saudi Arabia has an estimated 5.4 million foreign nationals residing with in its

borders. As of 2005, approximately 23 percent of the Kingdoms populace consists of foreign nationals (U.S. State Department, 2007).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is centrally located in the Middle East. It covers almost 2 million square miles, slightly more than 1/5 of the United States (Library of Congress Country Studies, 2005). The terrain is primarily desert with rugged mountains in the southwest. The climate is arid with great temperature extremes in the interior and humidity and temperatures are high along the coast (Janes Sentinel, 2005). It shares borders with seven countries and two seas. The northern border of Saudi Arabia is 1790 kilometers long and is shared by Kuwait, Iraq, and Jordan. The south and eastern borders are 2641 kilometers long and are shared with Bahrain, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Yemen.

The United States considers these boundaries as opportunities to move in virtually any direction within the western part of the Middle East with land forces. During the first and second Gulf War, this was demonstrated as we massed ground forces in both Saudi Arabia for the liberation of Kuwait and then in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for the invasion of Iraq to overthrow Saddam Hussein. Saudi Arabia's proximity to Israel, Syria, and its border with Jordan could also be used if the United States needed to become militarily involved with the defense of Israel. Tensions are always high in this region and if called to do so by Israel then the United States would not hesitate to support them.

Saudi Arabia has 2510 kilometers of coastline with the Red Sea in the west and the Persian Gulf in the east (Janes Sentinel, 2005). At the north End of the Red Sea is the Suez Canal. This canal is a vital link for shipping both commercially and militarily. This body of water is the only link from the Mediterranean Sea south of Europe to the Indian Ocean in the southern hemisphere. Without the Suez Canal, all shipping would have to travel around the

southern tip of Africa. To lose access to the Suez Canal would prevent the United States from being able to move Navel Warships and war supplies into the region in a timely manor. Saudi Arabia's western coast covers nearly all the Red Sea and could have a grave impact on worldwide shipping and support for United States operations currently going on in the Middle East. Across the Red Sea from Saudi Arabia is Egypt in the north and Sudan in the south. Relations with Egypt and the United States have improved over the years. Sudan has been on the State Department's list of states that sponsor terrorism since 1993 and the U.N. Security Council imposed sanctions from 1996 to 2001 because of its involvement in terrorism (Council on Foreign Relations, 2005).

Only 150-200 kilometers across the Persian Gulf from Saudi Arabia is Iran. Iran has in the past decade become quite a threat to Israel, our ally, the United States, and to many other countries in the Middle East. The United States Navy and Air Force continue to patrol the Persian Gulf. Monitoring Iranian activities, managing the worldwide shipping of oil, and enforcing the embargos imposed on Iran, are just a few of the missions conducted in the Persian Gulf by the United States Military. All these military forces conducting missions in the Persian Gulf need support facilities that are available in Saudi Arabia.

Currently in the Middle East, the greatest threat facing the United States and its allies in the region is the possibility of a war with Iran. Several possibilities such as Iran obtaining nuclear weapons, attacks on our ally Israel, or the support of terrorist organizations could prompt the United States into a war. The location of Saudi Arabia would be key in this effort. The country of Iran is only 150 kilometers across the Persian Gulf and could support naval and air operations into Iran. The narrow gulf also allows for the possibility of amphibious operations conducted by the Navy and Marines.

As Iran makes repeated threats to the future of Israel and nations supported by the west the most likely action they could take would be in the form of Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles. Saudi Arabia, though a Muslim country, is concerned if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons. The Saudi's despise Iran and since they or the United States would not be able to allow Iran to possess such weapons a likely agreement, or formal alliance would be formed. An agreement would most likely be under the pretense that the United States is supporting Saudi Arabia in the defense of its country.

Many in the United States government and United States citizens do not believe we should have military forces stationed in The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Currently we have military forces in six countries that border Saudi Arabia. Ports in Bahrain maintain the 5th Naval Fleet that conducts patrols in the Persian Gulf. The countries of Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates store pre-position equipment for the United States Army along with personnel to maintain that equipment. Kuwait stores equipment and houses support personnel that are key to the effort in Iraq. Additionally, the United States has military forces in the Sinai Peninsula conducting peacekeeping operations and forces in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Africa conducted direct action and counter-terrorism mission.

Opposing View

The United States, which currently has military land forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, does not need Saudi Arabia to conduct land operations in the Middle East. The United States has sufficient bases in the region to move land forces either west towards Israel or east towards Iran.

With the potential for war with Iran, many believe that we currently have enough bases in the region. The United States currently has military forces on almost every border with Iran; in

the west in Iraq, in the east in Pakistan, and in the south are Naval forces in the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea.

Conclusion

Even though the United States maintains a presence in several other locations throughout the Middle East the United States should consider Saudi Arabia a key strategic location for three reasons: Its close proximity to the volatile country of Iran, its borders along the Persian Gulf and Red Sea, but most importantly its centralized location within the region which enables the United States to react quickly to conflicts in the region.

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