

The US in Muslim and Arab Perspectives

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I want to deal with a subordinate facet of the Iranian threat – Iran’s reported ability to set the Middle East ablaze in the event of a confrontation with the United States.

It is often said that Iran has more strategic depth than one might imagine from an inventory of its military capabilities. This depth, it is argued, derives from the support of Arabs and Muslims worldwide for Iran’s anti-American posture. For example, an issue of *Foreign Affairs* included: “The Arab people do not share the anti-Iranian sentiment of their governments. Tehran enjoys significant soft power in the Middle East today.” Accordingly, anyone who dares to threaten, pressure, or strike Iran must take into account the reactions this might unleash beyond Iran.

To better explain this argument, I have harvested several quotes from a paper by a think tank in Washington, which discussed what might happen across the region if Iran were attacked. The paper says:

The Iranians would feel unrestrained about resorting to terrorism – their best bet against America’s military might. Consider a scenario where [al-Qaeda and an unleashed Hizbollah] overcome Sunni-Shiite divisions to form a tactical alliance against a common enemy: the United States. We could ignite destabilizing violence in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Egypt and Indonesia...our European allies host large immigrant Muslim populations;...and a US attack on Iran could unleash a wave of terrorist reprisals throughout Europe....There is also the risk of radicalizing America’s Muslim population.”¹

1. Charles V. Pena, “Iran: Gulf War III?” *American Conservative*, June 5, 2006, <http://www.amconmag.com/article/2006/jun/05/00012/>.

This is the end of quote but I can assure you that in the original source there is more.

In this scenario the verbs are dramatic: “unleashed” is used twice, and a move against Iran is depicted as the trigger for an apocalypse of violence. It is easy to find at least some part of this scenario more believable, but it only resonates as a whole because it is grounded in two assumptions that have become widespread over the past several years.

The first assumption is that US policy has angered Arabs and Muslims to such an extent that they are bound to rally behind Iran in any US-Iran confrontation. Red-hot hatred of America trumps everything, erasing the differences between Persian and Arab and Sunni and Shiite. Iran, depicted as the last anti-American force left standing, would benefit from that floating rage that was also used by al-Qaeda or Saddam Hussein. This assumption owes a lot to the annual Zogby polls that are taken in six Arab countries and presented to Americans as the final word on the attitudes in the Arab street. These polls are most famous for showing a dramatic erosion of America’s standing in Arab opinion, due to – the polls suggest – the Bush administration’s support for Israel. But lately the Zogby polls have also tried to measure Arab opinion toward Iran. The findings, if believed, would suggest that Iran is translating Arab resentment against the US into support for its nuclear agenda. In one particularly pertinent question Arab respondents were asked what the outcome for the Middle East would be if Iran acquired nuclear weapons. In the March 2008 poll 44 percent of the respondents said a nuclear-armed Iran would be positive, 29 percent affirmed that it would be negative, and 12 percent said it wouldn’t matter. Now, if these polls are accurate, they lend support to the notion that Arab opinion has aligned with Iran’s nuclear ambitions, which it believes to be directed against Israel and the US.

But are these polls accurate? For example, the largest percentages of respondents in specific countries who said that the outcome of a nuclear-armed Iran would be positive are found in Saudi Arabia (73 percent) and the Emirates (51 percent). This result seems to suggest that three-quarters of Saudis and half of the Emirates’ citizens would prefer to live next door to a nuclear armed Iran, a questionable result. And indeed, another poll of Arab opinion taken just a month ago for the Doha debate came up with significantly different results. In that poll Arab respondents were asked

whether the Middle East could tolerate a nuclear Iran. The region-wide answer was no by 55 to 45 percent, and the margin in the GCC states was 58 to 42 percent against tolerating a nuclear Iran

I don't intend to go into the problems of polling methods in these contexts, but I do want to suggest that the statement "Tehran enjoys significant soft power in the Middle East today" is potentially misleading. In fact, the soft power outside the Shiite circle is itself soft, not something that Iran could rely upon in a crunch, and there seems to be a split in Arab public opinion about Iran's nuclear program. Moreover, while across the board the different polls do show a clear Arab preference for a negotiated settlement, there is no evidence as to what people think should be done if negotiations fail. We in fact have no idea how different options vis-à-vis Iran might be received in the various Arab countries.

