

Assuring Uneasy Gulf Allies at Camp David: The Military Dimension

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Brief Analysis

The United States will need to supplement its traditional approach of focusing on arms transfers, military presence, and redlines with a commitment to push back against Iranian regional influence.

The high-level summit next week with leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states -- Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates -- is expected to focus on winning their support for the nuclear deal being negotiated with Iran. Washington is reportedly considering new arms sales and joint exercises among other measures to assure its uneasy allies, while at least some of the GCC states may request a formal, NATO-like collective defense agreement that would commit the United States to defending them if they are attacked.

Yet a review of past efforts to assure these allies shows that the steps reportedly under consideration are likely insufficient to assuage GCC fears regarding Iran's expanding influence and growing assertiveness in the region. This is the central concern of Gulf leaders, who worry that Iran would use funds obtained through sanctions relief, and eventually nuclear weapons, to advance its regional agenda.

CAPACITY BUILDING -- AGAINST WHICH THREAT?

In recent years, the United States has sold tens of billions of dollars in arms to its Gulf Arab allies (including missile defenses, attack helicopters, and strike aircraft), and helped them build up their cyberdefenses following Iranian cyberattacks. The intent has been to assure them by enhancing their ability to deter and counter external aggression, while convincing Tehran that its nuclear program will harm, rather than enhance, its security.

Yet Tehran is unlikely to engage in the kind of conventional aggression that would provide its neighbors (and the

United States) with reason to respond by conventional means. It is much more likely to engage in subversion and proxy warfare, as it has done in the past and continues to do today. For example, the GCC states emphasize Tehran's role in the slaughter of Sunni Arab civilians in Iraq and Syria, and in stoking sectarian violence in the region, which (combined with past U.S. inaction) has enabled groups such as al-Qaeda and the "Islamic State"/ISIS to present themselves as the defenders of the Sunnis. By contrast, President Obama emphasized the following in an April 5 interview with Thomas Friedman: "The biggest threats that [our Sunni Arab allies] face may not be coming from Iran invading. It's going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries." Moreover, in light of the administration's announced "rebalance to Asia" and the president's statement in the Friedman interview that "the U.S.'s core interests in the region are not oil," GCC leaders may view large U.S. arms sales less as a tangible expression of enduring commitment than a sign that America is providing its friends with the means to fend for themselves as it prepares to leave the region.

REINFORCED FORWARD PRESENCE -- TO WHAT END?

While the United States has drawn down its presence in Iraq and Afghanistan in recent years, it has increased other aspects of its presence around the Gulf as part of efforts to assure allies and deter Iran. For instance, it has been building up its missile defenses in the region since 2006, with more than two battalions of Patriot PAC-2/3 missiles deployed in four countries, two to three Aegis ships in the Persian Gulf, and AN/TPY-2 X-band radars in Israel, Turkey, and Qatar. The U.S. Navy also keeps at least one aircraft carrier in the area, and the deployment of F-22 stealth fighters there has become routine. At the same time, American naval forces have worked to enhance their ability to deal with Iran's anti-access/area-denial capabilities.

Yet there is no sign that the large post-1991 U.S. military presence in the Gulf has deterred Iran from using proxies to target U.S. interests in the region or elsewhere. During this period, Tehran caused the death of nineteen U.S. airmen in the 1996 Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia, provided arms to Shiite "special groups" that killed hundreds of U.S. service members in Iraq, and plotted to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington in 2011. Nor has it deterred Iran from intervening in regional conflicts in ways that have exacerbated sectarian tensions, threatened the security of U.S. allies, and increased its influence in the region. In short, while the U.S. presence ensures freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf, it has not deterred Iran from pursuing a strategy of proxy warfare that poses a major challenge to regional stability.

GCC allies are frequently reminded that America continues to maintain some 35,000 service members in the region, but this has led them to question the purpose of such a large forward presence -- especially at a time when Iran and Hezbollah's intervention has contributed to the death of more than 200,000 Syrians, mostly Sunni civilians, amid U.S. inaction. And even when Washington finally did act against ISIS, it did so at least initially on behalf of beleaguered Iraqi minorities (Yazidis in Sinjar, Turkmens at Amerli, and Kurds in Erbil) rather than Sunni Arabs.

