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83. *The Middle East*, 369-70.
84. Coughlin, *King of Terror*, 276-89; Pollack, *Threatening Storm*, 58-64.

Chapter 4

William J. Clinton Administration and the Persian Gulf, 1993-2001

Introduction

Unlike his 10 immediate predecessors in the White House, President William J. Clinton lacked a clear, overarching national security threat with which to deal upon assuming office in January 1993. Those men faced daunting, but reasonably unambiguous, security challenges, ranging from Franklin D. Roosevelt's prosecution of World War II and Harry S. Truman's establishment and consolidation of a Western front in the emerging Cold War against the Soviet Union to Ronald W. Reagan's rollback of Moscow's global empire and George H.W. Bush's orchestration of the end of the bipolar confrontation on American terms.

Clinton, by contrast, began his first term on the heels of the end of the Cold War and the Bush administration's successful conduct of the 1991 Persian Gulf War. In particular, the expulsion of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's forces from the neighboring state of Kuwait in February 1991 and the dissolution of the Soviet Union 10 months later left the United States bereft of a threat—actual or perceived—to US interests at home and abroad on the scale of those prevalent during the Cold War and its aftermath. These developments, in turn, engendered a sense of euphoria among academics, policy practitioners and the American public at large that allowed, if not encouraged, the Clinton administration to focus primarily on soft rather than hard security issues in articulating its initial foreign and security policies and strategies.

One of Clinton's first major foreign policy addresses, a February 1993 speech at American University in Washington, for example, was illustrative of that approach. In his address, the president noted that the

Cold War was a draining time. We devoted trillions of dollars to it, much more than many of our more visionary leaders thought we should have. We posted our sons and daughters around the world. We lost tens thousands of them in the defense of freedom and in the pursuit of containment of communism. ... The change confronting us in the 1990s is in some ways more difficult than in previous times because it is less distinct. ... Our leadership is especially important for the world's new and emerging democracies. To grow and deepen their legitimacy, to foster a middle class and a civic culture, they need the ability to tap into a growing global economy. And our security and our prosperity will be greatly affected in the years ahead by how many of these countries can become and stay democracies.¹

Similarly, in a September 1993 speech before the UN General Assembly, Clinton stressed that

The momentum of the Cold War no longer propels us in our daily actions. ... The United States intends to remain engaged and to lead. We cannot solve every problem, but we must and will serve as a fulcrum for change and a pivot point for peace. In a new era of peril and opportunity, our overriding purpose must be to expand and strengthen the world's community of market-based democracies. During the Cold War we sought to contain a threat to the survival of free institutions. Now we seek to enlarge the circle of nations that live under those free institutions. For our dream is of a day when the opinions and energies of every person in the world will be given full expression, in a world of thriving democracies that cooperate with each other and live in peace.²

As opposed to Bush, Clinton failed to develop a clear, well-focused foreign policy blueprint. Rather than prioritize American interests consistently on the basis of an emphasis on a particular region or issue area, the Clinton administration launched and pursued a wide variety of initiatives, ranging from military intervention in the Balkans to often overbearing mediation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, few of which it followed through to completion. As Richard Haass, currently serving as president of the Council on Foreign Relations, has argued, "Clinton inherited a world of unprecedented American advantage and opportunity and did little with it. ... A foreign policy legacy can result either from achieving something great on the ground (defeating major rivals or building major institutions, for example) or from changing the way people at home or abroad think about international relations. Clinton did neither."³

There were two causes for the Clinton administration's lack of strategic clarity, neither of which was entirely the President's fault. First, Clinton's longevity in the White House detracted from his ability to maintain a foreign policy team whose members shared the same viewpoints throughout his tenure. He had two National Security Advisors (Anthony Lake and Samuel Berger), three Secretaries of Defense (Les Aspin, William Perry and William Cohen) and two Secretaries of State (Warren Christopher and Madeleine Albright) in eight years, most of whom had at least subtly different ideas of how best to define and pursue US interests. Albright and Berger, for instance, tended to have a greater affinity for the use of military force than either Lake or Christopher. Second, Clinton assumed office at the start of the post-Cold War era, a period during which the American public had no appetite for the expression of grand strategic visions or the expenditure of tax dollars abroad given that the threats previously presented by the either the Soviet behemoth or Saddam Hussein were at least perceived to have been diminished. Clinton's personal interest in domestic as opposed to foreign policy—and the primacy he often ceded to the former at the expense of the latter—only complicated matters further.

The Clinton administration's vision was both noble and understandably broad in light of the structure of the international system and position of the United States as the lone remaining superpower therein. It was also one that evolved as American policymakers were forced to respond to a variety of threats to US interests over the course of Clinton's

eight years in office. Two of the most significant such threats—those posed by Saddam on one hand and Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden on the other—emanated from the Greater Middle East generally and the Persian Gulf specifically. Above all, the ways in which Clinton and his advisors chose to handle respond to those threats reflected their unwillingness to bear substantial economic, military and political costs in order to achieve grand strategic objectives.

