

## **A Disquieting Engagement: Gulf States Fear Shift in Balance of Power if U.S. Engages Iran**

At the 45<sup>th</sup> Munich Security Conference on February 7, 2009, U.S. Vice-President Joseph Biden announced the Obama administration's approach to Iran, making official the strategic shift toward diplomatic engagement promoted by Mr. Obama. Western audiences generally welcomed the change from the Bush administration's more confrontational approach. The proposed shift in strategy, however, was received with much less enthusiasm by U.S. allies in the Arab world, in particular Saudi Arabia and Egypt, who bear daily witness to Iran's expansionist intent and fear losing a strong strategic counterweight to Iran if the United States pursues such engagement. Most of all, these countries fear U.S. engagement will confer on Iran the status of dominant regional superpower that it so strongly and blatantly covets.

## **A Changing Middle East – Shifting Balance of Power Creates Contest for Regional Dominance**

Bearing the scepter of the pan-Arab cause, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have traditionally held sway as the dominant states in the Middle East. The toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime and the U.S. occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan, however, disrupted the region's long-standing balance of power. [1] Combined with the general collapse of the Arab order that occurred in the 1990s, these developments have spawned a "new Middle East," characterized by a shift from the region's center (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iraq) toward the periphery (primarily Iran) and enervation of the traditional Arab order in favor of rising non-Arab powers. [2]

Iran has sought to take advantage of the upheaval in the regional strategic order to expand its influence. [3] Such attitudes are not new, as the Shah of Iran, who regarded Iran as "policeman of the Gulf" before his 1979 ouster, [4] harbored ambitions for regional dominance. Following the revolution, however, such ambitions have only intensified as successive regimes in Tehran have sought to validate the revolution through the export of its values and while working to shore up their inherently unstable domestic leadership. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's expansionist intentions have been particularly obvious as he seeks to bolster the populist platform on which he was elected and to offset criticism of his domestic policies. As a political analyst for *Al Arabiya* has observed, the "collective feeling of pride and Iranian nationalism provides a comfortable cushion for the Iranian regime to fall back on when threatened." [5] The perception that Tehran seeks regional domination pervades the Arab world, and this perception has been ascribed in particular to Saudi Arabia and Egypt. [6]

Iran's belligerent military posturing – in particular its suspect nuclear program – is seen throughout the region as the means to Iran's goal of regional domination; it shapes the context in which Iran's other hostile behavior is understood. Says one Arab writer: "Iran denies that it has ambitions in the Arabian Gulf and says that its neighbors in the Gulf may rest assured about its good intentions and sincerity. It asserts that its intensive armament programs and efforts to acquire nuclear capability are not directed against

these neighbors. However, it proves the opposite whenever it has an opportunity.” [7] Another Arab journalist writes that Iran wants to “complete its military nuclear project, to impose itself as a nuclear power, and to obtain privileges and clout that enables it to install the leaders it wants and to determine the future of the region as it pleases.” [8] One scholar sees Iran’s nuclear efforts as a quest to “up its stock in the Arab street as an Islamic nuclear power.” [9]

Considerable suspicion exists throughout the Arab world that Iran is “deliberately compounding the problems [in the region] in order to impose its own conditions and put itself forward as a policeman for the region.” [10] A growing dichotomy between “Persia Arabs” and “America Arabs” has been observed [11] with the increase in sectarian discord linked to Iran. [12] Discussion over this development grew louder and more censorious after Israel’s January 2009 incursion in Gaza, when the extent to which Iran was supporting Hamas, encouraging it to stir up trouble, and seeming to present itself as the protector of the Palestinians became evident. [13] Kuwaiti scholar Abdullah al Shayji cites these “menacing tactics,” noting that Iran is “employing the sectarian card, with all its dangerous repercussions.” [14] In early February, after the conclusion of the Israeli-Hamas hostilities, Egyptian state radio broadcast a commentary accusing Iran of seeking to “establish a Shi’i crescent in the Middle East,” and, as a means to this end, has “conspired against Arab countries with a view to splitting Arab ranks.” [15] At the Kuwait Economic Summit in January 2009, Saudi King Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz expounded on the importance of Arab solidarity, so as not to help “those who want to split the Arab ranks to advance their regional designs.” He was widely understood to have been referring to Iran. [16]

Many people in the region believe that Iran seeks to entrench itself in problem areas in order to both expand its influence directly and, in the case of Iraq and Palestine, indirectly, by establishing itself as indispensable in achieving stability. Iran’s growing influence in Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza, largely through backing for political groups, has particularly alarmed the Saudis and other Arab powers. [17] Iran has been accused of providing military aid to groups fomenting sectarian violence in Iraq. In addition, Iran has made numerous overtures to Iraq, with recent visits by senior officials being interpreted as an indication that Iran will be a close trade and cultural partner to predominantly Shia Iraq after the U.S. troop withdrawal in 2010; [18] it is seen as inevitable that “regardless of when and how the Americans pull out, Iran will end up having a strong say in Iraq’s affairs.” [19] Many Iraqis themselves fear that the nature of Iran’s interference in Iraq is expansionist and aimed at eventual regional hegemony. [20]

