

“The Future of US Policy in the Arabian Gulf”

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“If the Americans make a wrong move toward Iran, the shipment of energy will definitely face danger and the Americans would not be able to protect energy supply in the region.” —Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, June 4, 2006

Between 2006-08, I had the privilege of working in Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nahyan’s private think-tank, the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies & Research (ECSSR), in Abu Dhabi, the United Arab Emirates. During this time I was exposed to the cultural and strategic nuances of the Arabian Gulf in a way that was beyond typical academic experience, which is usually buried in the analysis of books and reports. Suffice it to say, no longer do I view the Gulf as a mere strategic abstraction and I treat any reportage coming out of that area with extreme caution.

On 20 January 2009, Barack Obama rode into office on the back of international expectation that he would make a less contentious head-of-state than his predecessor, that his brand of ‘yes we can’ politics would mobilise the American people from either side of the ideological divide and with this, set a new, pragmatic agenda for rebalancing American foreign and strategic policies.

Today, one of the most pressing international concerns is Iran and that country’s alleged ambition to develop nuclear weapons. What makes this a major international concern, is that Iran, a country with 74 million people and a Shiite Theocracy with a messianic mission to spread their version of Islam into traditionally non-Shiite areas of the Arab world, is attempting to extend its strategic footprint at the expense of the US and its allies. The central question of course is – can Iran do it? Can Iran, a

country treated as an international pariah by the West, force the US to back down from supporting its missions in Iraq and Afghanistan and roll back its forward position in the Arabian Gulf?

The former Bush Administration believed it could. For most of President Bush's two terms in office, the idea of extending his 'War on Terrorism' to include Iran was never far from the public discourse. Iran was identified as part of the 'Axis of Evil', and in 2006, Tehran's allies, the southern Lebanese Shiite group Hezbollah, attacked Israel. Around 4,000 Iranian-made or sourced rockets and missiles rained onto northern Israel, causing millions of dollars worth of physical damage and major economic disruption to the Jewish state through the evacuation of 350,000 Israeli civilians.

But the US presence in the Gulf is not just about Iran.

It is about giving confidence and to demonstrate to the Sheikdoms of the Arabian Peninsula; that is, to Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE, Oman and Saudi Arabia, that American protection is close at hand. While the Bush Administration's zeal to press democratic reforms onto these monarchies did push some of them into adopting a few cosmetic political changes, questions remain over these governments' long-term viability. In many of these monarchies, political opposition is actively sought out and repressed, leaving only militant Wahhabists as the anti-government hard-core. These people are involved in an existential fight against local authorities and are driven by their sense of alienation from the political norm. Their willingness to die for their beliefs makes them a particularly destabilising influence, in spite of the fact that their numbers are far from overwhelming. The ideals of militant Wahhabists are not that far removed from the likes of Bin Laden and Al Qaeda – though caution must be taken when attempting to 'connect the dots'. For example, local Saudi militants fighting the authorities in Riyadh might very well have sympathy for Bin Laden and Al Qaeda, but they are primarily organised and engaged in conducting jihad against what they consider corrupt Arabian Peninsula governments. They will make loose affiliations with similarly predisposed groups in other Arabian Peninsula states, but these affiliations are highly fluid arrangements. These affiliations do not present a unified front with a stable centre of gravity, which makes flushing out militant cells an extremely difficult task.

US forces in the Gulf are not primed to directly intervene in these local internal struggles. They provide covert assistance and supply local Arab forces with weapons and training. Washington is, however, very mindful that a series of seething internal crises among the Arabian Peninsula monarchies give strategic opportunity to Iran. This strategic opportunity needs to be lessened for a very pressing reason. The US presence in the Arabian Gulf is made sustainable by existing basing arrangements. The US Army has a large presence in Kuwait. The US 5th Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain. This is a very strained arrangement because the local Bahraini monarchy is a Sunni clique ruling over a Shiite majority population. Qatar has a conspicuous US military presence at Al Udeid air base which hosts a forward headquarters of US Central Command and the 379th USAF Air Expeditionary Wing. And the UAE, though technically the most neutral of the Gulf monarchies, hosts a significant US military presence as a logistics hub.