The second questionable assumption is that in dealing with matters of national security, what people think in the street trumps what rulers think in the power seats. The assumption is that Arab people do not share the anti-Iranian sentiments of their governments. (I will leave aside just who the Arab people are, since it is an awfully broad category.) But even if granted that political matters are perceived differently from outside the palace, it is problematic to assume that the rulers lack the leverage to shift or neutralize public opinion if they try. And within the palaces, of course, there is unease about Iran's nuclear ambitions. This sentiment manifests itself in different ways. The Gulf states are triangulating between Washington and Tehran – that has always been their strategy – because they are small, but also because the US has seemed to them irresolute on the Iranian issue. But it is striking how much more outspoken the Saudi and the Egyptian media have become, both in criticizing the ambitions of Iran and berating other Arabs who seem indifferent to that ambition. Over the summer one Saudi columnist wrote: "The absolute priority must be our strategic security in the Gulf, which is threatened by Iran, even if this comes at the expense of the Palestinian cause. We need to push the world powers towards military confrontation to neutralize the Iranian enemy, whatever the cost, before the nuclear bomb makes it too late."

Saudi columnists have described the split in the Arab world, dividing the Arabs of the north from the Arabs of the south. The former are allegedly blinded by their preoccupation with Palestine and they are susceptible

to the siren calls emanating from Iran. As another Saudi columnist put it, “Some of the Arabs of the north are in a strategic alliance with the Persian enemy. It goes without saying that according to all the indicators, the primary and most dangerous enemy of the Gulf states is Iran.” In my opinion, this presentation of the issue probably reflects the views that are held by royal bankrollers of Saudi newspapers and journalists. In many of these pieces the United States does stand accused, not of support for Israel – which is nothing new – but of strengthening Iran, largely through its folly in Iraq.

What does this mean? It means that it is still possible for President Obama, when he delivers his speech in an Islamic capital, to win some Arab endorsement by putting forward the principle that all options should be on the table in dealing with Iran. It may be possible to build some Arab support for what Obama has already stated, “It is unacceptable for Iran to possess a nuclear weapon. It would be a game changer.” The United States, of course, will always be regarded with a mix of fear, suspicion, and resentment in this part of the world. But this doesn’t mean it can’t form alliances of convenience against those who induce even more fear, suspicion, and resentment than the US does. Over the years, the United States has formed alliances of convenience in the Middle East, first against the Soviet Union and then against al-Qaeda in Iraq, and there is a basis to do the same vis-à-vis Iran.

At the same time, it is important not to downplay Iran’s genuine impact beyond its borders, also through its relationship with Syria, Hizbollah, and Hamas. Iran too has allies, and allies of convenience. But even in worst case scenarios involving those allies, we know what the outer limits will be because we know both Iran and its allies’ capabilities. For some of those capabilities there are answers; others are indeed more worrisome.

However, for the sake of intellectual consistency, it is also crucial to give equal consideration to the worst case scenario for the region if Iran does acquire nuclear weapons. That scenario has been drawn most recently and vividly in the report by the US National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025*:

Iranian demonstrations of its nuclear capabilities that reinforce perceptions of its intent and ability to develop nuclear weapons

potentially would prompt additional states in the region to pursue their own nuclear weapons programs. It is not certain that the type of stable deterrent relationship that existed for most of the Cold War would emerge naturally in the Middle East with multiple nuclear weapons capable states...The possession of nuclear weapons may be perceived as making it “safe” to engage in [low intensity conflicts and terrorism].... If the number of nuclear-capable states increases, so will the number of countries potentially willing to provide nuclear assistance to other countries or to terrorists. The potential for theft or diversion of nuclear weapons, materials, and technology – and the potential for unauthorized nuclear use – also would rise.²

This is a pretty disturbing worst case scenario, which seems far worse than the alternative worst case scenario presented above. The National Intelligence Council goes on to describe it as more dangerous than the Cold War, which is saying rather a lot. President-elect Obama was right to call a nuclear Iran a game changer for the entire region. I think we would all prefer to play the game we know for lower stakes than a game we don't know for much higher ones.

2. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World*, pp. 62-63, http://www.dni.gov/nic/PDF_2025/2025_Global_Trends_Final_Report.pdf.