



**THE ARAB GULF STATES AND THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR CHALLENGE:  
IN THE LINE OF FIRE**

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*The Gulf states' policy towards Iran's nuclear ambitions has combined elements of appeasement with a fundamental reliance on the United States as a defending and deterring force. Most Gulf states lack strategic depth, have small populations, and small, untrained armies. Moreover, their significant oil and natural gas reserves have made them the potential target for aggression and dependent on outside forces for defense. Despite the great wealth and inherent weakness of the Gulf states, they have remained largely on the sidelines in the international effort to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Iran's determination to continue with its nuclear program has made it difficult for them openly to present a united front and thereby function as a counterforce to Iran's might.*

As a way to contain Iran's ambitions, the Gulf states' policy combines elements of appeasement with a fundamental reliance on the United States as a defending and deterring force. Iran's determination to continue with its nuclear program, more than ever, is already forcing them to struggle with a different type of threat perception, which so far has made it difficult for them openly to present a united front and thereby function as a counterforce to Iran's might.

The relative weakness of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, and Qatar stems from the fact that most of them lack strategic depth, have small populations, and small, untrained armies. Moreover, their territory contains some 45 percent of the world's oil reserves and 25 percent of the world's natural gas reserves, a fact that has over the years made them the target of aggression and dependent on outside force for defense. One may have expected that, in light of these facts--great wealth and inherent weakness--the GCC states would have played a big part in the international effort to persuade Iran to abandon its nuclear ambitions, but to date they have remained largely on the sidelines.<sup>1</sup>

**GCC POLICY**

The Gulf policy regarding Iran is replete with inherent contradictions. While the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) States are indeed worried about continuing nuclear development in Iran, they are no less worried about a scenario in which, lacking any attractive diplomatic option, Iranian nuclear facilities are attacked. In their view, such violence is liable to trickle across their borders, whether in the form of a direct Iranian retaliation against them and U.S. interests on their soil or in the form of general regional destabilization. Moreover, while the Gulf states support a diplomatic solution to the Iran crisis, they are concerned that it may come at the expense of their own interests and that the result will be the United States recognizing Iran's dominance in the Gulf. The GCC states have thus chosen a strategy that combines appeasing the Iranians, demonstrating public support for diplomatic efforts to solve the nuclear crisis, and relying on American military strength for deterrence and defense, coupled with behind-the-scenes activity designed primarily to heave the problem as far away from them as possible.

The Gulf states continue to make preparations for possible developments in the Gulf on the Iranian question and demonstrate sensitivity to oft-repeated threats coming from Teheran. Although all seek to curb Iran's regional ambitions, they prefer not to show them publicly to avoid generating an Iranian counter-move against them. The public expressions about Iran's nuclear program include:

- Repeating the recognition of Iran's right to maintain nuclear technology for peaceful uses while calling for a regional ban on nuclear weapons (Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone, WMDFFZ).
- Supporting a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear crisis and expressing a desire to take an active part in it alongside Western nations.
- Urging Iran to cooperate with the international community and the accepted verification regimes of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).
- Expressing concern over any military action directed against Iran while stressing the destructive ramifications such an attack could bring to their doorstep.

Iran has positioned itself as the utmost threat to the stability of the Gulf regimes. The hegemonic ambitions of the Shah and the attempts of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to export the Islamic Revolution to the west shores of the Gulf are still fresh in the memories of the region's rulers. Despite the severity of the threat, the monarchies are constrained by a number of factors: public opinion and "the Arab street," which tend to be anti-American and do not--unlike the ruling elite--view Iran's nuclear program as a real threat; recognition of their military and strategic inferiority compared to Iran; different threat perceptions among them with regard to the threat from Iran; the weakness of the relatively moderate Arab bloc; and perhaps also the recognition that it may be too late to

stop Iran from achieving nuclear capabilities and that it is thus pointless to join a lost cause. The outcome is an inverse ratio between the threat level coming from Iranian nuclear development and the level of involvement of the Arab Gulf states in attempt to keep that capability from Iran.