The primary aim of the US presence in the Gulf is to deter Iranian interference from further stoking instability on the Arabian Peninsula. One might ask – how can Shiite Iran affect Sunni Arabs? Well, one of the least well-known facts about the eastern Saudi seaboard is that there are some two million Shiites in this area of Saudi Arabia – many of them working in the Saudi oil and gas fields. If these populations' sympathies drift to Tehran, it could potentially give Iran significant leverage over Riyadh.

Then, there is the potential of state-on-state warfare. Most of Iran's fleet of ballistic missiles are well within range of Arabian oil and gas fields and major population centres. Iran's geographic proximity to the Arabian Peninsula gives it the capability to easily intimidate the oil-rich Gulf monarchies. It is

not a stretch to say that the Gulf Arab capitals live in a state of constant fear and paranoia over Iran and its intentions.

Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard has an estimated strength of 125,000, while its conventional military is said to possess some 350,000 personnel (Bruno 2009). The Basij, or 'Mobilisation of the Oppressed', a strategic reserve ostensibly used for regime preservation, has a strength of some millions, though actual figures are a matter of speculation. This makes Iran the largest military power in the Gulf region. But it is the country's military manpower and its willingness to conduct 'asymmetric operations' to preserve its national interest, that poses the biggest security challenge for both the West and the Gulf Arabs. Asymmetric operations such as the capture of a detachment of British sailors who strayed inside Iranian territorial waters from the *HMS Cornwall* in March 2007, the Revolutionary Guard's harassment of USN ships patrolling the Straits of Hormuz (January 2008) or covertly supporting Shiite militias in Iraq against Western military forces, remind the world that while Iran might not be in possession of a technologically sophisticated military, it can tie down Western forces and precipitate a 'controlled' international crisis by carefully choosing its ground and its targets. Such military or paramilitary feints display Iranian prowess, and keep US forces in the Gulf on guard.

As an aside – while in Abu Dhabi in 2008, I had an audience with USN Vice Admiral Kevin J. Cosgriff, then commander of the US 5th Fleet and Commander, Combined Maritime Forces. Speaking candidly, he said that the USN and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Navy were engaged in a deadly series of 'cat and mouse games'. Much of what goes on in the Gulf between US and Iranian forces is not publicly commented on. Suffice it to say, tensions are real and we, the public in the West, are only privy to a very small part of these tensions.

Iran's missile and rocket forces are formidable, though their technical origins and vintage suggest that the most modern are retrofitted and domestically produced and or modified North Korean variants of Soviet-Russian systems. Some modern Chinese technology has been acquired to enhance these missile and rockets' guidance systems and their payload delivery, but it is safe to say that in a major war, many of these missiles and rockets would not have the capability to conduct precision strikes against US bases in the Gulf, or Arab military and logistics hubs. Iranian missile and rocket forces are 'area weapons' to be used against large, soft targets such as cities, where their ability to terrorise populations is designed to act as these weapons' greatest force multiplier.

Iran does have an active WMD research capability. But given that it suffered at the hands of Saddam's chemical weapon attacks during the 1980-88 Gulf War, Iranian society officially denounces the use of chemical weapons against enemy states. Tehran signed the 1925 Geneva protocols against the use of chemical weapons, and signed and ratified the 1993 Chemical Weapons Conventions. It is likely that a similar proscription applies to the use of less predictable biological weapons. Iran did sign and ratify the 1972 Biological and Toxin Weapons Conventions. However, we need to add a caveat here. In a clash where Iran is confronted by American and Israeli power, leaders in Tehran may possibly overturn any hesitation regarding the use of WMDs and aim to either rapidly expand existing domestic research, or acquire chemical and biological warheads from strategic confederate, Syria. For this to have a measure of public support, it must be absolutely clear to the Iranian people that Iran is defending its national borders against attack. The Iranian people would not condone their leaders' 'first-use' of WMDs. This sits within Iran's largely defensive strategic mindset, but also the government's wish to be seen as a moral instrument of Shiism.