REDLINES -- FADING FAST?

Washington has drawn various redlines concerning Iran's nuclear program; in January 2012, for example, President Obama declared that if Tehran tried to build a nuclear weapon, the United States would use every means at its disposal to prevent it from doing so. The warning came, however, after Tehran had crossed at least a half dozen previous U.S. redlines in order to become a nuclear threshold state. It also followed the president's August 2012 redline concerning chemical weapons use in Syria, which he subsequently failed to enforce when the Assad regime crossed it a year later.

Since his January 2012 warning to Iran, the president has tended to couch his threats in passive language that conveys more ambivalence than resolve, to allies and adversaries alike. In a March 2012 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg, he stated, "I also don't, as a matter of sound policy, go around advertising exactly what our intentions are.

But...when the United States says it is unacceptable for Iran to have nuclear weapons, we mean what we say." He struck a similar tone in last month's interview with Friedman, stating that if Iran does not change as a result of U.S. efforts to engage it, "our deterrence capabilities, our military superiority stays in place. We're not relinquishing our capacity to defend ourselves or our allies. In that situation, why wouldn't we test it?"

Thus, the U.S. redline gave Tehran the latitude it needed to become a nuclear threshold state. While this may not be an existential concern to the United States given its vast military advantages, from the point of view of America's regional partners it is a game-changing development that has significantly altered Middle Eastern power dynamics.

SECURITY GUARANTEES

The Obama administration is also looking for ways to formalize the U.S. commitment to its Gulf partners. The president emphasized this point in the Friedman interview: "When it comes to external aggression, I think we're going to be there for our [Arab] friends -- and I want to see how we can formalize that a little bit more than we currently have."

Accordingly, at next week's summit some Gulf states are expected to seek security guarantees along the lines of Article V of the 1949 Washington Treaty, the legal basis for the collective security arrangements that underpin the NATO alliance. Article V states that "an armed attack against one or more [parties to the treaty] in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all," and that "each of them" will take "such actions as it deems necessary...to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area." It should be noted that the article only covers attacks in Europe and North America, and gives each member significant latitude in choosing how to respond.

Congress would probably not approve a treaty that could draw the United States further into the region's numerous conflicts. And an executive agreement would not be particularly reassuring, since the language would almost certainly be sufficiently vague as to have little practical value. The 1994 Budapest Memorandum, which provided vague assurances to Ukraine in return for it giving up nuclear weapons inherited from the former Soviet Union, is a glaring example of the shortcomings of such an agreement given Russia's recent intervention by proxy there.

Moreover, Tehran's reliance on subversion and proxy warfare (and, more recently, offensive cyber operations) would likely complicate efforts to respond to a perceived act of Iranian aggression -- as would the tendency of some U.S. Gulf allies to see Iranian hands behind almost every event in the region.

CONCLUSION

The United States currently has a credibility deficit that threatens its interests and endangers its allies. Thus far, the steps it has taken to assure GCC allies -- arms transfers, forward presence, and redlines -- have often failed to allay their doubts, and frequently compounded their fears.

Only by pushing back against Iran's efforts to expand its regional influence can Washington hope to restore its credibility. To this end, the United States should do the following:

1. Ramp up support for the opposition in Syria.
2. More proactively interdict Iran's arms shipments to allies and proxies in the region.
3. Strengthen support for those partners engaged in conflicts with Tehran's allies and proxies.
4. Supplement routine defensive exercises with exercises rehearsing long-range offensive strike operations in the Gulf.
5. Tend to and sharpen redlines regarding Iran's nuclear program to more clearly spell out the price Tehran would pay if it attempts a breakout.

There is no reason that such a policy cannot go hand-in-hand with engaging Iran, just as the United States pushed

back against Soviet aggression while engaging Moscow during the Cold War. For as much as it may be in the American interest to conclude a long-term nuclear accord with Tehran, it is also a U.S. interest to curb Iranian activities that fuel sectarian violence, contribute to the appeal of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and ultimately threaten the stability and security of U.S. allies in the region. Such a policy would also go a long way toward repairing ties with traditional allies in a part of the world that still matters very much.

Michael Eisenstadt is the Kahn Fellow and director of the Military and Security Studies Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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