Commentary

How Gulf States have undermined Israel's case on Iran

Yoel Guzansky, Azriel Bermant / 13th August, 2015

In its relentless opposition to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the nuclear agreement between Iran and the world powers that was signed on 14th July, Israel has argued that the deal would pose a grave danger to the entire region. Israel's case against the nuclear deal with Iran has shifted away from attacks on the substantive terms to focus on its regional implications. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly outlined that Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States are at least as concerned as it is regarding the dangers of the nuclear deal, and the possibility that Tehran will use the lifting of sanctions to cause mayhem throughout the Middle East. Now, Israel's case has been dealt a serious blow with the public backing, albeit cautious, of the Arab Gulf States for the Iran nuclear deal.

On 3rd August, the Qatari Foreign Minister, Khalid al-Attiyah, expressing the position of the Gulf Cooperation Council or GCC (the exclusive monarchies club that includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain) remarked in a press conference with US Secretary of State John Kerry that the nuclear deal "was the best option amongst other options in order to try and come up with a solution for the nuclear weapons of Iran." The White House claims that the public support of the Gulf States "undermines" those US lawmakers and pro-Israeli organizations who claim that the Iran deal endangers America's friends in the Middle East.

Yet one has to distinguish between what the Gulf States say in public and what is said behind the scenes. The concerns of the Gulf States over the dangers of the Iran agreement have not gone away. *Al Sharq al Awsat*, a pan-Arab daily that is owned by the Saudi Royal Family, warned recently that "the agreement would open the gates of evil in the Middle East." The former Saudi ambassador to the United States, Bandar bin Sultan, was more critical of the Obama administration, comparing the Iran deal with the nuclear agreement reached with North Korea, and remarked that it would "wreak havoc on the region." Furthermore, even if the royal house chose not to criticize the agreement publicly, its actions are likely to indicate its dissatisfaction concerning the implications of the agreement.

While the Gulf States remain deeply apprehensive about the ramifications of the agreement for their security and standing, there are significant differences between the

GCC members on Iran. Unlike the Saudis, Qatar and Oman have been more positive about the deal, even behind closed doors, with some leaders expressing the view that it could open a new chapter in relations between Iran and the Gulf States. However, they remain unhappy about the possibility of an American rapprochement with Iran that could come at the expense of their ties with the United States. They are also concerned that the agreement will enable Iran to lower its nuclear breakout capacity at the end of the JCPOA, while directing sanctions relief to strengthen its position throughout the Middle East.

The Gulf States have calculated that there is nothing to be gained by publicly defying the Obama administration. They accept that the Iran agreement is a done deal and that a strategy of damage limitation is the best way forward. They are only too aware that they will need the military support of the United States in addressing any future threat from Iran, and they do not take the support of Washington for granted. As Iran becomes an increasingly powerful actor in the Middle East, the Gulf States, particularly Saudi Arabia, will seek to deepen their defence ties with the West, while attempting to contain tensions with Tehran. In compensation for the agreement, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are seeking sophisticated arms systems, such as the advanced F35 jet fighter. The United States is reluctant to supply such weapons systems to the Gulf States, fearing that this could damage Israel's qualitative edge. However, the Americans may be forced to review this policy in order to keep them on board.

In contrast, Mr. Netanyahu believes that the nuclear agreement is dangerous enough to justify a head-on collision with the White House, calculating that he can defy the Obama administration without damaging Israel's special relationship with the United States. However, this is a reckless gamble. Were the Iran deal to collapse as a result of Israel's intervention, this could have serious repercussions for the international credibility and standing of the United States, with incalculable consequences for Israel's long-term relationship with Washington. It is noteworthy that Israel has refrained from any criticisms of Russia, in spite of its public advocacy for Iran both before and during the negotiations process leading up to the agreement. Unlike Washington, Russia does not provide $3 billion in military aid to Jerusalem, but it could make life more difficult for Israel if it decides to step up its cooperation with Iran. Israel does not want to take chances with Moscow.

With the Gulf States moving into line with the Obama administration, Israel effectively finds itself isolated on the world stage in its fierce opposition to the agreement. Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has tried to galvanise opposition to the nuclear agreement in the United States with his claim that it will be a threat not only to Israel but to all America's allies in the region. If Iran's adversaries such as Saudi Arabia are now ready to publicly welcome the nuclear agreement, then this becomes a much harder sell.

Israel and the Arab Gulf States share the view that the Iran agreement is a bad one, and are united in their concern about the prospect of Iran becoming a nuclear power. Yet their different political cultures and styles of leadership result in markedly diverse approaches to fending off strategic threats. Given the White House's combative response to Netanyahu's remarks, it is clear that the Obama administration prefers the quiet behind-the-scenes approach of the GCC.

Nevertheless, as Israel's former foreign minister, Shlomo Ben Ami pointed out recently, "Netanyahu is an ideologue of Jewish catastrophe." The decision by Netanyahu to go all out against Obama is motivated by a deep concern for Israel's long-term security, even if electoral calculations may also have played a role in his decision (indeed, nearly 75 percent of Israelis said they thought the agreement would accelerate Iran's development of a nuclear weapon, not prevent it). It could be argued that Israel's prime minister will thrive in a situation where Israel finds itself fighting a lone battle against the nuclear agreement. This would chime with Netanyahu's worldview of Israel as a state surrounded by enemies that can rely only on itself for its long-term survival. Whether this strategy is in Israel's long-term interests is a different matter entirely.

Yoel Guzansky *is a research fellow at the* ***Institute for National Security Studies*** *at Tel Aviv University and was a National Security Council staffer in charge on the Iranian dossier until 2010. He is also the author of 'The Arab Gulf States and Reform in the Middle East' (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).*

Azriel Bermant *is a research Fellow at the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University. He is the author of 'Margaret Thatcher and the Middle East' (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming, 2016)*

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