While Clinton recognized that terrorism represented a growing danger to the United States, he was relatively cautious in confronting Al Qaeda, relying on limited cruise missile strikes on bin Laden's training camps in Afghanistan rather than a more robust military response to attacks such as those on the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, in August 1998. Clinton's unwillingness to sanction the use of anything but token force against Al Qaeda paralleled his stance toward Iraq. The Clinton administration's only substantial—and somewhat sustained—response to Saddam's consistent unwillingness to adhere unambiguously to UN Security Council Resolutions prohibiting the development of nuclear, chemical and biological WMD and sponsorship of terrorist groups was a flurry of cruise missile strikes in the context of Operation Desert Fox in December 1998.⁴ Those strikes, which came after Saddam's expulsion of UN weapons inspectors the previous month, did not result in the inspectors' return. Rather, once completed, they left Saddam free to defy the United States without repercussions until the George W. Bush administration expressed a renewed American willingness to take bold action against Iraq following Al Qaeda's 11 September 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

With these observations providing a necessary contextual foundation, the balance of the chapter examines and assesses the Clinton administration's policies toward the Persian Gulf in three related sections that unfold in the following manner:

- The first section opens with an examination of American interests in the Gulf as articulated by the Clinton administration, then discusses the resultant development of policies toward that region—and, to a limited extent, the broader Middle East—from January 1993 to January 2001. Given the centrality of those developments to the US role in the Gulf both from 1993-2001 and in the years that have elapsed since then, this section is considerably lengthier than either of the chapter's ensuing sections.
- The second section considers the strengths and weaknesses of the Clinton administration's policies toward the Persian Gulf generally and Iraq specifically at the US domestic level as well as in the contexts of the Gulf, Greater Middle East and global international system.
- The concluding section reiterates the chapter's key points, then closes with an assessment of the short- and long-term costs and benefits of the above policies.

US Interests and Resultant Policies in the Persian Gulf, 1993-2001

As is true of all presidential foreign policy teams, Clinton and his advisors defined US

interests on the basis of past experiences, present worldviews and the characteristics of the international system within which America interacted with its allies and adversaries. Clinton assembled one such team at the start of each of his two terms in Washington and made occasional adjustments along the way. The members of those teams (the Vice President, National Security Advisor, Secretary of State, Secretary of Defense and—albeit to a lesser degree, Director of Central Intelligence—and their staffs), in turn, were responsible for the development and implementation of policies toward the world in general and the Persian Gulf and wider Middle East in particular. Consequently, in order to better understand the foreign and security policies Clinton pursued during his first and second terms, it is first necessary to provide a primer on the individuals serving in the above positions from 1993-97 and 1997-2001, respectively.

A relative neophyte with respect to foreign affairs, Clinton entered office in January 1993 content to focus on domestic economic policy and leave US relations with external actors (especially hard core security issues) primarily to his principal advisors.⁵ During Clinton's initial term, that inner circle included Vice President Albert Gore, National Security Advisor Lake and his deputy, Berger, along with Secretary of State Christopher and Secretary of Defense Aspin. The latter stepped down following the deaths of 18 US servicemen in a botched operation to secure the capture of a Somali warlord in October 1993 and was replaced by Perry. In addition, the president named Albright as American Ambassador to the United Nations and elevated her position to a Cabinet Level post.⁶

Berger, a long-time friend of Clinton, had served in the Carter administration's State Department, along with Lake and Christopher. Aspin was a former Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee and Albright a member of Carter National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski's staff. The switch from Aspin to Perry was one of two upper level security staff shifts in the first Clinton administration. CIA Director James Woolsey's resignation less than a year into his tenure and John Deutch's subsequent appointment to that position was the other. Collectively, the group was reasonably well balanced with respect to a willingness and reluctance to use force to safeguard American interests. At the White House, for instance, Berger tended to be more hawkish than Lake. And, similarly, on the diplomatic side of the equation, Christopher had much less of an affinity than Albright to resort to military tools to achieve political ends on the international stage.

For his part, Clinton was more dove than hawk, but by no means unwilling to switch course as circumstances required, most notably so during his second term. The changes the president made in his foreign policy team after defeating Republican Challenger Robert Dole in the 1996 national election was indicative of that flexibility. Berger and Albright replaced Lake and Christopher as National Security Advisor and Secretary of State, respectively, former Republican Senator William Cohen of Maine was named Secretary of Defense and former New Mexico Congressman Bill Richardson assumed Albright's Ambassadorship to the UN.⁷ The elevation of Deutch's chief deputy, George Tenet to CIA Director completed a team that, overall, proved considerably less averse to military intervention generally and the limited use of force in response to current and prospective future threats to the United States and its allies in regions ranging from the

Balkans to the Persian Gulf.