The Gulf states have also demonstrated passivity in their planning for the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran; it would seem that they are simply casting their lot in with the United States. Almost certainly, the result will continue to be a marginal contribution to the region's security and reliance, as before, on America's military might to handle Iran, especially should its aggressive tendencies be backed up by military nuclear capability.

It is interesting to note that, at first, Gulf criticism of Iranian nuclear development appeared in the context of nuclear safety and concern about radioactive spills from the Bushehr nuclear plant (where, in late October 2010, the Iranians began loading fuel into the core), whether accidents or caused by outside attacks. It is possible the GCC states chose to relate to this context in order to differentiate themselves from Western criticism of Iran and to avoid angering Iran too much. The repeated use of the statement, "The nuclear reactor at Bushehr is closer to Manama or Kuwait city than to Teheran," shows that the high level of threat has made the Arab Gulf states very cautious. Iran has proven sensitive to this criticism and has made efforts to lend its program as civilian a nature as possible. For example, Iran has often hosted delegations from the Gulf at the Bushehr reactor in order to provide reassurances about its safety.<sup>2</sup>

Whether it is the inherent passivity of the Gulf states' conduct or the West's indifference to receiving their input in the political effort against Iran's nuclear ambitions, the result is that the GCC states feel that talks on so acute an issue to them take place with or without their involvement, and at times even--as they have put it--"behind their backs." Their primary concern is that the United States and Iran could arrive at an agreement that would be harmful to their own interests. Such fears have led to criticism of the diplomatic effort

aimed at dissuading Iran. One of the difficulties of the diplomatic channels and dialogue with Iran, at least according to some of the Gulf states, is that they were not invited to participate from the outset.<sup>3</sup>

### IRAN'S STRATEGY

Iran does not view the GCC states as a serious threat; they are certainly not the primary motivation behind its nuclear program. Nonetheless, it does identify them as a serious security problem, mostly because of their pro-Western orientation. On the one hand, Teheran would like to project an image of itself as a partner to the Gulf states in every sense and has engaged in efforts to prove its good intentions. However, its conduct--including casting aspersions on the legitimacy of the Gulf regimes, making explicit threats to close the Straits of Hormuz and to attack U.S. facilities in Gulf State territories, holding threatening military maneuvers, covert interventions among the Shi'a communities, and strengthening its hold on occupied territories (Abu Musa and the Tunb Islands) do not contribute to calming the anxieties on the western bank of the Gulf.

The Arab Gulf states have never directly threatened Iran. All of them maintain a defensive security philosophy and all would like to preserve the status quo in the Gulf. Aside from Saudi Arabia, their military forces are relatively small, and they do not have the power to go head-to-head with Iran. Moreover, one might also assume that Iran is not worried about them attacking any time soon. However, the use of America's military power as their tool, the historic enmity (mostly for having supported Iraq in the eight-year Iran-Iraq War), the Sunni-Shi'i rift, and the limitations their advanced weapons systems impose on Iran's freedom of action in the Gulf have all made Iran view the Gulf states as a significant security problem and has led Iran to oppose the presence of any foreign military troops--especially Western--in the Gulf.

The Arabian Gulf is of supreme strategic value for Iran, because it is the primary channel for the export of Iranian oil and

import of goods necessary for its economy. Because diplomatic efforts have not helped Iran persuade the GCC states to maintain a more "balanced policy," the Iranians have tried to force it to do so by using terrorism and subversion on Gulf soil, especially during the 1980s and early 1990s. In most cases, like the alleged coup plot unveiled in Bahrain in late 2010, direct Iranian involvement was difficult to prove. Iran was, therefore, able to maintain open diplomatic relations with the Gulf states--despite its clandestine activity against the Gulf states.<sup>4</sup>

Iran has several military aims therein: to prevent or at least limit the ability of various players to use the Gulf to attack it; to defend the Iranian coast with its refineries and navigation lines; to attempt to undermine American influence and increase the price of any U.S. intervention in the Gulf; to improve Iran's ability to respond if attacked, especially regarding freedom of navigation and oil exports from the Gulf; and to project its strength while sowing fear among its smaller neighbors in order to influence their policies.

