

Sunset on the 'High Noon' of US-Iranian Confrontation?

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout recent history the Iranian theocracy's relationship with the West has been one of confrontation, punctuated by a series of half-hearted attempts at 'normalisation'. Half-hearted in that there appears to have been a number of calculations made by Iran's senior leadership, suggesting that moving too close to the West might imperil the survival of the theocratic state. To the conservatives of the Iranian elite the likelihood of such a scenario is unacceptable. It would signal the end of Iran's 'greatness', independence and strength.

The diplomacy of 'oil' has been used on many successive occasions to play one power off against another in order to side-step sanctions. This has given rise to the perception that Russia and China are interested in preserving Tehran's political status quo for their own economic and strategic benefits. But although pragmatism permeates the leadership in Moscow and Beijing, their hard-headed business attitude does not necessarily extend to defending Iran at all costs. So, with the larger international markets closed to them Iranian leaders have to be content with the limited capital and protection that comes from Russian and Chinese patronage.

Iran has created for itself an autarkic economy. For a country that is internationally isolated, this was a rational, though costly step to take. Of course no country can be truly autarkic. The Obama administration's decision to attack the Iranian economy at its most vulnerable point, its currency (January 2012),¹ has forced Iran's hand on whether or not to open up the country's most cherished symbol of national power – its nuclear program – to international scrutiny. While sheathed in obscurity as to its ultimate intent,² placing Iran's nuclear program at the centre of international negotiations designed to end some of the most crippling sanctions against Tehran, is a huge gamble.

- If the Iranian nuclear program was indeed created to build Iranian nuclear weapons, then the decades' long program will be sacrificed for no net strategic gain. Israel will keep its nuclear weapons capabilities and still consider Iran a primary threat, and the US will retain the right to intimidate Iran.
- If the nuclear program was only ever intended to be for domestic energy consumption, then a valuable and expensive sovereign infrastructure program

¹ By imposing a new sanctions regime designed to further constrain Iran's ability to sell oil on the international markets.

² As a weaponised deterrent against enemies Israel and the United States, or simply a new source of domestic energy.

will be pried open by the international community and the Iranian rhetoric of 'strategic ambiguity' of the program may reveal itself to be a bluff. In either case, Iran might gain some economic relief, but the country's strategic position will be eroded. A weak Iran cannot play well to a domestic audience tired of theocratic repression, especially among the upwardly mobile in Iran's major cities. Having suffered the Green Revolution (2009), which was put down by Iranian authorities at great cost, a similar popular rebellion might not see the survival of Iran's system of politicised Ayatollahs. Should the Ayatollah plutocracy survive further domestic challenges, the question then arises: without a general peace settlement between the US and Iran, and without the strategic ambiguity of a nuclear program which could be used to influence regional actors such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt, can the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and by extension, Iran, retain its strategic power? Could it still project power, and could it really defend itself?

The first sign of post-Revolutionary warming with the West came during the leadership of President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1993-97). Iran's foreign policy during this time was characterised by the avoidance of unnecessary confrontation with the US, while defending the Revolution's political gains at home. In the wash-up of the 1991 Gulf War, Rafsanjani sought to build better relations with the West, but Iran's refusal to lift the fatwa against controversial author Salam Rushdie and Rafsanjani's defence of Iran's nuclear program, hampered his efforts. His successor to the Iranian presidency, Mohammad Khatami, was greeted by the West and many urban Iranians as a domestic reformer. There was much speculation during the early period of Khatami's rule that some of the worst of the Iranian theocracy's repression would be rolled back and that Khatami would be more overtly a friend of the West. But these optimistic forecasts miscalculated the plutocratic tendency of Iranian politics. Reformers can promise, but the rest of the conservative system has to support the reforms. Iran's political system is filled with check and balances, many of which are skewed towards supporting an overall conservative agenda. Presenting a presidential candidate that looks like a popular reformist, while giving him little chance to truly affect the system, is just a ploy designed to calm a restive domestic audience and be seen to be a responsive international partner. Khatami's foreign policy sought to bring about an atmosphere of conciliation without changing the underpinnings or orientation of the Iranian leadership. He was the 'face' of Iran's religious government. But, towards the end of his term in office (2005), during the funeral of Pope John Paul II, (according to Iranian conservatives), Khatami overstepped his mandate by speaking directly to the then Israeli President Moshe Katsav.³ Khatami was severely chastised by Iranian conservatives and the media upon his return home.⁴ Nonetheless, during Khatami's presidency, Iran supported two Western military actions that profoundly altered the scale and perception of Iranian power.⁵

³ An Iranian Jew born in the same area as Khatami.