On balance, the Clinton administration had a tendency to characterize its interests in broad terms that did not allow for a clear prioritization of those interests and the resultant policy developmental processes. That approach was especially evident during Clinton's first term. Consider the administration's initial National Security Strategy (NSS), a document released in July 1994. While giving minimal credence to the nascent threat of transnational terrorism, that NSS echoed Clinton's aforementioned 1993 address to the UN General Assembly, noting that the "only responsible US strategy is one that seeks to ensure US influence over and participation in collective decision making in a wide and growing range of circumstances." Further, with respect to the use of force, it stressed that while "there may be many demands for US involvement, the need to husband scarce resources suggests that we must carefully select the means and level of our participation in particular military operations."⁸

To his credit, Clinton did decide to place a greater emphasis on harder core security issues—most significantly those related to the maintenance of stability in the Balkans and Greater Middle East and the reduction of threats posed by Iraq's WMD and missile development programs and sponsorship of terrorist organizations—following his reelection in 1996. Yet, at that juncture, the president and his advisors insisted on trying to do everything rather than concentrating on one or two critical initiatives. Consider, for instance, Berger's characterization of Clinton's legacy in January 2001: "Today ... America is by any measure the world's unchallenged military, economic and political power. The world counts on us to be a catalyst of coalitions, a broker of peace [and] a guarantor of global financial stability."⁹

In general terms, the Clinton administration's final NSS, which it issued in December 1999, mirrored the above statement by Berger. In short, that document promulgated three overarching objectives. First, "to enhance America's security." Second, "to bolster America's economic prosperity. And third, "to promote democracy and human rights abroad."¹⁰ As Yale University historian John Lewis Gaddis, perhaps the most authoritative scholar of American national security policy over the past half-century, has pointed out, the "Clinton statement seems simply to assume peace."¹¹

Similar to the Clinton administration's 1994 NSS, the 1999 version failed to recognize the seriousness of the threats to the United States. In particular, that oversight was evident in the president's approach to the Persian Gulf from 1993-2001.

The ensuing assessment of that approach is subdivided contextually into four parts. Those parts address the development and implementation of policies designed to mitigate threats to US interests emanating from the region in the following manner: threats posed by Iraq; threats posed by Al Qaeda; linking stability in the Gulf to that in the Greater Middle East; and connecting the dots vis-à-vis threats posed by state and non-state actors within and beyond the Greater Middle East.

Responding to Threats Posed by Iraq, 1993-2001

An examination of the Clinton administration's policies toward Iraq must begin with a

caveat of sorts. Because the president was unable, if not unwilling, to identify one clear threat to US interests, he pursued a range of initiatives with variable degrees of resolve. Iraq was simply not at the top of the list. According to Kenneth M. Pollack, the point man on Iraq on Berger's staff from 1999-2001, for example, the

Administration (especially during its first term, under the direction of Lake, the high-minded national security advisor) was seeking to create a new paradigm of international relations—a true New World Order. The goals of this new paradigm were a world of global economic development, cooperation, collective security, and the use of force only to aid the oppressed and defeat aggression. ... Actively confronting Saddam did not fit neatly into that brave new world.¹²

As a result, on Clinton's watch, the United States sought to mitigate Saddam's potential to develop nuclear, chemical and biological WMD and, perhaps, eventually transfer those munitions to terrorist organizations by relying primarily upon the UN to dispatch weapons inspectors to Iraq and oversee Baghdad's use of proceeds from the sale of its petroleum resources for essential items such as food and medicine. The president also authorized the limited use of military force against Iraq on several occasions from 1993-98, the most robust of which came in response to Saddam's expulsion of the weapons inspectors in December 1998. However, in none of those cases was an invasion of Iraq seriously considered. Instead, Clinton attempted to contain the threats posed by Iraq on the cheap in terms of both economic and political capital, domestically as well as internationally.

Given that this chapter does not focus exclusively on Saddam, the ensuing examination of Clinton's management of US policy toward Iraq from 1993-2001 is necessarily limited to a selective review of the most significant crises that defined the relationship between Washington and Baghdad during that period. Four such episodes stand out: a foiled spring 1993 plot by the Iraqi intelligence service (Mukhabbarat) to assassinate George H.W. Bush during the former president's trip to Kuwait to commemorate the coalition's victory in the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War; the brief mobilization of Iraqi forces along the Kuwaiti border in October 1994; stillborn US-backed plots to overthrow Saddam's regime in March 1995 (by Kurdish and Iraqi National Congress [INC] forces) and June 1996 (by rogue military officers); and a 1997-98 showdown between Saddam and the Clinton administration that ended with the conduct of Operation Desert Fox in December 1998.

