

## The Gulf States and Iran following the Interim Deal

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The Gulf states' policy toward Iran in general and the Iranian nuclear program in particular is full of contradictions; these states do not wish to have a radical Shiite state like Iran seeking to dictate the agenda in the Gulf by virtue of its nuclear capability. On the other hand, they fear that in the absence of a diplomatic option, Iran's nuclear facilities may be targeted, resulting in a conflict that places them in the line of fire. In the past, the Gulf states have witnessed the effect of regional conflicts on their security and economic stability. They therefore seek to avoid a conflict that may incur additional challenges in addition to the challenges created by the turmoil of the Arab Spring.

In a speech immediately after the signing of the interim deal with Iran, United States President Barack Obama noted that he was aware of the US allies' concerns and justified doubts. However, these comments, along with US diplomatic activities and significant arms sales intended to reassure America's Arab allies, did not alleviate concern that the agreement is based on Iranian subterfuge and Western self-deception. The Arab world, particularly the Gulf states, fears the agreement's potential for US-Iranian rapprochement and the consequences this will have for Iran's status in the Gulf, far more than it fears the agreement's technical significance. Publicly, the Arab states recognize Iran's "right" to possess nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, but they have pleaded with Tehran to cooperate with the international community and

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the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). They have also expressed support for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis and a desire to take a more active role in facilitating such a solution, since they fear that the United States may reach a final agreement at their expense.

The Sunni Arab world's hostility toward Shiite Iran is fueled by historical and sectarian hatred, clearly reflected in modern Middle East geopolitics. The Arab Spring and Iranian support of the Assad regime have only increased Arab hostility toward Iran, to which the continued progress of the Iranian nuclear program has also contributed significantly. The openness conveyed by Rouhani and his people, dubbed the "charm offensive," is perceived by the Gulf states as an exercise in deception. In the eyes of the Gulf leaders, a (final) agreement between the West and Iran on the nuclear issue would help Iran escape the isolation it has suffered since the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mainly fear reconciliation between Iran and the West, which would provide the Iranian regime with legitimacy in the eyes of the international community, allowing it to increase its influence in the region and its involvement in their domestic affairs. Consequently, the Saudis expressed concern regarding the Geneva agreement and attempted to persuade the United States not to surrender to the Iranian President's "sweet talk," as they put it. Just before the agreement was signed, the Saudi ambassador in London criticized the United States for its haste: "We are not going to sit idly by and receive a threat there and not think seriously how we can best defend our country and our region," stated the ambassador, adding that "all options are available."<sup>1</sup> Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal bin Abdulaziz al-Saud noted in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal* that "America is shooting itself in the foot," and even expressed identification with Israel's positions on Iran: "For the first time, Saudi Arabian interests and Israel are almost parallel," added al-Saud.<sup>2</sup>

The uncertainty over the future of US involvement in the region is very troubling to Gulf leaders. The United States does not conceal its desire to limit the extent of its military commitments in the Middle East, which is in keeping with its intention to divert the US foreign policy's attention toward East Asia. A possible detente in US-Iran relations is also perceived in Riyadh as a deadly blow to Saudi Arabia's relations with the United States.

The Saudis reflect on the days prior to the Islamic Revolution, when Iran served as a main strategic anchor for the United States in the region. Given the current situation, a return to close strategic relations between Iran and

the West appears to be a distant vision, yet any rapprochement between Iran and the United States raises concerns among the monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula. The events of the past year, mainly the Geneva Agreement and the American refusal to use force against the Assad regime following its use of chemical weapons, have further strengthened the image of the United States as a superpower in retreat. The United States' failure to stand by its former allies, such as Mubarak and Ben Ali during the wave of revolutions in the Arab world, has also reinforced the feeling among its Arab allies that its strategic support is not as reliable as it was in the past. In addition, the Gulf monarchies fear that the United States will achieve energy independence by the end of the current decade, which could remove the main basis of the strategic alliance with its Arab allies.

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf states are concerned that the agreement with Iran is nothing more than preparation for the United States' detachment from the region, which would leave Iran as a nuclear threshold state with an improved standing in the region. The feeling in the Gulf is that Iran is gaining strength while the United States is becoming less attractive. The options available are neither numerous nor optimal. No other world power is capable of or interested in filling the US role of maintaining security in the Gulf. Furthermore, at this point, there appears to be little likelihood of closer cooperation in the framework of the GCC and creation of a unified regional bloc. Arab states that have previously played a major role in Gulf politics, such as Egypt and Jordan, are currently relatively weak and preoccupied with domestic problems.

Prior to the signing of the interim deal, Iran had attempted to alleviate the tension with its neighbors. In an article published in *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohamad Javad Zarif called upon Iran's neighbors to establish a new regional order in the Gulf that would be free of intervention by outside parties. In a clear reference to the American presence in the Gulf, Zarif wrote, "The presence of foreign forces has historically resulted in domestic instability within the countries hosting them and exacerbated the existing tensions between these countries and other regional states."<sup>3</sup> Since the agreement was signed between Iran and the six world powers in late November, Tehran has been conducting a "charm offensive" aimed at the small Gulf emirates. A few days after the signing, Foreign Minister Zarif paid a visit to all GCC members with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The declared objective of the visits was to diffuse tensions

between Iran and its neighbors, which had increased under Iran's former President Ahmadinejad, and to attempt to turn over a new leaf throughout the Gulf. A number of high-ranking figures from the Gulf states went on highly publicized visits to Tehran, where they met with the Iranian leadership.