Until it has nuclear capability, Iran's security philosophy will continue to be based on asymmetrical deterrence against the soft targets along the western bank of the Gulf, where there are many infrastructure facilities (terminals, refineries, and desalination plants) located near civilian population centers. As the Gulf states see it, under nuclear protection, Iran is likely to adopt more extreme policies on the range of issues over which the two sides differ. If the Iranian regime attains nuclear weapons, it could decide to try to deter the United States--the mainstay of the GCC states' security policy--from any future intervention in the Gulf on their behalf.<sup>5</sup>

The GCC worry that a nuclear Iran will earn increased popularity on "the Arab street," at the expense of the Arab regimes that lack it. Iranian nuclear capability could also mean considerable blackmail power: Iran may realize its territorial demands of them or even change the regional structure so that certain states, out of fear, would seek to take shelter under Iran's nuclear wing. In certain scenarios, this may well change the Gulf states' pro-

Western orientation and lead to a split in the Arab world.

Moreover, the regime of the ayatollahs, equipped with nuclear bombs, is likely to increase its support for Shi'i concentrations in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain in order to undermine the stability of the royal families and increase the survivability of the revolutionary regime and Iranian dominance of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) so as to terrorize the Arab oil producers and dictate the policies on oil supplies and costs. While Iran did, on a few occasions, offer its uranium enrichment capability to its Gulf neighbors, this was likely no more than an attempt to demonstrate its sense of superiority over them.

## THE UNITED STATES

The United States is the Arab Gulf states' protector and, for its own interests, needs to have access to the Gulf's oil and economies. As such, the Gulf military balance is integrally linked to the presence of the U.S. forces. Since becoming independent, the Gulf states have been defense buyers, not suppliers. Their lack of strategic depth, their built-in military weakness, and hostile neighbors--formerly Iraq, and now Iran--have caused them to depend more and more on an American military presence.

In recent years, the United States has engaged in serious efforts to shore up the moderate Arab camp and formulate a unified policy on Iran and the nuclear issue; to this end, it even established a permanent consulting body consisting of the GCC states, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq (GCC+3+1). The United States is seeking to ensure the Gulf states' support and cooperation in the struggle against Iran, pressing for curtailment of their commercial ties with Iran, which are even more important for Iran in light of the international sanctions. In addition, the Obama administration is selling advanced weapons to Gulf Arab states in order to help them cope better with the Iranian threat. In an interview on the Qatari *Al-Jazeera* network, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates stated, "The more that

our Arab friends and allies can strengthen their security capabilities, the more they can strengthen their cooperation, both with each other and with us; I think this sends the signal to the Iranians that this path they're on is not going to advance Iranian security but... weaken it."<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the attempt to persuade Iran that the nuclear path is not going "to advance its security but weaken it," strengthening America's allies in the region--especially by providing access to anti-missile defense systems--will, from the U.S. point of view, help the United States adopt a policy of deterrence and containment towards Iran. In this context, the U.S. administration has signed a number of large-scale arms deals in which the United States is to supply a number of Gulf states with many U.S.-made advanced weapons systems, has maintained the American bases and equipment, and has held joint military exercises. Between 2005 and 2009, the United States sold up to \$37 billion in arms to Gulf states; and it is predicted that over the next few years, the GCC states will spend as much as \$100 billion buying F-15 Eagles, F/A-18 Hornet, and THAAD missile defense systems. Chief among them is Saudi Arabia, which expected to buy some \$60 billion worth of weaponry.<sup>7</sup>

From the Gulf states' perspective, they will be the ones to pay for any American error with regard to Iran, whether the Iran chooses to arrive at a settlement with the United States or chooses to operate military power against it. For its part, the United States is seeking to ensure the support of the GCC states in possible future moves against Iran. For example, the Gulf states are important due to their ability to regulate oil production and to hike up prices in the event of a future crisis with Iran. The frequent visits of U.S. senior officials to the Gulf are intended primarily to diffuse the monarchs' worries and to show America's public commitment to the security of their states in any scenario of a future war with Iran, a confrontation that would be likely to place them in the line of fire.