In April 1993, Bush planned a visit to Kuwait to commemorate the American-led expulsion of Iraqi invaders from that state through the prosecution of the 1990-91 Persian Gulf War. A day before Bush's arrival, the Kuwaiti authorities announced that they had uncovered and foiled a Mukhabbarat plot to assassinate him. The Mukhabbarat had planned to detonate a bomb in the center of Kuwait City as Bush's motorcade drove through. The bomb had already been planted and was uncovered by the Kuwaitis, who passed that information along to the Clinton administration. Subsequent CIA and FBI investigations confirmed that the explosives indeed had the

markings of the Mukhabbarat.¹³

Two months later, Clinton retaliated against Iraq by authorizing the launch of 23 cruise missiles into the Mukhabbarat headquarters in Baghdad, an attack that occurred in the middle of the night when the building was largely deserted and thus destroyed potentially valuable intelligence files but killed few operatives.¹⁴ By Clinton's standards, it was a relatively forceful response, one that had been recommended by Colin Powell, who continued to serve as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until October 1993. Clinton recalls in his memoirs that "I felt we would have been justified in hitting Iraq harder, but Powell made a persuasive case that the attack would deter further Iraqi terrorism, and that dropping bombs on more targets, including presidential palaces, would have been unlikely to kill Saddam and almost certain to kill more innocent people."¹⁵ Notwithstanding that assessment, Saddam, who had retained power despite the Gulf War and ruthlessly crushed domestic revolts by the Kurds in the north and Shiites in the south following that conflict, likely perceived the limited missile strikes as a sign of weakness, one he would attempt to exploit with gradually but consistently increasing degrees of success in subsequent years. As Woolsey notes in one published report: after an exhaustive two-month investigation, Clinton "fired a couple of dozen cruise missiles into an empty building in the middle of the night, which is a sufficiently weak response to be almost laughable."¹⁶

On the other hand, while it stands to reason that the nature of Clinton's response to the assassination plot against Bush may have emboldened Saddam, the second confrontation between the two was resolved in a manner more beneficial to the United States. At the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War, Saddam agreed to abide by restrictions on WMD development and also to accept economic sanctions regulating Baghdad's income from its oil resources—both subject to UN oversight and verification—in the context of Security Council Resolution 687. Saddam challenged Clinton vis-à-vis the sanctions by amassing approximately 80,000 troops along the border between Iraq and Kuwait in the fall of 1994. The United States countered with Operation Vigilant Warrior, a reinforcement effort that quickly raised American troop strength in the Persian Gulf region from 13,000 to 60,000. Clinton's reaction, along with an explicit warning from US and British military officers that they would strike the Iraqis if they did not pull their forces back from the border region, forced Saddam to back down.¹⁷ In this instance, Clinton's approach was effective. Unfortunately, the president did not prove nearly so resolute over the long term.

During the run-up to the 1996 Presidential Election, Clinton was willing to allow his advisors some latitude in the development of plans to weaken, if not eliminate, the Iraqi regime from within. A more direct use of US military force, however, was deemed too risky in an election year. Saddam, for his part, focused concurrently on limiting the damage the UN Special Commission for the Disarmament of Iraq (UNSCOM) could inflict on his WMD programs and maintaining firm political control at the domestic level through the ruthless repression of any individual or group that defied his regime. In addition, he used much of the money allowed through the UN-administered oil-for-food programs for military purposes, then blamed his people's hardships (most notably malnutrition among children) on the sanctions generally and the United States

specifically. In particular, he skillfully manipulated international media coverage of starving children in Iraqi hospitals to generate negative publicity for Clinton at home. As Albright explains, "Saddam's goal was to foil the inspectors by gaining relief from sanctions without giving up his remaining weapons. His strategy was to publicize the hardships of Iraqi civilians in order to gain sympathy among Arabs and the West, and to an extent he succeeded. Anti-Americanism will always find a receptive audience in some circles."¹⁸

Against this backdrop, the Clinton administration authorized the CIA to plan two insurgency operations: one a collaborative effort with Kurdish Democratic Party head Mazud Barzani and exiled INC leader Ahmed Chalabi in 1995 and the second a coup under the leadership of an anti-Saddam faction in the upper levels of the Iraqi security services and military in 1996. Regrettably, but perhaps not unexpectedly, given Saddam's penchant for survival over the years, neither plan came to fruition. A March 1995 offensive by Kurdish forces near the northern city of Irbil appeared promising initially but the dispatch of reinforcements from the Iraqi Republican Guard in Baghdad caused the United States (which was itself unprepared to provide substantial military support should the situation sour) to caution the Kurds to stand down, which they did. The coup was also stillborn. The Mukhabbarat uncovered the plot and liquidated the conspirators in June 1996.¹⁹ Yet, ultimately, neither operation proved particularly damaging to Clinton politically, which was probably one of the principal reasons he approved both to begin with.