During the Bush years, it was relatively easy to overlook a few truths about Iran. Historically speaking Iran is not an aggressive nation. The last time Iran launched an unprovoked military assault on a neighbouring state, was during the Safavid Dynasty in the 18th Century. In recent history it was

Iraq, not Iran, which began the 1980-88 Gulf War. It was Iraq, not Iran, which invaded Kuwait in 1990. While it is true that Iran under the Shah was setting itself up as a major regional power with a robust regional interventionist policy, it was a time when Iran was clearly in the American camp and was even a friend of Israel. The 1979 Iranian Revolution put paid to any notion of closeness to either the US or Israel. And while the Mullahs publicly waged a war of words with the West and its Arab neighbours – in truth, these statements were largely unwarranted and were the ramblings of a new regime, deeply insecure about its survival and its prospects. It was a time when the religious elite's most important concern was to defend the revolution from remnant 'pro-Shah' reactionaries within the borders of Iran. The US hostage crisis was symptomatic of this. Then, Ayatollah Khomeini and his associates were attempting to consolidate their hold over Iranian society, all the while purging the remaining conservative, 'anti-Mullah' sentiment from their body politic. Dragging the US into this domestic power struggle was one way the Ayatollahs could deter Washington, at reasonably little cost to themselves, from embarking on a more direct intervention to save the Shah.

As it happened, the timing could not have been better for Khomeini. The US was in no position to embark on a military campaign to save Shah Reza Pahlavi. America was pained and paralysed by its loss of the Vietnam War in 1975, and the 'Vietnam Syndrome' affected almost all US international policy considerations. Also, as the leader of the West, Washington still had to check possible Soviet moves into strategically significant areas. The chaos engulfing Iran in 1979-80 was as perplexing to the USSR as it was to the US, with Moscow focussing on its own moves in Afghanistan during that time.

But is Iran a 'natural enemy' of the US? Let us look at Iranian behaviour towards Washington prior to 9/11. Tehran was never a friend to the Taliban. In fact, Iran almost went to war with Kabul in 1998 after Taliban Sunni fundamentalists killed Iranian diplomatic staff. Ironically, US diplomatic intervention prevented an Iranian invasion of Afghanistan that may have toppled the Taliban in 1998, and possibly prevented 9/11 from ever happening! During October-December 2001, the Iranian government silently supported the US-led overthrow of the Taliban. And while the international public riled against the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Iran welcomed this American-initiated shift in the regional balance of power. Iran suffered almost a million casualties at the hands of Iraqi forces in the 1980-88 Gulf War. So Tehran had its reasons to provide quiet assistance to US forces as they prepared for regime change in Iraq.

The fact that the US changed the nature of Iran's strategic encirclement by replacing belligerent hostile Sunni states (Taliban & Saddam) with weak, pro-US governments – each hosting a very powerful US military presence – gave Tehran's leaders no joy. Strategic encirclement is strategic encirclement and American enmity toward the Iranian Revolutionary regime is long-standing. Also, the closer America got to Iran's borders, by extension, the closer Iran's other enemy – Israel – would get too. It was these calculations that drove Iran's political elite to foster a sense of ambiguity regarding the possession of a nuclear weapons program. The fact that Iran has a burgeoning population and that the country really does want hard currency for its oil and gas resources, presents a rational argument for a civilian nuclear program to service its own domestic energy needs. Given that US forces are ensconced in neighbouring Iraq (130,000) and Afghanistan (60,000) in numbers that worry the clerical regime – to exaggerate Iranian ingenuity and determination to build a nuclear weapons stockpile, does make sense.

Practicalities, however, dictate that creating a viable nuclear weapons program under conditions of economic sanctions will be an expensive, and technically challenging, exercise. North Korea achieved nuclear weapons status only under conditions of extreme political repression and economic and social deprivation – hardly a situation that Iranian leaders are likely to emulate, especially considering that they are still struggling to find popular legitimacy following the recent re-election of President Ahmadinejad, darling of the clerical 'hard-liners'.