While the GCC states rely on U.S. forces to defend them, this reliance is not total. In quite

a few cases, the states have publicly refused to allow U.S. troops to use their territory--in the past to attack Iraq and more recently Iran--and as a rule they prefer to be off the field. The United States cannot prevent subversion or terrorism against the Gulf states, and it may be that its presence in the Gulf is an excuse and also a target for that sort of activity. Relying on the United States for security is, then, designed to repel a premeditated invasion or attack. In such a case, there is no substitute for America's military might, whether as a deterrent or as a curbing force after an attack.<sup>8</sup>

The vulnerability of the Gulf states encourages them to take cautious, balanced policies by which they seek to maintain correct relations with both the United States and Iran. Doubts about the continued U.S. commitment to resolve the Iranian problem and doubts regarding its overall commitment to Gulf security may be the reasoning behind this policy. The plan for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan by the end of 2011 and its inability to stop Iran's nuclear development have made the GCC states question the U.S. ability to guarantee their security. From their perspective, in certain scenarios they may well be left alone to cope with a nuclear Iran. Thus, they present a conciliatory line towards Iran, especially because Iran, unlike the United States, which is pulling its troops out of Iraq, Iran and its military will remain very close. While concerns about the shifting balance of power in Iran's favor is shared, each Gulf country makes its own profit and loss balance, leading each to adopt a different policy for the containment of Iran's ambitions.

### **SAUDI ARABIA**

Saudi foreign relations are characterized by an ideological, religious conflict and competition over regional influence. Iran's interference in Iraq and its involvement in Lebanon and Yemen are a thorn in the side of the leading Sunni nation, the keeper of the holy sites, and the Gulf state closest to the West. In addition, Saudi Arabia has from time to time accused Iran of encouraging violent demonstrations during the Hajj to Mecca and a

series of terrorist attacks on its soil. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rise to power in Iran brought an end to the honeymoon between the Saudi Arabia and Iran under the Muhammad Khatami presidency and led to an increased Iranian threat. The Shi'a (representing some 15 percent of the Saudi population) are almost all concentrated in the oil-rich region. Any Iranian move to stir them up would likely grow in the future, as nuclear weapons would give Iran the possibility of using nuclear blackmail.

### **KUWAIT**

Other than a warming in Iranian-Kuwaiti relations after the Iraqi invasion, Kuwait's attitude towards Iran is similar to that of Saudi Arabia and is affected by its geographical proximity to Iran, Iran's negative attitude towards it, Iranian involvement in subversion (such as the covert Iranian "sleeper cell" uncovered in Kuwait in April 2010), and the presence of significant Shi'i concentrations on its soil. Most of the Shi'a residing in Kuwait are of Persian origin and naturally identify with Iran. They represent some 35 percent of the population, and although they are integrated into sensitive sectors such as the national oil company, the army, and the police, the Sunnis by and large still consider them to be a fifth column. This explains Kuwait's sensitivity to Shi'i activity within its borders.

### **QATAR**

As part of its independent foreign policy, Qatar, the "bad boy" of the Gulf, maintains good relations with Iran as well as with other radical elements such as Hamas, whether to counterbalance Saudi power or to increase its own regional importance. Qatar and Iran also share a natural gas field (the South Pars). In recent years, various announcements have been made regarding Qatari willingness to strengthen its cooperation on security, possibly as a result of Qatar's concern that Iran would use its superior power to turn profits at Qatar's expense. For its part, Iran worries about Qatar being home to the largest

military air base in the Middle East, Al-Udeid; enormous storage facilities for early deployment; and the CENTCOM forward headquarters--facilities that would be used in any military action against it.<sup>9</sup>

### **THE UAE**

Despite the widespread commercial ties between Dubai and Iran, the issue of the disputed islands (Abu Musa, Greater Tunb, and Lesser Tunb) seized by Iran casts a pall over the nations' relations. In 1992, Iran took control of Abu Musa, expelled the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and violated the joint sovereignty agreement in place between the nations since 1971. In July 2008, Iran further asserted its control of the island and established other facilities on it. Abu Dhabi has maintained a stricter line towards Iran than Dubai, which is home to many Iranians and an important commercial vein for Iran. Beyond the economic consideration in the ties with Iran, the emirate may view maintaining open commerce with Iran as a sort of policy insuring it against a future Iranian attack.