Not surprisingly, Clinton proved increasingly unwilling to take any marked political risks in confronting Iraq over the final four years of his tenure in the White House. In particular, he limited himself to one relatively small-scale military operation in the face of Saddam's perpetual defiance of UNSCOM inspectors in 1997 and 1998 prior to their final departure from Iraq in the run-up to Operation Desert Fox. The start of Clinton's second term in January 1997 coincided with the commencement of a campaign by Saddam to gradually frustrate UNSCOM's efforts, while reconstituting at least some of his WMD capabilities with proceeds siphoned from the oil proceeds allowed by the UN in order to (theoretically but by no means practically) provide food and medicine to the Iraqi people. Differences within the Security Council between the United States and the United Kingdom on one hand, and France, Russia and China on the other, who favored strict and loose enforcement of the UN's resolutions, respectively, only strengthened Saddam's hand. As Pollack explains, Saddam's "goals were to impede UNSCOM's progress, exacerbate the growing differences within the Security Council, and antagonize the United States without presenting enough of a provocation to justify a major military response. However, he was also looking to fight back against the inspectors' efforts to penetrate the security of his regime."²⁰

It was Iraq's repeated provocations in the latter issue area that led to an American military response—namely Operation Desert Fox. In the months preceding that operation, Saddam had repeatedly denied UNSCOM inspectors access to many of his presidential palaces, mammoth structures that had the potential for use in the concealment of WMD. In February 1998, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan traveled to Baghdad, where he negotiated a temporary compromise through which the inspectors were granted

"unrestricted access" to all sites in Iraq. Yet, by November, Iraqi officials were still routinely tuning inspectors away from a variety of sensitive "presidential sites." The next month, the United States conducted four days of air and cruise missile strikes on a range of Iraqi targets, only 11 of 97 of which were directed at suspected WMD sites.²¹

According to Clinton, following the "attack we had no way to know how much of the proscribed [WMD] material had been destroyed, but Iraq's ability to produce and deploy dangerous weapons had plainly been reduced."²² The extent to which that assessment is true remains unclear. However, one thing is clear: when the operation was complete, Iraq did not readmit the inspectors. As a result, Saddam remained free of anything but token diplomatic pressure to comply with the UN resolutions over the remainder of Clinton's second term. As journalists and public policy analysts Lawrence Kaplan and William Kristol conclude, the "whole business reflected the administration's refusal to employ measures of genuine strategic effectiveness. The Clinton policy toward Iraq may have comforted the sensibilities of its architects—but not nearly so much as it comforted Saddam Hussein, who, by the time Clinton left office, was out of the box whose confines had been mostly imaginary to begin with."²³

Responding to Threats Posed by Al Qaeda, 1993-2001

When Clinton entered office, the principal security threats his administration would face in the future were understandably unclear. Nonetheless, Clinton's failure to mitigate one such threat emanating from the Greater Middle East—that posed by Al Qaeda—over the ensuing eight years, was one of his most significant shortcomings as president, particularly given the devastating nature of the attacks that organization staged on 9/11. Put simply, Clinton and his advisors made two sets of errors with respect to the manner in which they confronted bin Laden. First, they were late to recognize the severity of the dangers posed by Al Qaeda, choosing to treat terrorism primarily as a law enforcement issue rather than a national security concern. Second, after acknowledging the grave threats presented by bin Laden, they remained reluctant to take decisive military action against either Al Qaeda or those regimes upon which it was suspected of relying for support.

In order to assess the degree to which the Clinton administration should be faulted for its inability to weaken, if not eliminate, Al Qaeda, it is necessary to review the opportunities it had to respond to terrorist acts carried out by bin Laden and his supporters, how effectively or ineffectively it did so and why that was the case in each instance. Given that this discussion is only one component of the broader chapter and book, assessments of the following four examples are sufficient: the February 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York; a foiled plot to detonate bombs aboard 11 airliners over the Pacific Ocean and subsequent failure to secure bin Laden's extradition from Sudan in 1995-96; the August 1998 bombings of the American Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania; and the October 2000 bombing of the USS Cole.²⁴

The Clinton administration's first opportunity to deal with an act of terrorism directed

against the United States came on 26 February 1993. That morning, a group of terrorists led by a man named Ramzi Yousef parked a rental van packed with explosives in a garage beneath the North Tower of the World Trade Center. They then lit the fuses attached to the bomb and fled. The resulting explosion caused limited damage to the infrastructure of the tower, killing six people and injuring 1,000 more.²⁵ Yousef, who was traveling on an Iraqi passport at the time and not apprehended until February 1995, later boasted to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents that the objective of the operation had been to collapse the foundation of the North Tower, causing it to topple into the adjacent South Tower in hopes of killing up to 250,000, a catastrophe that would have dwarfed the losses in the 9/11 attacks.²⁶ The subsequent FBI investigation of the bombing uncovered considerable evidence linking Al Qaeda to the operation, a development that proved a indicator of the rising threats bin Laden was to present to US interests in the years to come.²⁷

Clinton based his 1992 presidential campaign primarily on domestic rather than foreign policy issues, most notably those associated with economic and social programs. He had minimal experience in international security affairs and the initial foreign policy advisors he chose (Christopher and Lake among others) were skeptical of the robust use of military force to back diplomatic overtures. Consequently, Clinton's response to the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center was hardly surprising. He perceived the attack as an isolated act carried out by a loosely affiliated group of individuals as opposed to a coordinated assault planned and orchestrated by a transnational terrorist organization, let alone one with state backing. As a result, the administration limited its response to a criminal investigation carried out unilaterally by the FBI, an approach that left national security institutions such as the CIA and Department of Defense largely out of the equation. This lack of collaboration reduced the potential to uncover Al Qaeda's misdeeds in an expeditious fashion, costing the administration valuable time in identifying bin Laden as a credible national security threat.²⁸