⁴ This minor dialogue being the first time since 1979, that heads of state of both countries had spoken to each other.

⁵ Quiet support was given to US efforts against the Afghan Taliban in 2001, an enemy Tehran almost went to war with in 1998 after the terrorist organisation slaughtered 11 Iranian diplomats. Iran also supported the Bush administration's 2003 war against the 'old enemy' Saddam Hussein.

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected to replace Khatami. His term in office was the true high point in Iranian anti-Western bellicosity. Ahmadinejad made no secret of the fact that his ambition was to exploit any perceived asymmetric advantage Iran had to resume the country's role as a regional hegemon, even though the country was by and large internationally isolated, its economy struggling and the Iranian people polarised between those who lived in the cities and wanted greater economic and political freedom, and those in the poorer rural areas who supported the regime and a harder stance against the West. Iran's progress in its nuclear affairs was used as a key tool to intimidate the richer Gulf Arab states, the US/Western presence in the Arabian Gulf, and Israel. IRGC units were actively harassing US naval shipping in the Gulf; Iran escalated its support for Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and penetrated the new Shia political leadership in post-Saddam Iraq. Ahmadinejad was the rock Iranian conservatives threw into the pool of the Arabian Gulf, and the ripple effects were far reaching. So much so, that from 2006 onwards, talk of war between the US/Israel and Iran was constant in the media, not helped by the fact that Iran supplied Hezbollah with rocketry that enabled them to punch deep into Israeli territory during the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah War. War talk has essentially continued to 2013, when in August of that year, the election of a new Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, saw another seemingly dramatic turn around. Like Khatami, Rouhani, came to the office of Iranian president as a reformer. But unlike Khatami, Rouhani is for the moment armed with the 'blessing' of his religious peers to steer a different course. A course that might see a final political settlement between the West and Iran, with the normalisation of Iran hanging in the balance. But before we turn to this new course, we will need to look at the threat perception Iran still poses to other actors in the Middle East, to appreciate just how fragile the foundations of an American-Iranian rapprochement are.

Of all the pressing regional considerations regarding a potential détente between the US and Iran, two stand out for immediate consideration – the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Israel.

GULF CO-OPERATION COUNCIL

The Gulf Cooperation Council is a loose confederation of the following states: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Together, as a grouping, the GCC looks strategically powerful and significant.

This regional collective spans some 2,673,108km², has a combined GDP of approximately USD2.1 trillion largely through the proceeds of oil and gas exports. There is a regional military arrangement called the Peninsula Shield Force. This force was created to deter any conventional military attack on GCC member-states, who have a combined population of some 42 million people. However, the arrangement is not a tightly disciplined and organised framework for mutual military support like NATO. If we dig a little deeper, the GCC exhibits a number of unique challenges.

- The organisation is dominated by Saudi Arabia, a situation that does not necessarily sit well with other member-states that believe Riyadh overrides the sovereign interests of the smaller Gulf Arab capitals. Collective unity

therefore rests largely on the smaller GCC states making common cause with Saudi Arabia. For example, the GCC (Saudi Arabian, Kuwaiti & Emirati) Peninsula Shield Force military intervention into Bahrain in March 2011. Rarely does Saudi Arabia openly acknowledge or support GCC initiatives from its smaller fellow-members. Cooperation among the smaller states, such as the Qatari and Emirati decisions to deploy military forces to aid the toppling of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in 2011, were sovereign decisions taken outside the GCC.

- Significant issues separate the GCC states from each other:
 - All states have ongoing territorial disputes because prior to their respective independence, former colonial masters did not delineate boundaries with any degree of accuracy. This was partly due to lack of technology at the time, and partly because much of Gulf Arab territory 'pre-oil' was of little international consequence. The advent of satellite information and access to better cartographical methods, combined with the fact that where a line is on a map, on-shore and off-shore in the contemporary Arabian Gulf, can signify ownership of rich oil and gas fields. Therefore, long-standing and simmering disagreements among the GCC states exist over contemporary borders.
- Among all GCC states, except for Saudi Arabia, population is a major concern. The Khaleeji (native Gulf Arab) population is relatively small and this poses major social problems. A predominantly foreign labour force has been imported into Qatar, the UAE, Bahrain and Kuwait to help maintain the instruments of government, national growth and development. While this is a logical strategy to follow, the potential problems lie in the question of what to do with long-term foreign labour? All GCC states have embarked on Arabisation programs seeking to replace foreign labour with locals. However, this excludes manual labour, which will for the foreseeable future continue to be drawn from the Indian Sub-continent (Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka & Bangladesh). There are also some specialist skills currently filled by Western expatriates employed within government, that simply cannot be easily replaced as education standards for local Gulf Arabs vary widely between states and within states. Saudi Arabia has made the largest strides in the area of Arabisation. It has the largest Khaleeji population of all GCC states. But completely replacing foreign labour at either the blue-collar or white-collar level is still very much a long-term, perhaps multi-generational ambition.