Iran has made similar inroads into the Palestinian territories, a traditional seat of Arab dominance, with its increasingly ardent backing of the resistance militant group Hamas. After Israel’s January 2009 incursion in Gaza, while the Arabs were struggling to negotiate a unified response and financial assistance package, Iran grandly announced its offer to fund reconstruction of Gaza’s parliament building with “very significant sums” of money and “reiterated that Iran will always stand behind the Palestinian people.” [21] Moreover, Iran seized on the lack of united Arab protest at the start of the incursion to present itself as a vociferous defender of the Palestinians, [22] and fomenting criticism of

the Palestinians' Arab brethren for their silence. [23] The Secretary-General of Iran-supported Hezbollah, Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah, even made the "unprecedented" move of calling for a military coup against the Egyptian regime and for the Egyptian public to rebel against their government. [24] The belief is widespread in the Arab world that Nasrallah would not have made such a comment without Iran's knowledge if not its approval. The remark is understood in the region in the context of Iran's general interest in subverting Saudi and Egyptian leadership.

A Western diplomat based in the region observed that "the Iranians...pose as the champion of the Arabs whereas [the moderate Arab states] are being portrayed as stooges of the West." [25] One columnist for Saudi Arabia's *Asharq Alawsat* newspaper emphasized the blatant hostility and subversiveness of Iran's actions: "Here should we not remind ourselves of what Iran is doing in Lebanon via Hezbollah, whose leader only a few weeks ago accused Egypt of betrayal? ... Should we not remind those who are concerned with improving Iran's image that Hamas – who have been strengthened by Tehran – also carried out an armed coup in Gaza against the Palestinian Authority? ... [S]ome of those who want to improve Iran's image today were the same ones who yesterday were defending Saddam Hussein in the name of Arab nationalism." [26]

By fomenting conflict and subsequently entrenching itself in areas of particular interest to the United States, as well as by projecting a bellicose military posture and taking a high-handed approach to its neighbors, Iran also seeks to solidify its regional dominance by forcing Washington to engage with the country. As one scholar observed, "Iran knows that the US and the West in general need its help in Iraq, Afghanistan and other flash points. Such an atmosphere serves Iran's interests and allows it to flex its muscles and try to bully its weaker and more accommodating Gulf Arab neighbors." [27] It has been speculated that the recent drive to embed itself in these problem areas with particular fervor is motivated by Iran's anticipation of a more engagement-minded U.S. – because, as one Saudi columnist speculated, "Iran's policy focuses on influencing the Arab region in the belief that this region represents an additional strategic depth as well as a key bargaining chip with the United States." [28]

As a reaction to the growing threat perceived from Iran, Saudi Arabia and Egypt convened a meeting of the foreign ministers of nine Arab states [29] on February 3, 2009 in Abu Dhabi that, according to an official statement, was "focused on...preventing unwelcomed [sic] interferences in Arab affairs by non-Arab parties." The Al-Arabiya Television anchorman covering the meeting clarified that the implicit reference is to "Iran's growing role in the region and its attempts to interfere in Arab issues." [30] A second motivation for this meeting has also been suggested: that it was convened "because the new administration [in the United States] has disappointed [the moderate Arab states] with its wish to enter into a dialogue with Iran, which, in itself, is recognition of Iran's role as a regional nuclear superpower state." The commentator, the London editor of the pan-Arab *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, continues: "It is perhaps for this reason that the foreign ministers in question have gathered to discuss the situation, beat the drums of war anew, and look for a way of finding a new ally that would stand up to the growing Iranian power and would declare war on Iran, exactly as they did to get rid of Saddam Husayn's

regime in Iraq.” [31] One outcome of this meeting was the launch of a “diplomatic, media campaign from Abu Dhabi to counter Iranian influence.” [32]

#### Bahrain as “14<sup>th</sup> Governorate” of Iran

The idea of “beating the drums of war anew” may explain the Arab states’ reaction to another recent development: a senior Iranian official’s laying claim to Bahrain as an Iranian possession, a mere four days after Vice President Biden’s Munich speech. It is likely that worsening relations between the Arab world and Iran, as well as the increased threat perception of Iran and consternation over prospect of U.S.-Iranian engagement, engendered the strong confrontational response from the Arab world, as this incident gave the Gulf States the opportunity to demonstrate both the threat of Iran to the United States as well as their own determination to resist Iran’s domination.