Clinton did eventually recognize the pressing nature of the rising dangers presented by Al Qaeda. As he acknowledges in his memoirs, initially, "bin Laden seemed to be a financier of terrorist operations, but over time we would learn that he was the head of a highly sophisticated terrorist organization, with access to large amounts of money beyond his own fortune, and with operatives in several countries, including Chechnya, Bosnia and the Philippines."²⁹ Regrettably, though, Clinton remained reluctant to take decisive action to counter those threats, most emphatically so during his initial term. In January 1995, for example, a collaborative effort between US and Filipino domestic law enforcement agencies uncovered a second terrorist plot involving Yousef, an individual named Abdul Hakim Murad and an Al Qaeda member called Khalid Shaikh Mohammed. The plan was designed to facilitate the planting and detonation of bombs aboard 11 commercial airplanes bound from points in Asia to sites in the United States, with the explosions to occur over the Pacific Ocean and result in the deaths of some 4,000 Americans.³⁰ Fortunately, the plan never came to fruition. Instead, the Filipino police apprehended Murad in Manila in January 1995, and Yousef was taken into custody by Pakistani Special Forces and FBI agents in Islamabad, Pakistan, the next month.

Mohammed, on the other hand, remained at large.³¹

Yousef's apprehension and conviction for his role in the World Trade Center bombing in a subsequent trial in New York in 1996 contributed to the development of an increased emphasis within the Clinton administration on dealing with the bin Laden problem. Unfortunately, Clinton and his national security team proceeded to squander repeated opportunities to secure bin Laden's extradition from Sudan to the United States over the course of the 1996 election year. Bin Laden had set up a base of operations in Sudan following his expulsion from Saudi Arabia in the wake of his repeated criticisms of the political leadership in the Kingdom in 1991. Notwithstanding denials by some Clinton administration officials, published reports that have emerged in recent years indicate that Sudan offered to deliver bin Laden to the Americans—either directly or by way of a third country—on repeated occasions during 1996. Such offers were made to contacts in the CIA, the Department of State and in the US private sector.³² Whether or not the Sudanese would actually have delivered bin Laden remains open to question. What is clear is that the political leadership in Khartoum eventually forced him to leave the country in May 1996, at which point he relocated to Afghanistan, where he reconstituted the Al Qaeda infrastructure he then used to orchestrate the events of 9/11.³³

Had the Clinton administration elected to engage Sudan more vigorously, at least some of the attacks bin Laden carried out in subsequent years could perhaps have been prevented. One explanation as to why Clinton did not choose to pursue bin Laden any more vigorously at that juncture was that he wanted to maintain a positive focus rather than panic the public prior to the November 1996 Presidential Election, which he won handily over former Republican Senator Robert Dole. Dick Morris, one of Clinton's top domestic political advisors during his initial term, for example, notes that, "on issues of terrorism, defense and foreign affairs, generally, [Clinton] was always too wary of criticism to act decisively."³⁴ Unfortunately, the trend Morris points out continued throughout Clinton's final four years in the White House as well, a period during which the President had two clear opportunities to respond decisively to attacks carried out by Al Qaeda on American civilian and military targets—the August 1998 African embassy bombings and the October 2000 bombing of the USS *Cole*.

In May 1998, bin Laden called a press conference of sorts near Khost, Afghanistan in territory under the control of the Taliban. He used the occasion to publicly declare war against the United States for the fifth time since October 1996.³⁵ Three months later, Al Qaeda carried out bombings of the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania. The attack in Kenya killed 256 people and injured another 4,500; the strike in Tanzania left 11 dead. Among the fatalities were 12 American diplomats.³⁶ Clinton responded as forcefully as he had to any previous Al Qaeda assault to that point, authorizing cruise missile strikes on an alleged chemical weapons factory in Khartoum, Sudan (the government of which the administration suspected of collaboration in the embassy bombings) and Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan.³⁷

In defending the strikes in his memoirs, Clinton recalls stressing in an address to the American people that "our attacks were not aimed against Islam, 'but against fanatics and killers,' and that we had been fighting against them on several fronts for years and

would continue to do so, because 'this will be a long, ongoing struggle.'³⁸ It remains unclear whether the factory in Khartoum ever actually produced chemical weapons of any sort rather than pharmaceutical supplies (as the Sudanese claimed).³⁹ And, regrettably, the limited missile strikes directed at the training camps in Afghanistan neither resulted in bin Laden's death nor reduced markedly Al Qaeda's capacity to threaten US interests. In short, pinprick strikes sent the wrong message to bin Laden: that Washington lacked the political will to use the full extent of its military assets against Al Qaeda. As Mike Rolince, former chief of the international terrorism division at the FBI, asserted in an interview with *National Review* editor Rich Lowry, "What you told bin Laden is that he could go and level two embassies, and in response, we're going to knock down a few huts. If you're bin Laden, that sounds like a real legitimate cost of doing business."⁴⁰