So what social problems come from this peculiar arrangement? Khaleeji nationals are a privileged elite. They stand divorced from foreigners whom they know to be there for the money. No enduring loyalty is built up or encouraged between the Khaleeji population and their expatriate workforce and that creates and sustains a 'mercenary mentality' among the expatriates. The Khaleeji population looks at this foreign influence as un-Islamic and certainly non-traditional. Even Muslim Arabs from other parts of the Middle East, such as Egypt and Lebanon, are not necessarily seen as natural 'partner populations' for potential long-term settlement and integration among the GCC states. Indeed, a long-term concern exists among the Gulf monarchies about the potential for radicalisation of Arab expatriates drawn from poorer Arab countries,

or transient Muslim populations drawn from South and Central Asia. This makes the Khaleeji populations among the GCC extremely sensitive to their own vulnerability. External threats are given an exaggerated flavour and need to be confronted, directly or by proxy, irrespective of the contemporary international climate. Here, Khaleeji survival is the key driver. And since this demographic reality is worse among the smaller GCC states, they begrudgingly fall under the sway of Riyadh. Saudi Arabia's size in terms of territory and population (as well as its special place as the guardian of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina), makes it the natural regional hegemon.

GCC MILITARY BALANCE

Saudi Arabia's 'centre of gravity' is the size of its military. Of the GCC's militaries, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's is the largest. The Royal Saudi Land Forces (Army) is 75,000 strong; the Royal Saudi Air Force has a personnel complement of 18,000; the Royal Saudi Air Defense has 16,000; the Royal Saudi Navy 15,500, including a force of approximately 3,000 Marines; while the royal 'praetorian guard', the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) has a force of some 75,000 regulars with an extra 25,000 tribal levies loyal to the House of Saud. This gives the country a total force structure of over 200,000 active military personnel. Riyadh also has a Strategic Missile Force armed with possibly as many as 100 Chinese-made Intermediate Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs) – of the DF-3/CSS-2 Dong-Feng type. These missiles are nuclear capable but are presently thought to only possess High Explosive warheads. Rumour has it that because Saudi Arabia partially funded Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, Riyadh could call upon Islamabad to acquire nuclear warheads for their IRBM fleet, should the need arise.

The hardware at the disposal of Saudi Arabia's conventional forces consists of some of the best in the world, easily purchased with the great wealth gained from the country's vast oil reserves. The military equipment is a mix of Western types drawn from the US, the UK, France and other European countries. This mix brings with it challenges. For a military service to support a number of different, yet similar weapons, is an expensive and complex process. That the primary weapons are all Western, does not mean that they can be supported from one source. For example, American aircraft are qualitatively different from French aircraft and require entirely different logistics and maintenance regimes. An air force officer familiar with flying American aircraft will be less familiar with French aircraft. This builds within the Royal Saudi Air Force systemic issues which require that during a time of war, the supplier states providing the military technology and the know-how to operate it, do not withdraw their support. If they do, then a particular type of weapon would have to be suspended from the order of battle because it cannot be effectively deployed. Or, they can be used, but only in 'one shot' operations. Strategically, having a variety of source countries supplying military capabilities can lessen a state's dependence on a sole supplier, and arguably, Saudi Arabia has taken steps to prevent such a stranglehold from happening. But this comes at the cost of having to sustain multiple supply chains supporting multiple types of similar equipments in service.

Saudi Arabia's main strategic concerns are: instability in Yemen brought on by the prospect of state failure threatening the country's southern frontier; internal anti-monarchist Sunni radicalisation from groups such as Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and its affiliates; the moral panic over sectarian confrontation between local Sunnis and Shia; direct confrontation with Iran; and proxy confrontation with Iran in places like Bahrain, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Lack of internal coherence between the powerful factions within the Saudi monarchy serves to complicate and obfuscate policymaking, branding the country a capricious regional actor.