### **BAHRAIN**

Bahrain is widely seen as the most vulnerable of the GCC states. It is the home to the U.S. Fifth Fleet and around 70 percent of the country's population of one million is Shi'a, unlike the Sunni ruling family. Despite having shown a more positive attitude to Iran in recent years, the two nations have experienced difficult periods of tension, especially over Iran's support for the opposition in Bahrain and failed attempts at subversion in the kingdom. Iran's repeated calls for sovereignty over Bahrain, such as the most recent one in February 2009, aroused fierce reactions in Bahrain and led to a wave of protests and a show of solidarity with Bahrain in the Arab world.

### **OMAN**

Oman's relations with Iran are fairly close. The two maintain extensive commercial ties

and even some security cooperation. It is possible that Oman's relative weakness and its location at the edge of the Gulf make it take a rather conciliatory line towards Iran compared to the other Arab Gulf states. In 2010, there were reports that Oman was turning a blind eye and facilitating the smuggling of goods into Iran and even the smuggling of Iranian arms to the Shi'i rebels in Yemen. Moreover, it seems as if Omani-Iranian cooperation has intensified in the security realm as well, and senior officials of the two nations have been meeting with greater frequency than ever before.<sup>10</sup>

### **TOGETHER AND APART**

In response to Iran's nuclear development and in an attempt to intensify the pressure on the United States to solve the crisis, at the end of the December 2006 Gulf Cooperation Council summit, the Gulf states announced their desire to develop independent nuclear programs of their own. At the same time, in order to prevent unnecessary tension with Iran, for the first time since the GCC's inception, the Iranian president was invited to participate in the annual summit that took place the following year. While Ahmadinejad sought, as he put it, to "open a new page" in Iran's relations with the Arab Gulf states, he also stressed that in order to establish a "new Gulf order free of foreign involvement," the GCC states had to trade in their security reliance on the United States for a reliance on Iran instead, something they are not likely to do.

While the Gulf countries may actually wish to coordinate their positions on the Iranian nuclear question and other issues, in reality each continues to act unilaterally and calculate its own costs and benefits. Qatar and Oman, for example, prefer to appease Tehran by way of containing its ambitions. Other states have voiced radically different views, even if only behind closed doors. Thus in recent years, security ties between Iran and Oman have been strengthened, practical security cooperation agreements have been signed between Iran and Qatar (including training and exchange of information), and joint exercises

have been held with Kuwait. There have even been reports of limited cooperation with Bahrain--despite the prolonged hostility between the countries--on "soft" security issues such as border security and smuggling prevention.

### **CHOOSING THE LESSER EVIL**

Although the GCC states have conducted themselves passively and have, for the most part, remained on the sidelines of the political effort against Iran, in recent years an adjustment in strategy and the adoption of a more active policy on Iran has been discernable. Below are the chief manifestations of this policy, which while fairly limited to temporary and partial solutions have some positive elements.

