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Will the Middle East Now Start to Miss US Imperialism?

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According to the 2012 edition of World Energy Outlook, the flagship publication of the Paris-based International Energy Agency (IEA), the U.S. will become the world's largest producer of oil before 2020, a net oil exporter by 2030, and will achieve energy self-sufficiency by 2035. In light of pending energy self-sufficiency, a change in U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East should not come as a surprise. But how will the complex region and its own trade, security, and energy concerns react to a change in U.S. policy?

Energy exports have made Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, some of the wealthiest, in per capita income terms, in the world. This new found wealth, and a close relationship with the U.S., has transformed them into huge consumer markets for American goods and services. Simmering tensions between Iran and GCC states have also converted the region into a very lucrative export market for U.S.-produced military hardware. The U.S. already exports large volumes of vehicles, machinery, aircraft, and medical equipment to the region.

The U.S. signed a framework agreement to expand trade and strengthen economic ties with GCC states in September 2012. Total two-way trade totalled over \$100 Billion in 2011 and the region is currently the 10th largest export market for the U.S. In this regard, it is likely, therefore, that the U.S. will want to maintain good relations with GCC states, in order to protect its other economic interests, whether it needs their energy or not.

Similarly, when it comes to the U.S.-led 'War on Terror', though it may be winding down, it is by no means over, meaning the U.S. still retains vested interests. Al-Qaeda still exists as a force and, according to the former Director of the CIA, David Petraeus, its chapter in the Arabian peninsula (AQAP) is currently the most potent terrorist group in the world in terms of the risk it poses to U.S. interests. Al-Qaeda also remains a force in Iraq and is now starting to take root in Syria.

The continued success of U.S.-led counter-terrorism operations rely, in part, on cooperation between intelligence agencies in the U.S. and their counter-parts in GCC states such as

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Saudi and the UAE, as well as non-GCC states, such as Yemen and Iraq. This cooperation involves sharing intelligence about suspects, sharing best practice when it comes to counter-terrorism, and providing logistical support for U.S.-led operations, including land and facilities. This gives the U.S. another reason to remain engaged with, or at least on good terms with, states in the Persian Gulf.

And what about Israel? Regardless of energy needs, it is and will remain a key ally of the U.S. There is strong and powerful domestic support for Israel; it is a key partner in military and technology fields and a traditional cold-war ally. Iran, on the other hand will continue to be seen as hostile and a threat. Iranians view the U.S. as an imperial power acting against their interests and anti-Americanism is deeply entrenched amongst the ruling elite in Iran.

The U.S. is not alone in its fear of an imminent all-out Israel-Iran war – the feeling is replicated across the international community. What is more, Iran is also hostile towards Saudi Arabia and other GCC states that it views as pro-western. It's worth noting, therefore, that Tehran stands to benefit tremendously from U.S. withdrawal from the region.

With U.S.-led international sanctions against Iran beginning to bite, Iran could resort to a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, thus threatening global oil supplies. If Iran does take this step, it could trigger a military response from the U.S. and GCC states, dragging the entire region into a prolonged war that would threaten global energy prices and the world economy. For the U.S. to remove itself entirely from current tensions between Israel and Iran would therefore be unlikely. It seems certain that it will remain engaged in the region to some extent, regardless of its energy needs.

Iran-Israel tensions aside, other states in the region are also experiencing political instability post-Arab Spring. Bahrain is still trying to pacify a Shia-led rebellion against the ruling monarchy with support from other GCC states. Kuwait seems to be undergoing a period of uncertain change as women and young people are demanding more representation. Political dissidents in the UAE and Saudi Arabia are starting to become more vocal while state repression against opposition forces is increasing.

Iraq, nine years after the U.S.-led invasion, remains unstable too. Al-Qaeda-inspired groups are still operating and staging deadly attacks. Sectarian and regional tensions remain as Christians continue to flee the country while Kurds in the north demand more autonomy. The political scene is characterised by in-fighting and mutual mistrust, as Sunni politicians accuse

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their Shia counter-parts of collusion with Iran. The country has also been unable to restore pre-war levels of oil production.

The Persian Gulf is very unstable and likely to remain so for a while. As we have seen, this instability may well demand continued U.S. presence in the area. Yet, especially in light of potential energy self-sufficiency, this instability actually gives the U.S. further incentive not to rely on energy from this region. And with less demand for foreign oil and a need to rein in federal borrowing, there will also be huge pressure within the U.S. to cut spending, making it much harder to justify maintaining a costly military presence in the Persian Gulf.

Even if pentagon strategists insist on doing so, they would struggle to attract support for their plans in these economically difficult times. The legacy of the Iraq war and the continued proliferation of extremist groups in the region mean that there is likely to be public support in the U.S. for scaling back too.

U.S. energy self-sufficiency may well have far-reaching political and geo-strategic ramifications for the Middle East. Ultimately it would allow the U.S. to scale back from what is becoming an increasingly unstable and unpredictable region and, more importantly, complete its pivot towards the Asia-Pacific region. Ironically, without U.S. military presence, the Middle East is likely to become an even more unstable region and the bad old days of 'U.S. imperialism' may start to be missed.

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