Bin Laden continued conducting the business to which Rolince refers with tragic repercussions vis-à-vis the attack on the USS *Cole*. Al Qaeda operatives carried out the attack by guiding a small explosives-laden boat across the harbor in the port of Aden, Yemen, to the side of the *Cole*, where they detonated it. The resulting explosion ripped a hole in the side of the vessel, killing 17 American sailors and severely injuring 39 more. Clinton dispatched a team of FBI investigators to Yemen and considered a military response against Al Qaeda once reliable evidence as to its involvement in the attack was uncovered, but ultimately decided not to use force.⁴¹ According to the President, the CIA's inability to pinpoint bin Laden's location in Afghanistan left only two other options: "a larger-scale bombing campaign of all suspected campsites or a sizable invasion. I thought neither was feasible without a [formal US legal] finding of al Qaeda responsibility for the *Cole*."⁴²

Notwithstanding Clinton's explanation, there are two additional interconnected reasons why it stands to reason that he chose to act the way he did in the context of the *Cole* episode. First, he was within three months of the end of his final term and preoccupied with forging an enduring foreign policy legacy. Second, he had spent much of the previous year attempting to base that legacy upon the achievement of a lasting peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. Put simply, launching missile strikes against bin Laden—who was viewed favorably by many Palestinians and Muslims in the broader Middle East—let alone a war on terror, would have undermined his last-ditch attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Pursuit of Peace and Stability in the Gulf and Broader Middle East, 1993-2001

The policies the Clinton administration developed in an effort to reduce the threats posed to US interests by both Iraq and Al Qaeda, in turn, affected its relationships with other states and institutions in the Greater Middle East and the resultant extent of stability (or lack thereof) across the region. In particular, three interconnected sets of relationships—those between the United States and Iran, Saudi Arabia and the principal actors in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—stood out above the rest. Each is discussed in greater detail below.

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and maintenance of a theocratic regime in that

state in the years since has rendered the development of any semblance of a constructive relationship between Washington and Tehran a perpetually daunting challenge. As was true of their predecessors, Clinton and his advisors had to strike a balance in Washington's approach toward Iran. In short, they had to acknowledge the potential for diplomatic engagement without creating the perception that the United States had any intention whatsoever of ending its criticism of Iran's sponsorship of terrorist organizations absent substantive behavioral changes on behalf of the mullahs in power in Tehran. According to Albright, "we chose a course that, though incrementally, helped us to move our relationship in the right direction, while opening the door to increased contacts."⁴³

During Clinton's initial term, there was little indication of the type of diplomatic opening necessary for the development of a more constructive American-Iranian relationship. Instead, the administration placed an emphasis on its concerns over Iran's role in terrorist acts directed against the interests of the United States and its allies, most notably so in the context of the Greater Middle East. One such act was the June 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers, a residential complex for US military forces stationed in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. The attack killed 19 American servicemen and left another 373 people injured. Ultimately, an FBI investigation uncovered evidence that the Iranian-backed terrorist group Saudi Hezbollah played a role in the planning and execution of the bombing.⁴⁴

Concerns over Iranian involvement in the matter, irrespective of the extent of such involvement, naturally reduced the potential for a warming of relations between Washington and Tehran. On the other hand, notwithstanding those concerns, domestic political developments within Iran early in Clinton's second term suggested that a diplomatic opening might eventually come about. In particular, in May 1997, the Iranian electorate selected a reform-minded president named Muhammad Khatami. Although Khatami had only limited power (especially relative to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei) over Iranian internal and external affairs, his elevation represented a window of opportunity for the Clinton administration.

For her part, Albright attempted to take advantage of that opportunity in the context of a June 1998 speech in which she welcomed "Khatami's election and the growing popular pressure in Iran for greater freedom."⁴⁵ Regrettably, albeit predictably, Khamenei was unwilling to allow Khatami much freedom to pursue even marginal democratic reforms domestically or deal with the Americans either directly or indirectly at the international level. A second US push to improve relations following further gains by Khatami's reformers in February 2000 legislative elections in Iran proved equally fruitless. In both cases, continuing US suspicion of Iran's linkages to terrorist organizations and pursuit of the development of nuclear weapons only complicated matters. Consequently, Albright concludes that

Clinton administration policy toward Iran was calibrated appropriately. We could have achieved a breakthrough only by abandoning our principles and interests on nonproliferation, terrorism and the Middle East, far too high a price. We could have

avoided the charge that we were too soft on Iran by ignoring the reform movement entirely, but that would have left us isolated internationally and provided no incentive for Iran to change further. ... By offering an unconditional dialogue, we put the onus on Iran to explain why it was unwilling even to talk about our differences and laid the groundwork for formal discussions if and when they become possible.⁴⁶