The UAE has the second largest and arguably the most capable military of all the GCC states. It boasts an active total force of some 51,000. While also employing a similar multinational mix of weaponry in its arsenal as Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi has been a little less 'wide reaching' in this regard. Its primary high technology weapons are drawn from US and French sources and since, internationally, both these countries have a history of differences in Middle East policy and are fiercely independent, there are expectations among the Emirati military that should one supplier not support a particular mission, they can use the other to get what they need. So far and fortuitously, this theory has not yet been put to the test.

The UAE has deployed small military forces to overseas missions. An army detachment was quietly sent to Afghanistan (2008)⁶ as part of Coalition efforts at containing the Taliban and protecting the overall international nation-building effort there. North American and European military personnel who worked closely with Emirati forces were highly complimentary about the skills and professionalism the Emiratis demonstrated. The UAE also deployed a fighter squadron of F-16s to a Coalition mission to topple the Libyan dictatorship in 2011. While both these military deployments are easily criticised as symbolic, for the UAE they provided invaluable experience in operating with allied military units in different, challenging environments.

Oman is the third largest GCC military with a total active personnel tally of 43,000. As one of the less developed GCC states, its military is largely an internal security force designed to quell tribal dissent and maintain the political status quo. Oman is closely aligned to the UK and much of its equipment, though old by GCC standards, is drawn from British stocks. The country's 'less developed' status is due to the Sultanate having a smaller share of Arabian oil resources. Indeed, it has been forecast that Oman's oil reserves might be exhausted by 2020, causing that country's frenetic attempts at economic diversification. However, the recent discovery of potentially rich gas fields may well save Oman from economic stringency and/or collapse. Muscat's ability to hold onto its territory and resources will focus the attention of Omani policy makers over time, since its position on the Musandam Peninsula, (owning the southern tip of the strategically significant Strait of Hormuz), makes this GCC member a potential 'front-line' state in any conflict with Iran.

Next is the Sheikhdom of Kuwait. This small country, wedged between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, is uniquely vulnerable to invasion and occupation, as demonstrated by the Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait, 1990-91. This geographic vulnerability

⁶ The UAE had a detachment of 170 soldiers deployed in Afghanistan in 2008, their area of operations in Tarin Kowt. This presence has been scaled back to some 35.

has not changed since the country's liberation. Only geopolitical forces have changed. Post-Saddam Iraq is no threat to Kuwait considering that Baghdad's political attention is solely fixed on maintaining national unity in the face of Iranian machinations, Turkish predations and Syrian jihadist penetrations. Arguably even more importantly, the government of Nouri al-Maliki has played a very dangerous game within Iraq. Playing one sectarian, ethnic or tribal faction against another, makes Iraq a potential tinderbox on the verge of civil war. Such a situation is destabilising to Kuwait. Its larger neighbour's problems, if existential in nature, could unwittingly draw in the tiny Sheikhdom. On Kuwait's southern flank, Saudi Arabia is a friendly country, unlikely to pose any real challenges in the near-term unless the situation in Iraq spirals out of control.

Under these trying strategic circumstances, there is little that Kuwait can do independently to defend itself other than stage a short 'holding action', designed to buy time for the arrival of GCC and US reinforcements. Kuwait's total active force is approximately 15,500. Most of its primary weaponry is US derived.

Qatar has a total active force of 11,200. Occupying a significant peninsular on the eastern Arabian seaboard, Qatar potentially has quick access to Saudi and Emirati overland support should any threat emerge to challenge this small state. The problem for Qatar now and into the foreseeable future is that its newfound gas riches are making the leadership in Doha more ambitious and competitive vis-à-vis its Saudi and Emirati neighbours. Being the home to the controversial Al Jazeera media service which is considered by many of the conservative Gulf Arab monarchies a regional political 'agent provocateur', Doha appears to some to revel too much in Al Jazeera's reputation. While it is unlikely that rivalry between Doha, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi will break GCC co-operation, its continuation is likely to pose interstate problems that could undermine inter-organisational trust and confidence in the idea of mutual support. Like the UAE, Qatar sent fighter-jets to Libya in 2011. But because Qatar is still emerging as a major international gas producer, its military forces, more internally focussed and ceremonial in nature, are unlikely to have learnt any significant lessons from the deployment. Lessons in interoperability with allied forces will only come about if the Qatari Sheikh orders his military to be more outwardly orientated, and this can only come about when there is no fear of internal threats against the ruling monarchy.

