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TAKING A STAND ON NUCLEAR IRAN: VOICES FROM THE PERSIAN GULF

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At a conference on NATO's role in Persian Gulf regional security held in Doha in late November, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Secretary-General Abdul Rahman al-Attiya portrayed Iran's nuclear ambitions as a direct threat to the security of the Gulf states and to NATO. According to some reports, he also noted Iran's interference in the domestic affairs of Gulf states and expressed fears that a nuclear Iran would spark further proliferation in the region.

Because such statements mark a significant departure from longstanding tendencies, they may signify a significant shift in the public posture of the Gulf states vis-à-vis Iran's nuclear policy. During the previous three years of heightened international concern at the prospect of a nuclear Iran, the Arab states remained notably absent from the debate, maintaining a relative silence on the emerging threat. Although many analysts predict that the development of an Iranian nuclear capability will generate pressures for further proliferation in the Middle East – in Saudi Arabia and Egypt, but also in other states – those countries tended not to openly voice their concerns over Iran. On the contrary, at the latest NPT Review conference (May 2005), for example, Egypt was most instrumental in supporting Iran in its efforts to deflect attention

away from itself and to focus attention solely on Israel.

The reticence of the Arab states was not explained by the fact that the prospect of a nuclear Iran is less of a potential threat to them than many analysts suggest. It stemmed, instead, from several other sources. One was a relatively straightforward cost-benefit calculation, especially for the Gulf states; openly protesting Iran's behavior would antagonize a major regional power without holding out much promise of changing it, whereas those who could potentially change it, i.e., the Europeans and/or Americans, would take care of the problem for them. A more deeply rooted explanation probably lay in their sense that discussion of the negative implications of Iranian policy could easily be interpreted as acceptance of the so-called double standard on the nuclear issue; as long as no action is taken against Israel, opposition to Iranian nuclear programs is something of a taboo in the Muslim world.

As a result, some states in the region seemed willing to overlook the fact that Iranian actions consistent with the pursuit of a military nuclear option would amount to blatant violation of international obligations under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty to which Iran is a signatory,

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would pose a direct or indirect threat to them, and would increase the pressure for further proliferation in the Middle East. These states therefore placed themselves in a position whereby they tacitly accepted Iran's nuclear ambitions, whatever the implications.

However, the Gulf states, perhaps in response to the growing conviction that European negotiations with Iran are not producing results, have recently indicated that there may be a limit to their determination to remain silent. These states, which are closest to Iran geographically and sense most immediately the potential threat it poses, have begun to address the issue more directly. According to various reports emanating from the Gulf, some states are increasingly apprehensive not only about the direct security threat from Iran but also about the negative implications for them of preemptive military action that might be taken against Iran by others. Moreover, there is a concern with the possibility of nuclear accidents, such as occurred in Chernobyl, due to their close proximity to the Iranian reactor in Bushehr. Those concerns find expression not only in the declaration of the GCC Secretary-General but also, for example, in remarks of the Chief of Staff of the Kuwaiti Army, who was recently quoted as saying that Kuwait has sought help from NATO to prepare for a possible nuclear emergency in the event of an accident at the Bushehr reactor. The latter also expressed concern that a preemptive attack on Iran might prompt Iran to retaliate by striking at US allies in the Gulf.

Open acknowledgement of their concerns about Iran naturally raises the question of what these states think should be done? In fact, their options are quite limited, but one idea that might be gaining ground is that of a Gulf Weapons of Mass Destruction Free Zone (GWMDFZ). This is the topic of a research project being pursued at

a prominent research center in Dubai, and ahead of the recent GCC summit meeting held in Abu Dhabi in mid-December, GCC Secretary-General Attiya noted favorably the possible creation of a Gulf WMDFZ that would include the GCC countries, Iran, Iraq and Yemen. While the idea of establishing a WMDFZ in the Middle East, including Israel, has long been favored in the Gulf, the idea to begin with the Gulf seems to reflect these states' growing concerns with Iran. Interestingly enough, however, although the recent GCC summit focused heavily on concerns over Iran's nuclear ambitions, the final statement that was issued did not mention Iran at all and chose, instead, to single out Israel for criticism. Arab League Secretary General Amr Moussa contributed to this outcome by writing to GCC leaders to express his concern about Israel, rather than about Iran. Thus, the double standard taboo is still potent when it comes to official declarations and might well constitute a serious constraint on practical action.

Nevertheless, the new dynamics coming from the Gulf and especially the idea of creating a sub-regional WMDFZ could have broader regional implications. If Iran agreed to take part and discussions on creating such a zone were able to make headway, this in itself would be a positive development. In the event, however improbable it may seem today, that Iran were also willing to engage in even more far-reaching consultations, that could help change the atmosphere in the Middle East, reinforce the prospect of regional arms control dialogue, and perhaps serve as an impetus for serious thinking about how to revive cooperative regional security efforts in a Middle East defined to include both Iran and Israel.

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