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The Gulf heats up

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Concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons program are heard these days more in Arabic than any other language, including Hebrew.

In recent weeks, it seems that temperatures on both sides of the Persian Gulf have come to a boil. Temperatures in the Gulf, although usually high during the summer, reached a peak not due to global warming but because of increasing fear of Iran among Arab Gulf states. Indeed, concerns about Iran's nuclear weapons program and negative involvement in the region are heard these days more in Arabic than any other language, including Hebrew.

The current peak is associated with a statement made by the United Arab Emirates ambassador to the United States, the same kind often heard behind closed doors. The ambassador publicly endorsed the use of the military option to counter Iran's nuclear program, if sanctions fail. "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 said.

Traditionally, the monarchies' vulnerability leads them to be cautious and seek to maintain as normal relations as possible with Iran. In their eyes, in some scenarios they are likely to remain alone to deal with Iran. This perspective leads them to present a conciliatory line, thinking that it is not wise to quarrel because Iran, unlike the US, is not expected to go anywhere. Therefore it is in the best interests of the emirates to contain the crisis and not to anger its threatening neighbor, and indeed UAE officials said that that "the statements were taken out of context" and that they support a diplomatic solution to the rift. Interestingly, they did not deny the content.

For its part, Iran wants to show that it enjoys good relations with the Arab monarchies, and officials there said that the alleged quotes are a lie. Among the loose UAE federation, Abu Dhabi is taking a harder line against Iran than its neighbor Dubai, an important commercial artery for Iran: Some half a million Iranians live there and there are as many as 8,000 Iranian- owned businesses there.

Beyond economic considerations, it may be that keeping trade open is a sort of "insurance policy" against future Iranian attacks.

EVEN IF the ambassador were "out of context," he still reflected the fear of Iran among the small sheikhdoms. Earlier this year, in another unusual statement, the foreign minister of the UAE compared the Iranian occupation of the UAE's three Gulf islands – Abu Musa, Greater Tunb and Lesser Tunb – to none other than "the Israeli occupation of Arab land."

The ambassador's remarks did not come in a vacuum: The UAE recently took steps to curb Iran's efforts; it stopped shipments to Iran, freezing more than 40 international and local companies that were associated with Iran's nuclear and missile programs, and there are reports (whose reliability is not clear) that there was a refusal to refuel Iranian commercial aircraft.

Teheran wants to convey that it sees itself as a partner for all of the Gulf states, but its actions, including questioning the legitimacy of regimes, explicitly threatening to shut the Straits of Hormuz and to target strategic facilities in their territories, threatening military maneuvers, occupation of Arab land and even statements like Bahrain being in fact the 14th district of Iran – don't contribute to calm on the Western side of the Gulf.

There is a genuine worry in the Gulf that an Iranian bomb will enable it to set the future political, economic and strategic agenda in the region. The Gulf states see the difficulties of the international community in stopping Iran on its way to nuclear capability and tried to maintain a passive opposition to Iran with maintenance of good (mainly economic) neighborly relations to avoid a direct confrontation. So, is there a change in policy?

Although the Gulf states have so far demonstrated passive behavior and stayed for the most part on the margins of the diplomatic effort vis-à-vis Iran, recently a change can be identified in their strategy, adopting a more active policy. Specifically, it may have more to do with the particular disillusionment of the Obama administration with Iran and recent steps the US has taken against it in the Security Council and Congress, and US demands for wider sanctions against the country, which may have contributed to current confidence on the Arab side of the Gulf and gave legitimacy to such steps.

Beside the American pressure to take concrete steps against Iran, it can be attributed to the last economic crisis in Dubai and Abu Dhabi coming to its rescue. It is unclear exactly what promise Abu Dhabi extracted from Dubai in return, but it is not inconceivable that this change in policy vis-à-vis Iran is related to the matter.

If the monarchs are convinced there are indications that Iran intends to “break out” to nuclear military capability and that a military action is the only way to prevent this – and if there is an explicit request from the US – it is reasonable to assume they will allow it to use their territory for this purpose. As the ambassador said, ultimately they will prefer to absorb a limited blow from Iran, painful though it might be, and not to live for many years with the negative consequences of a nuclear Iran.

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