Bahrain is the smallest and poorest of the GCC monarchies. As a small group of islands between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, Bahrain has a number of unique characteristics make the country the most vulnerable to internal ructions. The Sheikhdom's leadership is Sunni and it rules over a restive, predominantly Shia population. Iran, especially under the more belligerent rule of former President Ahmadinejad, championed Bahraini Shia dissent against the monarchy. In the turmoil and fear of the Arab Spring, Shia Bahraini dissent was seen as a direct and existential challenge to King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The main island of Bahrain, connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway, was the scene of a GCC Peninsula Shield Force intervention, largely comprising of Saudi and Emirati forces. These forces were invited in by the Bahraini king to help put down Shia unrest in a move quietly supported by the Obama administration – the US Navy's Fifth Fleet Headquarters being stationed close to the Bahraini capital, Manama. A small Bahraini security

detachment was sent to Afghanistan to support the ISAF mission, largely as a measure to further cement ties between the vulnerable Al Khalifa monarchy and Washington.⁷

Saudi motives for the GCC intervention were not just to save the Al Khalifa monarchy. Riyadh wanted to show that as the champion of Sunni sectarianism throughout the Arab world, it had the ability to crush 'Iranian-inspired' Shia dissent. Saudi Arabia is home to some 3 million Shia, who live and work in the oil and gas industry which is geographically concentrated on the eastern Arabian seaboard. A perennial nightmare for Saudi and Sunni Gulf Arab leaders is the potential of an uprising of local Shia in favour of Iran. And while there is little evidence for Shia Gulf Arabs harbouring irredentist loyalties to ethnically Persian Iran, this is no comfort to Sunni Gulf Arab sensitivities.

The GCC taken as a collective of Khaleeji military capabilities is essentially aimed at preventing internal dissent, whether from radical Sunni jihadists, anti-monarchist insurgents and agitators, and Shia fifth columnists. The Peninsula Shield Force is an umbrella term under which the sovereign forces of the Gulf States come together for collective action. So far, the only collective action taken was against the Shia of Bahrain – an internal security operation. Peninsula Shield Force has yet to demonstrate a capability to counter determined asymmetric or conventional military threats, and it is highly unlikely the GCC has the capacity to do so independent of the not-so-hidden hand of US forces ranged throughout the Arabian Gulf. Furthermore, were Iran to pre-emptively strike the GCC selectively or on a broad front, the shock of such a move might well fracture the brittle façade of GCC unity. The military power of the GCC is fragmented. There is no viable Gulf Arab command and control of local forces; strategic command and control capabilities are largely outsourced to the Americans, British and French. And while it is unlikely that these powerful foreign actors would ever abandon their Gulf Arab allies, America and Iran reaching any kind of détente would fuel deep Khaleeji security sensitivities, potentially making them more prickly toward Washington and willing to undertake risky action to undermine any diplomatic rapprochement between Washington and Tehran; actions such as selective false-flag operations⁸ designed to implicate Iranian duplicity. Arising during the midst of diplomatic negotiations, such false flag operations could seriously jeopardise any moves toward a general American-Iranian peace and the potential normalisation of the Iranian theocracy.

ISRAEL

This country is the Middle East's most powerful regional actor. Though only harbouring some 7 million people (of which 5 million are Jewish), the Jewish political elite has created a military and intelligence force known for its prowess and ruthlessness. Born out of the desire to create a Jewish homeland and prevent a second

⁷ US Relations with Bahrain, Bureau of Near East Fact Sheet, September 13, 2013, US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/26414.htm> accessed: 05/02/2014

⁸ A false flag operation is an act of terrorism or aggression by a group (in this case a state or non-state actor) designed to discredit another rival group.

Holocaust against the Jewish people, Tel Aviv is singularly determined to fight all prospective threats and contain any combination of Arab powers ranged against it.⁹

Iran is considered a 'latecomer' to the threat matrix for Israel. Prior to the 1979 Revolution, Israel enjoyed good relations with Iran then ruled by the extremely pro-American and pro-modernisation Pahlavi dynasty. When the Ayatollahs ousted the Shah of Iran, Iran turned against America and Israel. Both states were accused of supporting the oppressive and corrupt rule of Shah Reza Pahlavi. Not long after the Iranian Revolution (1980) Iran's neighbour Iraq launched a war of conquest to settle outstanding border disputes with what Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein considered a confused and enfeebled Iran, wracked by internal turmoil. The Iran-Iraq War lasted eight years and ruined both countries. But it was not just the war and the tactics used by both sides that saw it grind into a series of brutal imitations of World War I-style campaigns. Both Washington and Tel Aviv saw strategic advantage in these two regional giants slugging it out. They believed that by letting them fight each other, neither would have spare military capacity or inclination to harm Israel. This was a logical, 'realpolitik' assessment. For Israel, the nightmare scenario was Iraq and Iran making common cause and this, however unlikely, from an Israeli perspective could not be allowed to happen.

