

The Gulf States and Iran

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The release of the new National Intelligence Estimate will provide more fodder for those who claim that "neoconservative ideologues" and the "Israel lobby" are overly alarmed about the rise of Iran. In reality, some of those most worried about the mullahs wear flowing headdresses, not yarmulkes, and they have good cause for concern, notwithstanding the sanguine tilt many news accounts put on the NIE.

I recently visited the Persian Gulf region as part of a delegation of American policy wonks organized by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Throughout our meetings in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, the top issue was Iran's ambitions to dominate the region.

Evidence of those imperial designs is not hard to find. The Iranians are aiding extremists who are undermining nascent democracies in Afghanistan, Iraq and Lebanon. The beneficiaries of Tehran's largess include Hamas, Hezbollah and even, the evidence indicates, al Qaeda. (Saudi officials are quietly furious that Tehran has given refuge to some suspects in the 2003 Riyadh attacks.) Iran is building up its military arsenal, and has threatened to shut down the Persian Gulf (or, as Arabs call it, the Arabian Gulf).

What particularly concerns Gulf Arabs is the possibility that Iran could go nuclear -- a concern unlikely to be erased by the ambiguous findings of the new NIE. While this NIE claims that Iran stopped its nuclear-weapons program in 2003 (in direct contradiction to an NIE finding issued just two years ago that "Iran currently is determined to develop nuclear weapons"), it concedes that "Iran's civilian uranium enrichment program is continuing." Such a "civilian" program could be converted speedily and stealthily to military use. As the new NIE notes, "Iran has the scientific, technical, and industrial capacity to produce nuclear weapons if it decides to do so."

That thought fills Sunni Arabs with dread. "If we accept Iran as a nuclear power that is like accepting Hitler in 1933-34," warned one senior Arab official, using the kind of analogy that back in Washington would get him dismissed as a neocon warmonger.

On our recent trip to the Persian Gulf, we found no unanimity about how to respond to this threat, but many officials and private citizens alike called for a pre-emptive military strike. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia reportedly came away from his March summit in Riyadh with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad convinced that the Iranian president is dangerous and unstable. We also learned that many in the governments of Saudi Arabia and UAE privately favor military action to stop Iran's nuclear program. We were assured by numerous interlocutors in both countries that the consequences of such raids, which would probably include Iranian-backed terrorism, would be "manageable."

The key word here is "privately." Those states are afraid to get into a public spat with the Shiite fundamentalists across the Straits of Hormuz. They are even unwilling to impose unilateral economic sanctions that could head off a military confrontation. That's particularly significant in the case of the UAE, which is the leading offshore commercial center for Iran.

The Iranian Business Council estimates that Iranians hold \$300 billion in assets in the UAE, that 10,000 Iranian companies have offices in the UAE, and that trade between the two countries was over \$11 billion last year. If the UAE were to freeze these operations, it would impose real pain on Tehran. But, unlike the U.S., it refuses to go beyond the weak sanctions approved by the U.N. Security Council, where Russia and China block more significant steps.

As for the possibility of air strikes on Iran, much as the Arabs may applaud such a move by the U.S., they do not contemplate doing so on their own. Yet they easily could. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London, the air forces of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE) match up quite favorably with those of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The GCC states boast 627 combat-capable aircraft vs. only 286 for Iran, and most of the GCC aircraft are much more advanced. The GCC is well-supplied with modern American fighter-bombers -- F-15s, F-16s, F-18s -- and they are buying more top-of-the-line hardware all the time. Iran, by contrast, is still reliant on F-4s and F-5s acquired by the shah three decades ago, supplemented by a few more modern Russian and Chinese fighters.

Even though Iran has also been acquiring surface-to-air missiles from Russia, either the UAE or Saudi Arabia has, at least on paper, an air force capable of dealing the Iranian nuclear program a devastating blow. Of course a Gulf air

armada would take heavier casualties than an American one. Gulf pilots do not have the full panoply of surveillance and electronic warfare systems needed to totally suppress air defenses. Nor do they have the "bunker buster" munitions needed to take out deep-buried facilities.

But the Gulf air forces have had years of training, and their pilots do practice alongside those from the U.S., Britain, France and other nations in the kinds of elaborate air-warfare scenarios pioneered in the "red flag" exercises at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada. Some of the weaknesses of the Gulf air forces, such as lack of bunker busters, could easily be remedied by purchases from the American arsenal.

The U.S. is making those very kinds of transfers to help the Israeli Air Force develop its long-range strike capacity. We take for granted that Israel, a state of 6.4 million people with a GDP of \$140 billion, could successfully attack nuclear sites located 1,200 miles away. Yet we ignore the possibility that the GCC states, with a combined population of 39 million and a GDP of \$522 billion, could do at least as good of a job, operating from bases located in some cases less than 100 miles from Iran. (Iran's population is 65 million; its GDP \$193 billion.)

This is largely because the GCC states, for all their economic might, have gotten used to thinking of themselves as political and military weaklings. As much as they may resent and criticize us, they feel utterly dependent on us for their defense.

The U.S. has a major stake in defending states with so much oil, and they do provide valuable cooperation in basing and logistics. But these states can and should do more. For a start, they should take steps to integrate their armed forces, so that they can turn the GCC into a NATO-like fighting force. And if President Bush or (more likely) his successor decides to pre-empt Iran, it will be important, as in the 1991 Gulf War, to have participation, if only symbolic, from Arab states, so that the conflict cannot be cast as one pitting "Zionists" and "crusaders" against innocent Muslims.

We need to tell the Gulf Arabs that if they expect the U.S. to stand with them in the future, they need to stand with us publicly, not just privately. At the very least they need to stop kicking us in the shins, as King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia did earlier this year by condemning as "illegitimate" the "foreign occupation" of Iraq (even though he doesn't want us to leave).

The Saudi decision to attend the Annapolis meeting is a nice gesture in favor of the Bush administration's newfound priorities, but it does little to address the most pressing issue confronting the Middle East. A Gulf-wide policy of getting tougher with Iran -- diplomatically and economically and, if need be, militarily -- would do a lot more good.

Mr. Boot is a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of "War Made New: Weapons, Warriors, and the Making of the Modern World" (Gotham Books, 2006).

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