Managing the American-Saudi relationship proved equally challenging for the Clinton administration. Clinton had to employ a balanced approach in dealing with the Saudis. As has been the case since World War II, the United States was dependent on Saudi Arabia for a substantial proportion of the oil necessary to help fuel the growth of the American economy during the Clinton years. In addition, the United States maintained air bases in Saudi Arabia in order to maintain no-fly zones in Iraq throughout the 1990s. Thus, it was essential that Clinton and his advisors maintain a stable state of diplomatic affairs with the Saudis despite concerns over the kingdom's refusal to cooperate unequivocally in reducing the threats posed to US interests by terrorist organizations. Most significantly, the administration was frustrated over Saudi Arabia's support for Islamic charities suspected of collusion with terrorist groups—including, but not limited to, Al Qaeda.⁴⁷

The most notable example of the Clinton administration's inability to secure Saudi cooperation in a US-administered investigation of a terrorist attack on American interests was the aforementioned Khobar Towers episode. In the aftermath of the attack, early intelligence suggested Saudi Shiite members of the Iranian-backed Hezbollah were responsible. Rather than cooperate fully with the United States, the Saudis conducted their own investigation and refused to share the documentary evidence with the FBI. As a result, the FBI failed to obtain the necessary evidence to produce any indictments before Clinton left office. As Clinton administration NSC staffers Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon point out, the

Saudis eventually confirmed Washington's suspicions that high-level Iranians were involved and that some of the Saudi perpetrators were thought to be living in Tehran. But the Saudis never delivered enough information, and little, if anything, that could stand up in a courtroom, where the use of intelligence as evidence is problematic in the best of circumstances. With the United States impatient to make indictments, the Saudis balked at cooperation.⁴⁸

The connection between Iran and Saudi Arabia was particularly troubling to the Clinton administration given the traditionally cool diplomatic relationship between those two states, the vast majority of whose populations practiced Shia and Sunni Islam, respectively. It was equally alarming to Israel, as the one issue area that has typically united Muslims of differing ethnicities and Islamic stains in the past is their collective distaste for the very presence of the Jewish state in the heart of the Middle East. As *Newsweek International* editor Fareed Zakaria explains, "Israel has become the great excuse for much of the Arab world, the way for regimes to deflect attention from their own failures. Other countries have foreign policy disagreements with one

another—think of Japan and China—but they do not have the sometimes poisonous quality of the Arab-Israeli divide. Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip has turned into the great cause of the Arab world."⁴⁹ In the end, Clinton judged that leaning too hard on the Saudis vis-à-vis the Khobar bombing or, for that matter, the kingdom's broader acceptance of and, in some cases, advocacy for Islamists' rejection of the West, would limit his ability to focus on the Middle Eastern initiative with which he was concerned the most: the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Throughout his presidency, Clinton remained firmly committed to resolving the confrontation that has pitted Israel against its Arab neighbors generally and the Palestinians specifically since the establishment of the Jewish state in 1948. His efforts to do so, which ranged from presiding over the signing ceremony for the Oslo Declaration of Principles at the White House in September 1993 to an ill-fated attempt to bring the Israeli-Palestinian peace process to a successful conclusion at Camp David in July 2000, were noble.⁵⁰ Yet, as was true of his predecessors over the previous half-century, and his successor, George W. Bush, Clinton was unable to bridge the long-time gaps between the two sides.

Ultimately, the sources of strife that presented the Clinton administration with what proved to be irreconcilable Israeli-Palestinian differences were fourfold. First, Israel's refusal to accept the establishment of a contiguous Palestinian state composed of the territory in the West Bank and Gaza Strip that the Israeli Defense Forces seized during the June 1967 Six-Day War and has since used for the perpetual development of settlements in areas otherwise administered by the Palestinian Authority (PA). Second, Tel Aviv's understandable reluctance to condone the return of a substantial number of the Palestinians displaced by the conduct of the 1948, 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars and their extended families born and raised in refugee camps since—more than four million people—to Israel proper. Third, joint Israeli-Palestinian inability to resolve their differences over control of Jerusalem and the holy sites therein. Fourth, PA President Yasser Arafat's incapacity, if not unwillingness, to condemn and clamp down on the terrorist activities of Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.

While it is difficult to fault Clinton for focusing on an issue—the peace process—that, if resolved effectively, would likely have been quite beneficial as pertained to the stability of the broader Middle East, his efforts to produce that outcome were unsuccessful. After the Camp David talks broke up without an agreement, Clinton concluded frankly that the "parties could not reach agreement ... given the historical, religious, political and emotional dimensions of the conflict."⁵¹ Yet, because Clinton had placed such an emphasis on the peace process relative to other security challenges in the Persian Gulf and its periphery, his legacy in the region will forever be reflective of a task pursued vigorously but left undone.

Iraq, Terrorism and the Middle East: Connecting the Dots

In hindsight, perhaps the two gravest threats to US interests emanating from the Persian Gulf during Clinton's tenure in the White House were those presented by Iraq