Upon the cessation of hostilities between Iran and Iraq in 1988, Saddam Hussein turned his attentions to Iraq's tiny neighbour Kuwait. The Al Sabah sheikhdom was the most vociferous of all the Gulf monarchies in calling back war loans after supporting Iraq during its long war with Iran. This bilateral clash escalated into an international crisis when Iraqi forces entered Kuwait in 1990. Saddam Hussein launched a number of Iraq's Scud missiles at Israel, hoping to drag the country directly into the war and turning the war for the liberation of Kuwait into a broader Arab-Israeli conflict. This gambit failed. Indeed the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and subsequent war with allied forces hollowed out the Iraqi military so much so, that little of strategic significance remained. During the 1990s, and in spite of the fictions created by the Bush administration and British Blair government as a pretext for war against Iraq in 2003, Iraq's military reverted to its 'default setting' as an instrument for internal repression.

From the mid-1980s and throughout the 1990s, the Iranians were busy developing a support network for terrorist groups in the hope that Tehran could, in spite of it being a Shia theocracy, become a leading actor in the Palestinian anti-Israeli resistance – and by extension, a leading Middle East power.

During the 1980s Syrian-Iranian relations intensified. The countries leveraged off each other in their respective confrontations with Israel and Iraq. This was not a natural fit. Syria's ruling Alawite faction, while considered drawn from a sect of Shia Islam, was a champion of secular Arab nationalism. Iran was neither Arab, nor secular. It is a Persian religious state seeking to unify the ethnically disparate Shia from all over the Middle East. Damascus has long considered itself a bulwark against Israel.¹⁰ Even though Syria and Iraq shared Ba'ath Party origins in the 1960s, this potentially unifying aspect of relations between Damascus and Baghdad came to an

⁹ Israel fought 3 major wars with Arab states – 1948, 1967 and 1973.

¹⁰ Having been involved in the Arab coalitions that sought to destroy the Jewish state in 1948, 1967 and 1973.

end. Syria and Iraq's respective national interests, and the ambitions of Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad and Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein diverged and conflicted.

Collaboration between Syria and Iran allowed Iran to actively support the Shia in southern Lebanon by supplying the terrorist group Hezbollah with the equipment and training necessary to confront Israel. Syrian-Iranian collaboration also allowed Iran's influence to extend to the Palestinian areas, especially the Gaza Strip where it supported the Palestinian group, Hamas.

By the early 2000s, Iranian influence in the Levant was well established. Tehran could, through its proxies and with the support of Syria, put pressure on Israel whenever it was in its interest to do so. Using the moral pre-text of supporting an independent Palestine, Iran often used this to boost its prestige among the Arab people, demonstrating that while Arab leaders 'talked' about Palestine, Iran was prepared to act. Cooperation between Syria and Iran was formalised in early 2005 in a public announcement that the two countries were forming a mutual self-defence pact. The high point of this strategy came during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War when an Iranian and Syrian supported terrorist group humbled the might of the Israeli military which was still recovering from its invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982, an action which essentially left Syria in control of the Lebanese state. Until the 1982 debacle, the Israeli military was undefeated in the Middle East and considered by most international observers to be undefeatable. But this belief was largely the product of state-versus-state conventional warfare, not non-state versus state unconventional, asymmetric warfare.

THE BROADER ARAB WORLD

Israeli policy on Palestine remains a touchstone issue in the Middle East, cutting across most ethnic/sectarian differences.

Prior to the 2011 Arab Spring, a deep malaise had settled among the Arab people regarding Palestine and other politically and socially charged issues. Most Arab states were governed by long-standing dictatorships that claimed to act in the interest of their people and in the furtherance of Palestinian liberation. However, these dictatorships, many of which had radical origins in the 1960s-70s, were simply marking time. The dictatorships were brittle institutions, some morphing into 'dynastic republics' that were defined by narrow tribal or ethnic affiliations, totally void of their former popular appeals. They were by and large run in paranoiac ways, placing local political survival over and above regional political idealism. In this void of inaction over Palestine, came Iran and its regional proxies – Hezbollah and Hamas. While Iran's leadership maintained its overt Shia religiosity in its foreign and security policy dealings, the fact that Tehran gave physical support to the Palestinian people by offering them the means to resist Israeli repression and supplying them with weapons and/or civilian aid, defused some of the sharpest criticism from the Arab media and even found some popular support among the Arab people, sectarian differences notwithstanding.