Iran's current problems with Israel stem from two primary reasons, both of which are inter-related but without firm proof. The first of these assumptions is that Iran is close to developing its first nuclear weapon. According to some sources in Tel Aviv, Iran's civilian nuclear program is merely a smoke-screen for a nuclear weapons program. But without hard evidence of a "*smoking gun in the form of a mushroom cloud*", this remains speculation. As Bush's invasion of Iraq clearly bore out – before one can legitimately declare war on a country, one needs to provide irrefutable evidence that the country in question poses a clear and present danger. Up to now, all that Iran has demonstrated is that it is a deeply insecure country and whatever tactics it takes against the West – and even against Israel through its active support of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon – these tactics have been carefully designed to produce an effect in its favour, without unleashing Armageddon. Say what you will about the Mullahs, one thing is certain – they are not likely to partake in their own downfall by some bizarre act of irrationality. The Iranian Revolution has survived 30 years (the 30th anniversary took place on 10 February this year). The Clerics, however, will maintain control only as long as they can continue to manipulate the byzantine Iranian body politic, or the Iranian people themselves 'ease them out of power'.

The other popular assumption is that Iran's continuing refinement of its still relatively crude ballistic missile fleet, will, in the end, create a missile type, not only of sufficient range to attack Israel because it already has those in the form of the Shahab-3, but of sufficient quantity to potentially blanket Israel's major cities and these missiles may be armed with Iranian nuclear warheads.

The Shahab-3 and its experimental variants are a long way from being able to sustain a long-range missile campaign, let alone reach operational status. The best guess by some of the world's most credible open source intelligence companies, suggests that Iran might have as many as 50 Shahab-3 missiles that are operational. This, however, is the optimistic assessment. There are others who maintain that Iran has as few as 15 operational missiles capable of reaching Israel – none of them armed with nuclear warheads or sophisticated decoys.

Iran's oft-quoted threat of closing the Straits of Hormuz, the entrance to the Arabian Gulf where 40 percent of the world's oil shipments pass through, ignores the fact that the Straits are impossible to be closed by conventional military means. The Gulf is 56 kilometres wide at its narrowest point, and has a depth that varies between 50-90 metres. To construct a maritime barrier, or series of barriers, in full view of the US naval presence in the Gulf and the Arabian Sea would elicit a swift American military response. Also, even if it were possible for the Revolutionary Guard to seal off the Gulf to maritime traffic, such a move would severely cripple Iranian commercial shipping. Then there is China. It is hardly likely that Iran's last major international supporter would countenance such a move, considering its growing dependence on Iranian oil and gas shipments.

So what of the future of the US presence in the Gulf? If a 'regime-change' war against Iran, led by US forces, seems unlikely under President Obama's watch, and an Israeli military strike against Iran's suspected nuclear and ballistic missile sites seems improbable due to the complex and uncertain nature of this option, then we are left with only one thing – the status quo. The cat and mouse games between the USN and the Revolutionary Guard will continue; Iran will further refine its domestic ballistic missile and rocketry capability; it will engage the West and Israel in its game of strategic ambiguity regarding its nuclear program; and take the occasional calculated tactical risk against Western interests in Iraq and Afghanistan should the Mullahs deem it necessary. Internationally, the diplomatic door will remain open for Iran, though it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad's presidency will ever step through it since that would constitute an Iranian back-down and a major loss of face. In the end, Iran and the US are not 'fated' to remain enemies.

Under the Shah, Tehran and Washington spoke with one voice. Even the Mullahs showed their more cooperative side when America needed it most post-9/11, and in the lead-up to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein (in 2002-03). It is likely that we will see the end of clerical rule in our lifetimes, but it may not end through external military intervention or violent internal upheaval. A well-meaning 'insider' could come to power within the theocracy itself and attempt to put a more humane face on the regime. We've seen this sort of thing before in Apartheid South Africa and the Soviet Union – neither of these political systems survived attempts at internal reform.

Should the Iranian political system change into something more accommodating to the West, this would not end America's presence in the Gulf because this presence is necessary for as long as US forces are deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Gulf Arab Sheikdoms fear a successful, pro-American Iran more than they fear an isolated, paranoid Iran. The reason is simple. Should Iran ever resume the role it played when ruled by the Pahlavi dynasty, Iran would rapidly become America's leading ally in the Gulf. This would place enormous security strains on the Arabian Gulf monarchies, because in the absence of an Iran ruled by a wily, belligerent theocracy, the international community would focus much more closely on its dealings with the non-democratic Gulf Arab States.