#### ***Tougher Diplomacy***

Some states, chief among them UAE, have taken steps to curb Iran's nuclear effort. The UAE stopped some dual-use shipments to Iran, freezing the accounts of some 40 companies that were associated with Iran's nuclear and missile programs.<sup>11</sup> The UAE ambassador to the United States even publicly endorsed the use of the military option for countering Iran's nuclear program, if sanctions fail to stop the country's quest for nuclear weapons. "It's a cost-benefit analysis--we cannot live with a nuclear Iran... I am willing to absorb what takes place at the expense of the security of the UAE," he added.<sup>12</sup> At the opening of the Arab League Council meeting in March 2009, Saudi Foreign Minister Al-Faisal gave a speech in which he focused on the Iranian threat and the need to formulate a unified Arab stand on issues bearing a "direct relationship to Arab security, including the Iranian nuclear question."<sup>13</sup>

#### ***Promoting Compromise Initiatives***

In 2007, the GCC states offered Iran enriched uranium for civilian purposes from a joint corporation in an attempt both to provide for Iran's nuclear energy needs and to meet the

international community's demands of it. Iran declined the offer.<sup>14</sup>

#### ***Closing Ranks***

Conciliatory moves within the GCC, Syria's pull towards the pragmatic Arab camp, and the attempts to achieve rapprochement between the various Palestinian factions--all with increasing Saudi involvement--may be seen as manifestations of the desire to draw a clear line between the moderate camp and the radicals and to close the ranks of the Arab camp in the face of the Iranian threat.

#### ***Nuclear Development***

The primary motive for developing a nuclear program (each state its own, with the GCC serving only as a setting for negotiations) is Iran's own nuclear ambitions, even if, for obvious reasons, there has been no public acknowledgment of this.<sup>15</sup> The Gulf states have so far progressed with transparency and cooperation with the IAEA; among the Gulf states, the UAE has seemed to be making the most progress. To this end, it has signed an agreement with the United States (which may serve as a model for future agreements) and has established, like the other GCC states, an independent atomic energy corporation.<sup>16</sup> As for jumpstarting nuclear development in some of the Gulf states, this is primarily meant to signal to Iran that they are capable--even if they are not necessarily interested in doing so at this time--of developing a military nuclear program as a deterrent to Iran's advancing nuclear program. Though symbolic, it does represent a response to Iran, while for the Arab public it is motivated by considerations of prestige, regional standing, and modernization, and is meant to send a message of, "We, too, can."

#### ***Buildup of Conventional Arms***

The Gulf is in the midst of one of the biggest conventional arms races it has ever experienced, the emphasis being on buying advanced fighter planes and anti-missile

defense systems; this goes hand-in-hand with America's policy and points to the need to respond to Iran's menacing surface-to-surface missiles and perhaps even to the establishment of attack capability on its soil. These states' military forces have undergone substantive changes in recent years, mainly improvements in their defensive capabilities, and "on paper" they have acquired certain capabilities to attack Iran. Nevertheless, even massive procurement of weapon systems, no matter how advanced, is no match for Iran's military power and its ability to conduct modern warfare for a long period of time. Iran's nuclear buildup and the threat to the Gulf states from Iran's asymmetric capabilities in the Gulf and its surface-to-surface missile arsenal are the main catalysts for these states' efforts to increase their military strength. (These attempts have not diminished in the wake of the economic crisis and the decline in oil prices). Despite the scope and quality of the procurement, or perhaps because of it, the Gulf armed forces have remained small and limited in their ability to operate and maintain many advanced weapon systems.

### *Collective Security*

The GCC states have declared their intention to reestablish a rapid intervention military force on the ashes of the defunct "Peninsula Shield Force." According to plans, this force too is primarily meant to be a ground force (without a navy or air force) and it too is supposed to be stationed on Saudi soil. Its primary function, as the Gulf states recently announced, will be "to provide a response to security threats in the Gulf, such as the fighting on the Yemen-Saudi border."<sup>17</sup> Despite its previous weakness (at the height of its power, the force had about 5,000 soldiers, and only rarely was it completely staffed), it has had some relative successes, including the establishment of a joint headquarters with a permanent command, joint exercises, and three deployments on Kuwaiti territory: during the Iran-Iraq War, in 1994, and with the U.S. military's entry into Iraq in 2003.