This Arab public ‘support’, however, was limited and severely punctured by the actions of Iran’s Lebanese proxy and facilitator, Hezbollah, within the confines of the Lebanese state, especially from 2005 onwards.¹¹ It was largely rolled back by events within Iran in 2009 during the Green Revolution. In 2009, Iranian internal security forces, most notably the Basij, reinforced in the minds on the ‘Arab street’ that the Ayatollahs were just as repressive as the dictatorships they were enduring. It should, however, be noted that Arab support of Iran’s position on Palestine was highly conditional. This support only came about as a consequence of a lack of official Arab activism at both levels – state and Arab League. It is yet to be seen whether Arab opinion of the country’s ‘softer’ more accommodating new president, Hassan Rouhani, can change Arab perception of the Iranian theocracy. Much of the Arab world has grown weary of war, repression, confrontation and threats of war. Since the Arab Spring had taken out a number of Arab dictators and is still playing itself out violently in Syria, local Palestinian actors are now left to fend for themselves. Their only hope is that Western interests will curtail the worst of Israeli behaviour and intransigence. Rouhani will not want to jeopardise any strategic settlement with the US by overtly aiding and abetting Palestinian militant activity against Israel, nor would he want Hezbollah to threaten the viability of Lebanon or Israel’s northern frontier.

The 22 governments of the Arab League have conflicting opinions of Iran and the organisation’s contemporary bilateral relationship with Tehran reflects this. Those states closer to Iran, such as those of the GCC, are more fearful and suspicious of Iranian power and tend to have poorer official relations. Ironically, this does not mean that economic relations or even social relations are forbidden. Indeed, Dubai (UAE) has some 400,000 Iranians living in the city and has unofficially acted as Iran’s economic window to the world in spite of international sanctions. This is not surprising when one considers that historically, Gulf Arabs and Iranians are traders, and politics, though important, rarely acts to hermetically seal countries from each other. Those Arab League states that are geographically further away from Iran, such as the Arab states of the North African Maghreb region, tend to have better relations with it. Not seeing Iran from the perspective of the GCC states, they tend to act more pragmatically with Iranian leaders, which again, tends to leave Tehran some room to manoeuvre internationally in spite of the country’s general isolation.

TURKEY

Turkey’s official relations with Iran have been relatively sound, apart from the initial cooling that took place during the 1979 Revolution. Ethnically both states share Kurdish and Azeri populations and have sought to co-operate in border security, especially to threats posed by Kurdish separatists, narco-traffickers, and terrorists. Economically, Turkey and Iran are deeply interlinked. Ankara has significantly invested in the Iranian South Pars gas fields, and tourism between Turkey and Iran is

¹¹ Here we are referring to the alleged involvement of Syrian agents and Hezbollah operatives in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister, Rafik Hariri, not only a much-loved public figure, but one who was backed by Saudi Arabia. The far-reaching public backlash against this assassination saw the withdrawal of the Syrian military from Lebanon in 2005.

a good economic earner for both countries. About 30 percent of Turkey's natural gas comes from Iran, making Iran a vitally important partner in fuelling Turkish industrial and economic growth. But there have been political and strategic differences between Ankara and Tehran. As Turkey is a member of NATO, the Iranian political elite sees this reality as Turkey being captured by an American and Israeli strategic agenda. Iran was quick to protest Turkey's participation in a NATO missile defence shield in 2011. Iranian leaders believed that the NATO missile defence shield was aimed at their growing ballistic missile capability, thereby countering Iran's ability to strike Israel should Israel decide on attacking their nuclear facilities. The ongoing Syrian civil war also antagonises political bilateral relations between Turkey and Iran as both countries are supporting opposing forces. Iran is backing the government of Bashar al-Assad, while the Turks are backing the Syrian Sunni opposition. Where this becomes an existential issue for Iran is that Turkey has aligned itself both with Israel (indirectly, since Turkish-Israeli relations took a fall in 2009), and Saudi Arabia – two of Iran's greatest and most immediate threats. But even as this political situation continues to spoil official relations, unofficially, Turkey has acted to facilitate Iranian economic engagement and survival. So much so, that Turkish Prime Minister Erdogan's government recently got caught up in a major scandal involving its Iranian neighbour – a gold for gas deal, which, along with other recent domestic scandals involving Erdogan, is threatening the viability of his government. Corruption at the very top of the Turkish government had three of Erdogan's senior ministers resign in late 2013, while a Cabinet reshuffle saw the replacement of another ten. This illicit gold for gas trade allowed the Iranians to replenish their foreign exchange reserves in spite of economic sanctions. It also made Turkey look hypocritical in its position as a member of NATO, since as a NATO member, Turkey avowed to oppose Iran's nuclear programme. It is alleged that Iran might have earned in excess of USD119 billion in gold, more than enough to continue work on domestic uranium enrichment and other nuclear related activities.