On February 11, 2009, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, adviser to Iranian leader Ayatollah Ali Khamene’i, claimed that Bahrain was an Iranian province - the “14<sup>th</sup> governorate” of Iran. This was decried throughout the region as “nothing but another example of the tension that Iran is sowing in... Arab countries.” [33] This was not the first time a high-placed Iranian had made such a claim. Another adviser to Khamene’i had done so in the hardline *Keyhan* newspaper in 2007. [34] This time, however, moderate Arab states vehemently refuted the claim, with many, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, issuing formal statements of protest. Egyptian and Jordanian leaders rushed to Manama to demonstrate solidarity; Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak even offered to send Egyptian troops to the tiny Gulf state. [35] Analogies between Iran’s treatment of Bahrain and Saddam Hussein’s pre-Gulf War treatment of Kuwait were repeatedly made by the regional press. [36] A columnist in the Saudi newspaper *Asharq Alawsat* exhorted Iran to “retreat from its position quickly,” because “the magnitude of hatred toward Iran’s intentions and fear of its intentions has increased tremendously among nations in the region;” he continued to state that “because of Iran’s behavior and comments, this fear is now justified.” [37] Bahrainis themselves – even the Shi’ite population – angrily repudiated the Iranian official’s claim, especially his allegations that Bahrainis “wanted to be part of Iran.” [38] The Iranian government eventually recanted the statement and smoothed over the conflict, “fearing damage to the reputation it has tried to build as a defender of pan-Islamic causes.” [39]

While ultimately unsuccessful, Iran’s laying claim to Bahrain was perceived throughout the region as part of Tehran’s long-standing campaign to curry favor among the Arab populace, seeking to expand its influence over Arab regimes by winning the “hearts and minds” of their people. [40] As Mustafa El-Labbad, director of the Sharq Centre for Regional and Strategic Studies in Cairo, argues, Iran makes such polemic, high-handed statements in order to “keep up the pressure on Gulf monarchs and thus have the upper hand in any regional initiative be it towards settlement or escalation.” [41] As one *Asharq Alawsat* column concluded, “And so we can say with all confidence that Natiq Al Nuri’s comments came as part of an Iranian plan to export their problems to long-enduring Islamic countries such as Yemen, Egypt, Lebanon, Mauritania, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Palestine, as well as certain African countries and certain Gulf states...at the

same time relying upon its support of certain...resistance factions in order to help in its ideological and political expansion [in the region].” [42]

### **Saudi Arabia and Egypt Reassert Their Leadership**

Once it became clear that the Obama administration would pursue engagement with Iran, U.S. regional allies – led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, the two nations that arguably stand to lose most from the validation of Iran’s claims to regional dominance[43] – strongly articulated their disagreement with the decision. The view that U.S.-Iranian engagement would be tantamount to the validation and consolidation of Iran’s status as the dominant regional power, as well as the resultant consternation, was widely voiced. [44]

Commentators also noted that these states worry that any U.S. rapprochement with Iran could ultimately lead to their worst nightmare – “a nuclear-armed, non-Arab, Shiite nuclear power in their neighborhood,” bolstered by a U.S. president going “too far by offering concessions to the Iranians which would undermine our security and be unacceptable to us.” [45] An article in the Egyptian state-owned daily *Al-Akhbar* warned that if Iran and the United States normalized relations, political equations in the Middle East would change dramatically. [46] In addition to concerns over Tehran’s regional dominance, moderate Arab states also fear that Washington could cut a deal with Tehran that puts Shiism “at the heart of a new regional political order.” [47]

On the eve of Vice President Biden’s Munich speech, a state-owned Egyptian magazine, *Al-Musawwar*, published an open letter from its Chief Editor, Abd-al-Qadir Shuhayb, to President Obama, that can be read as a clarification of Arab positions in response to the president’s interview on Al Arabiyah Television on January 26, 2009 and in anticipation of an announcement of a policy shift on Iran. While affirming Egypt’s “strong and resolute rejection” of the military solution to the Iranian nuclear issue” and “welcoming the establishment of a serious dialogue between America and Iran,” the Shuhayb states that “we do not want this dialogue to end with the conclusion of an American-Iranian deal at the expense of the interests of us Arabs. That is something to be rejected in Arab terms and which no Arab will accept.” He continues: “We cannot accept a special position for Iran in our region as the Iranians desire and hope, so that they can guarantee their hegemony over our region and interference in Arab matters, affairs, and issues...Yes, we know that Iran is an important country in our region, but that does not give it the right of guardianship over us and our affairs. There are other important regional countries of weight and influence. Egypt is also an important country in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia, too, is an important country in the Gulf.” He concludes with a warning: “Therefore, engage in dialogue with Iran as you wish...However, you need to know that we shall never allow that to take place at our expense or for it to detract from our standing and position. We shall not accept any American acknowledgement of a special role for Iran in our region, granting it the right to interfere in our affairs and issues.” [48]