### *Varying Sources of Support*

The GCC States have attempted not to rely solely on one source of external security, i.e., the United States. They have thus turned to other countries, including Russia, Great Britain, and France, for arms purchases, joint military exercises, and have even allowed the establishment of foreign military bases on their soil (the most prominent example being the establishment of the French navy's Peace Base in Abu Dhabi in the UAE).<sup>18</sup> The purpose of these steps may be to signal to the United States that the Gulf states have alternatives to America. Saudi Arabia attempted to persuade Russia not to supply Iran with the Russian S-300 advanced aerial defense systems by buying the newer S-400 generation of missiles itself.<sup>19</sup> In recent years, several task forces and multinational forces have been established in the Gulf. By participating in security initiatives such as these, the GCC states seek to diversify the sources of their security support. The strengthening of the partnership with NATO in the framework of the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative and the active participation in Combined Task Force 152, the American-led multinational naval task force stationed in Bahrain, are prominent examples of this trend.

### *Policy Regarding Use of Force*

Despite these efforts, given the Iranian "breakout capability," it can be assumed that there will be no alternative to increased Gulf state military cooperation with the United States and their positioning under America's nuclear deterrent umbrella. Statements on the subject, such as those made by U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, are primarily designed to allay the Gulf states' concerns about Iran's ambitions.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, due to the traditional Gulf public opinion opposing any U.S. presence on Gulf soil, strengthening security relations between the United States and the GCC states, at least formally, could present a challenge to the Gulf regimes.



While the Gulf States have, on different occasions, announced that they would not allow their territory to be used to launch attacks against Iran's nuclear facilities, this may be unavoidable if and when the United States decides to resort to the military option. Their declarations opposing the use of their soil for attacks against Iran might be part of their comprehensive strategy and meant for Iranian ears as well as for the "Arab Street." Yet as the crisis draws nearer, and given an explicit U.S. request, it is reasonable to assume the GCC states would in fact allow the United States to use their territory for attacks--if only without public acknowledgment (as was the case with some of the Gulf states before the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq). Overall, it is not inconceivable that when the time for a decision comes they will prefer to absorb a stinging, temporary blow from Iran rather than live in the shadow of the Iranian bomb for years to come.

## CONCLUSION

The U.N. Security Council resolutions regarding Iran and the attempts at dialogue with it have granted a fair amount of legitimacy to act against it and should have facilitated the GCC states' ability to tackle the Iranian challenge with greater vigor. Nonetheless, the Gulf states--especially the small ones--read the map differently. They seek to avoid Iran's wrath; even if there is evidence of more active strategies vis-à-vis Iran, the GCC states are destined to stay on the sidelines of the effort to stop its military nuclear program. Even when the Gulf States express criticism of Iran, most of that criticism is directed against Iran's negative involvement in various Middle Eastern arenas. There has been no clearly articulated stance--certainly not a unified one--against its nuclear program. In this context, the rulers of the western Gulf countries have also avoided moves that could be interpreted as attempts at involvement in Iran's domestic affairs in the wake of the ongoing internal unrest since the June 2009 Iranian presidential elections.

Over the years, the Gulf states have not changed their basic approach. They have depended on one foreign force or another according to changing conditions and circumstances and are expected to continue to do so for the foreseeable future. A new era has begun: Iraq is no longer a threat, Iran is getting stronger, and the United States is not as attractive an ally as it once was. As in the past, the Gulf states may employ a variety of defensive measures--temporary and partial--in response to the threats, but they still cannot compare to Iran's might and will be unable to do so any time soon.

As for the United States and U.S. interests, safeguarding the stability of the pro-Western monarchies, deterring hostile neighbors, and securing energy sources in the Gulf will continue to be of top priority in the foreseeable future. Washington must send the message--especially if it chooses not to attack Iran's nuclear facilities--that despite its intentions to leave Iraq and Afghanistan, it will remain in the Gulf and even expand its presence there in order to deter Iran. This may serve to allay the fears over its future U.S. policy and commitments to maintain a stable balance of power in the Gulf in the long-term. Fundamentally, what will continue to be: After the Arab Gulf states have exhausted the limited aforementioned options, they may be expected to maintain their dual policy and maneuver between continuing their basic security dependence on the United States and preserving good neighborly relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "In the Shadow of the Bomb: Iran and the Gulf States," in *A Nuclear Iran: Confronting the Challenge on the International Arena*, Institute for National