CONCLUSION

The presidency of Hassan Rouhani might very well be a watershed for Iran, for the Iranian theocratic regime, the Iranian people and the balance of power in the Middle East.

Since the 1979 Revolution, Iran's foreign policy cycle has been one of confrontation, pragmatism, limited accommodation, confrontation again, and conciliation. All parts of this cycle underpinned by clever diplomacy, steely determination and economic autarky. Iran today stands at the precipice. Can the regime be normalised? And what will the outcome of normalisation look like, if indeed a true and lasting détente between the US and Iran can be achieved? A lot has to do with the domestic support that Rouhani can count on within Iran itself. There are powerful domestic actors like the IRGC and hard-line clerics who cannot imagine their regime surviving normalisation. Having thrived under the bellicosity of Ahmadinejad, they believe that national, and indeed Iranian 'civilisational' power remains only through continuous confrontation of all enemies, no matter how dire the economic circumstance. To them, accommodation and conciliation smack of weakness and defeat that will ultimately

usher in their demise. It is unlikely they will easily go down in ignominy. This suggests that Rouhani's power-base is fragile and likely to fall over at the first hint of IAEA suspicion over Iranian co-operation on the opening up of its nuclear program to inspectors. Furthermore, while some of Iran's strategic asymmetric cards, such as active support for Hezbollah and Hamas might be temporarily on hold – especially in their operations against Israel – while the general US-Iran atmosphere remains optimistic, Hezbollah's involvement in the Assad regime continues, as does Iran's.

Then there are the wild cards of Israel and the Gulf Arab states of the GCC. Both of these entities are doubtful of the benefits of a general US-Iranian rapprochement in terms of their security. Indeed, commentators and analysts both have suggested a warming of US ties to Iran might signal a cooling of Israeli/GCC ties with Washington. For Israel, should the Iranian Shia theocracy not renounce its policy of 'the destruction of the Jewish state', Tel Aviv will continue to view Iran and its proxies in the Levant as existential threats. For the GCC collective, Khaleeji fears of a potential American abandonment will be even greater. Ever since 9/11, the Washington beltway has rumbled with discontent over the level of support it was receiving for its attempt to roll back the power and influence of the Al Qaeda terrorist network from the GCC collective. Deep suspicion within the US government that some senior members of the various Gulf Arab monarchies were directly or indirectly supporting the Al Qaeda cause, make the GCC appear to some as an unreliable partner, or at worst, duplicitous. Since 2006, there has been a gradual, cautious and quiet warming of ties between Israel and some Gulf Arab states. In a case of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', there was speculation that the Gulf Arab states would not oppose and perhaps even welcome an Israeli/US strike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Since that scenario did not eventuate during the 'high noon' of US/Israeli and Iranian confrontation, and cunning Iranian diplomacy under a new leadership has largely taken this off the table for now, the idea that Israel and the GCC could covertly co-operate to undo a future US-Iranian settlement should be seen as a very real prospect. Israeli knowledge and penetration of the American government is an open secret. Israel's intelligence agencies are considered internationally to be the most ruthless and effective. Combined with Gulf Arab support, and perhaps even with the involvement of 'anti-rapprochement' Iranians from among the country's hardliners, Rouhani's diplomatic initiative could come to a halt through a cleverly created false flag operation. Should this come about, Washington will be left with little option but to abandon Rouhani, give up on peace with Iran and resume close ties with Israel and the GCC. Renewed confrontation with Iran would also change the internal political dynamics of that country. It would bring back the hardliners. Dovish fantasies of peace would disappear. And while this scenario might not be a prelude to an American/Israeli war on Iran, a resumption of confrontation between the US/Israel/GCC and Iran, would resign the region to a state of perpetual asymmetric violence, Sunni-versus-Shia moral panics and war scares, none of which would be good for long-term regional stability.