The combination of the Obama administration’s new policy of engagement - and Gulf Arabs’ fears over the consequences – with Iran’s expansionist tendencies produced a reinvigorated push for Arab unity. As the perceived threat from Iran grows, Arab states

are “scrambling to form a response to Iran’s emerging regional power.” [49] The idea, as one scholar has observed, is to “end the ‘Arab Cold War’” exacerbated by the recent iteration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,[50] “project an Arab consensus to deal effectively with the host of challenges and to present a united front in dealing with the Obama administration”, with its “worrying” grand bargain and opening up of Iran “looming.” [51] Saudi Arabia in particular has made special efforts toward this end; Saudi King Abdullah stated bluntly in mid-March 2009 that Arab “divisions and fragmentation,” caused by “ [Arab] political disputes,” cleared the path for Iran to advance its expansionist agenda in the region. [52] Earlier in the month, the Saudi government convened a meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Cairo for the purpose of building a “unified and joint position” in dealing with the “Iranian challenge in regard to the Arabian Gulf security and the nuclear issue.” [53] Prince Saud exhorted his Arab brothers to “stand up to Iran,” stating that “non-Arab countries must not interfere” in the regions where Iran has been accused of doing so. [54] Subsequent actions included a Saudi overture toward Syria, in an effort to “open up to [it] to take it away from Iran’s orbit,” [55] and an Arab summit in Riyadh that brought together the Egyptian and Saudi presidents along with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and other Arab leaders. [56]

Clearly, Arab-Iranian relations have worsened, as Saudi Arabia and Egypt lead the adoption of a more aggressive Arab stance toward their Persian neighbor. In early March, Morocco broke off diplomatic ties with Iran after accusing it of “engaging in hostile activities” in the North African state. The move was identified by media outlets as part of the “new Saudi initiative” to forge a common platform “to counter the threat from a rising Iran.” [57] The following week, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Abul-Gheit accused Iran of attempting to impose regional hegemony, telling Egyptian television on March 12 that Iran was “manipulating Arab states and entities to increase its influence in the region in order to achieve some goals, including easing the pressure on its nuclear program and to be a key partner, sitting with Arabs at one table to make deals on Arab issues.” [58] Moreover, three Gulf countries – unidentified, although presumed to include Saudi Arabia – informed host-country Qatar that they would reduce the level of their representation at the upcoming Arab summit in Doha “to the lowest level” if an invitation were extended to Iran. [59] Tehran had been invited to join two previous Arab summits, in December 2007 and early 2009, without great enthusiasm but without the fervent disapproval that the recent threat suggests: “Gulf countries are clear...that Iran's presence means their consent to its continuous interference in Arab affairs,” and do not intend to allow Iran “to continue its provocative policy towards the Gulf countries through its interference in their internal affairs.” [60] Amid “rising tensions” between Iran and the Arab world, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki paid a “surprise visit” to Saudi Arabia to “deliver a message” from Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad” about Saudi-Iranian relations and the situation in the region. [61] The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Saud al-Faisal, took the opportunity to criticize Tehran for not channeling its “support for Arab causes” through “Arab legality” and not being “in harmony with its objectives.” [62]

**Conclusion: Trajectory?**

On April 1, 2009, the Obama administration confirmed that the first face-to-face contact, albeit unscheduled and not substantive, between U.S. and Iranian envoys had taken place. The interaction occurred on the sidelines of an international conference on Afghanistan, between presidential envoy Richard Holbrooke and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Mohammad Mehdi Akhondzadeh. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton clarified that she did not personally have any interaction with the Iranian camp, but described the meeting as “cordial” and noted that the envoys “agreed to stay in touch.” [63] In early March, Saudi Prince Saud al Faisal and his Arab counterparts expressed their concerns about Iran to Secretary Clinton, and received her assurance that Washington was “carefully considering its moves” and would “consult fully with Gulf allies on Iran issues.” [64] However, it may be that the U.S. government is hoping that U.S. engagement would confer sufficient status on Iran to make Tehran more flexible regarding its other means to that end - its nuclear program.

Relations between Iran and the Gulf states remain poor with continued deterioration likely as Arab states become more motivated to play up their threat perception of Iran. Iran, for its part, has not displayed any great interest in allaying its neighbors’ concerns. Whether U.S.-Arab, U.S.-Iranian, and Arab-Iranian relations can improve in spite of the myriad deeply-rooted challenges that plague them remains to be seen, as does the implication those dynamics hold for the success of the new U.S. president’s policies in the region.

Deborah Berman – Monterey Institute James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies

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- [40] See source in [7], [8].
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