Security Studies (INSS) Memorandum, May 2010 (Hebrew), [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1273406054.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1273406054.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> *Al-Hiyat*, May 13, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> The Bahraini foreign minister, commenting on the annual summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council in December 2009, stated, "Somebody's trying to do business while we're not there, while we're not present in that room. This is a fundamental mistake of how these talks were conducted. I think that is the main reason of why the talks failed." Agence France Press (AFP), December 12, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Shaul Shay, *The Axis of Evil: Iran, Hizballah and Palestinian Terrorism* (Herzliya, Israel: IDC Press, 2003), p. 193 (Hebrew).

<sup>5</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "Beyond the Nuclear and Terror Threats: The Conventional Military Balance in the Gulf," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 13, No. 1, (July 2010), [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1279454841.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1279454841.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> "U.S. Urges GCC to Buy Weapons to Face Iran," *Middle East Newline*, September 9, 2009, <http://www.menewline.com/article-4534-U-S-Urges-GCC-To-Buy-Weapons-To.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> Kristen Chick, "How Arms Deals Are Shaping the Mideast," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 6, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Kostiner, Joshua Teitelbaum, and Uzi Rabi, "Security in the Gulf: Local Perspectives," in Joseph Kostiner (ed.), *The Gulf States: Politics, Society and Economics* (Tel Aviv: Moshe Dayan Center for Middle Eastern and African Studies, Tel Aviv University, 2000), p. 109 (Hebrew).

<sup>9</sup> Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani: "States in the region which house U.S. Military bases should know that these bases must not be used against Iran..." *Kuwait Times*, January, 28, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> At the beginning of August 2009, in honor of Ahmadinejad's swearing-in ceremony, Sultan Qaboos even made an official state visit to Iran. It was the first such visit since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. During this visit, the two signed several agreements and

memoranda, including an agreement of cooperation and security coordination.

<sup>11</sup> Yoel Guzansky, "The Gulf Heats Up," *Jerusalem Post*, July, 26, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Eli Lake, U.A.E. diplomat mulls hit on Iran's nukes, *The Washington Times*, July 6, 2010.

<sup>13</sup> *Al-Hiyat*, March 3, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Raid Qusti, "Tehran Silent on Gulf Nuclear Proposal," *Arab News*, November 19, 2007, <http://www.arabnews.com/?page=4&section=0&article=103743&d=19&m=11&y=2007>.

<sup>15</sup> Lars Berger, "Iran and the Arab World: A View from Riyadh," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (September 2009), <http://www.gloria-center.org/meria/2009/09/berger.pdf>, p. 29.

<sup>16</sup> In light of its great wealth and basic weakness, one cannot rule out the possibility that Saudi Arabia, too, may choose to develop a military nuclear option and to this end take advantage of its links with Pakistan, if only to apply pressure to the United States. Despite the negative implications of such a move from the Saudi perspective, it cannot be ruled out, especially if Iran establishes military nuclear capability and Saudi Arabia feels that it cannot rely on the U.S. defensive umbrella.

<sup>17</sup> *Saudi Gazette*, December 25, 2009.

<sup>18</sup> "French President Sarkozy Opens UAE Base," *BBC News*, May 26, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8067600.stm>.

<sup>19</sup> *Financial Times*, September 29, 2009, [http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/38e8ec8e-ad21-11de-9caf-00144feabdc0.html?nclick\\_check=1](http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/38e8ec8e-ad21-11de-9caf-00144feabdc0.html?nclick_check=1).

<sup>20</sup> James Rosen, "Clinton: U.S. Will Extend 'Defense Umbrella' Over Gulf If Iran Obtains Nuclear Weapons," *FOX News*, July 22, 2009, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2009/07/22/clinton-extend-defense-umbrella-gulf-iran-obtains-nuclear-weapons/>.