In fact, Iran is using a similar tactic against the Gulf states to that which it used during the negotiations with the international community on the nuclear issue: exploiting the existing disagreements between its adversaries in order to prevent the formation of a united front against it. Iran perceives Saudi Arabia, along with the United States, as the main threat to its stability and its regional ambitions. Not only is the Saudi kingdom Iran's largest ideological and religious competitor, but it is also the main sponsor of Iran's rivals in the Arab and Islamic world. Saudi Arabia is also the only state in the Gulf region that has the economic and military capabilities necessary to constitute a threat to the Islamic Republic, and it is the most conspicuous opponent of Iran, other than Israel, in its contacts with the leaders of the international community (even though this opposition is mainly expressed behind closed doors). Therefore, Iran is attempting to drive a wedge between Saudi Arabia and its traditional allies in the Gulf so as to make it difficult for the Saudis to unite the GCC behind them and in order to politically isolate Saudi Arabia.

The Iranian attempt to isolate Saudi Arabia includes action on two fronts; the first is the "charm offensive" toward the Gulf emirates and an attempt to repair Iran's relations with the smaller emirates that do not constitute a security threat in and of themselves, nor do they pose a challenge to Iranian ambitions. This attempt includes a concentrated diplomatic effort to assuage these states' fears of Iranian ambitions and an attempt to promote their cooperation with Iran in various areas. Iran is also trying to indirectly influence the negotiations in which it is engaged, hoping that the Gulf states will moderate their criticism and their pressure on the United States on the issue of Iran. Notwithstanding this Iranian activity in the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is having difficulty forming a united front to balance Iran's rising power, as evidenced by the latest crisis in the GCC over Qatar's support of the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

The second front for action includes an Iranian attempt to present Saudi Arabia to the world, and to its allies in particular, as undermining regional security by supporting radical elements and fanning sectarian tensions. Several Iranian media outlets have begun an aggressive anti-Saudi and anti-Wahhabi campaign including genuine incitement, to the point of calling for

violent retaliation by Shiites against the royal family. Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei has also accused Saudi Arabia of fanning inter-ethnic violence in the region. During Islamic Unity Week in January 2014, Khamenei noted that, "Unfortunately, some Muslim governments ignorantly fuel the conflicts; they do not realize that fueling these conflicts ignites a fire whose flames will seize all of them." This was a veiled threat to the Saudi royal family.<sup>4</sup>

Since the agreement finalization, Iran has become less isolated, and its nuclear project has to a large extent received international approval. This was achieved without a Western demand to cease its involvement in the affairs of other countries in the region, from Yemen to Iraq and Syria, and without stopping its support for terrorist organizations. The Gulf states would have preferred to see continuing pressure caused by the sanctions against Iran, which would isolate and weaken it, on the one hand, and could prevent the nuclear crisis from deteriorating into a military conflict, on the other. In their view, Rouhani's election and the agreement with the world powers on the nuclear issue are a (first) step in the right direction, but the Iranian "sweet talk" should be translated into action. However, their criticism is directed primarily at the United States for accepting Iran with open arms, and at the fact that the Gulf states did not participate in the talks. Prince Turki al-Faisal, former head of Saudi Intelligence and a former ambassador to the United Kingdom and the United States, had stated that it is important for the Saudis to sit at the same table as the world powers. He expressed disappointment that the very fact of the talks was (initially) kept secret, as he felt it increases mistrust between the United States and its allies.<sup>5</sup>

Despite concerns about the progress of the Iranian nuclear program, and perhaps as a reflection of them, since the moment the interim deal became an established fact the Gulf states have not deviated from their tendency to present an official position that is moderate and restrained. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia's response to the signing of the agreement sounded skeptical and forced. Particularly notable was the statement that "if there was goodwill," the agreement does bear hope.<sup>6</sup> Other Gulf states that have opposed the agreement during the talks also published announcements welcoming it and stating that it was an opportunity to restore security and stability to the region. However, since the signing of the agreement, there has been very little progress in restoring stability to the Gulf region or to other regions in the Arab world that have suffered from the Saudi-Iranian conflict.

The direction of developments in the Arab world and the Gulf depends to a large extent on the future of the negotiations for a permanent agreement between the United States and the world powers, on the one hand, and Iran, on the other. The chances of reaching such an agreement are still unclear. It would thus be an error to detach the agreement from the regional context and from appropriate attention by the United States to the fears of its Arab allies.

### Notes

- 1 Staff Writer, "Saudi Arabia Would Not 'Sit Idly By' If West Fails with Iran," *al-Arabiya News*, November 23, 2013.
- 2 Matthew Kaminski, "An Ally Frets About American Retreat," *Wall Street Journal*, November 22, 2013.
- 3 Mohamad Javad Zarif, "Our Neighbours Are Our Priority," *a-Sharq al-Awsat*, November 21, 2013.
- 4 A. Savyon, Y. Mansharof, E. Kharrazi, and Y. Lahat, "Iran Calls for Violent Shi'ite Reaction against Saudi Arabia," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Report No. 1068, February 12, 2014.
- 5 Steven Erlanger, "Saudi Prince Criticizes Obama Administration, Citing Indecision in Middle East," *New York Times*, December 15, 2013.
- 6 "Saudi Arabia Welcomes Iran Nuclear Agreement," *al-Jazeera*, November 25, 2013.