

The Elephant in the Gulf: Arab States and Iran's Nuclear Program

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Dec 21, 2005

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Brief Analysis

At the annual summit of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), held in Abu Dhabi on December 18 and 19, the leaders of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman avoided confronting Iran directly on its suspected nuclear weapons program. Instead, these member states confronted Israel. In their final statement, they demanded that Israel join the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and place all of its nuclear facilities under international inspection, and they appealed to the international community to pressure Israel.

Only the repetition from previous declarations "reaffirm[ing] its call for making the Middle East a region free of weapons of mass destruction" could be taken, at a stretch, as an implied criticism of Iran and the increasingly rancorous statements of the new Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmedinejad. But the extent of GCC's concern emerged at a news conference after the end of the summit, addressed by GCC secretary-general Abdulrahman bin Hamad al-Attiyah. Asked why the final communiqué had not mentioned Iran's nuclear program, al-Attiyah simply acknowledged that the leaders had discussed it, giving no indication it was a central component of the summit. It was left to his colleague, UAE foreign minister Rashid Abdullah al-Nuaimi, to confirm media speculation that Arab League secretary-general Amr Moussa had written to GCC leaders, expressing his concern, "as an Egyptian citizen," about the Israeli rather than the Iranian nuclear program.

Such meddling clearly infuriated the Gulf officials, some of whose colleagues in the past have privately voiced their resentment about the Arab League's financial dependence on the oil-rich Gulf Arab states. The UAE minister pointedly noted that if the Arab League head was "talking about threats to Arab national security, [he] should have raised concerns about the Iranian program." He noted that the GCC countries are close to the Iranian nuclear power reactor being completed at Bushehr on the Gulf coast, saying, "we do not have any protection in case of a radioactive leakage. . . . It is a legitimate concern." Dismissing Moussa's intervention, he continued: "When the secretary-general of the Arab League talks about threats posed to the region, he should take into account that the Arab security order also covers the six Gulf Arab countries."

The intervention by the Arab League head could reflect institutional rivalry between his organization and the GCC as

well as the concern that Egypt, which considers itself the leader of the Arab world, has no voice in it. Despite its peace treaty with Israel, Cairo appears obsessed by its perceived military inferiority. Moussa's letter was perhaps prompted by remarks emerging from the GCC last month that described Iranian nuclear ambitions for the first time as "a threat" that could "endanger global security."

Acting as a Bloc against Iran

Iran has always been a concern for the GCC. The full name of the GCC is the Co-operation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf, a formulation which deliberately excludes the non-Arab Gulf state of Iran. The organization was founded in 1981, shortly after the Iran-Iraq war started and when fears of the spread of Iran's (Shiite) Islamic revolution pervaded the Sunni-dominated Gulf. GCC member states refer to the Arabian Gulf, the waterway known to Iran and much of the rest of the world, including the United States, as the Persian Gulf. A perennial issue for the GCC has been Iran's 1970 occupation of three small islands claimed by the UAE -- Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa. Previous final communiqués have unconditionally rejected Iranian claims to the islands, a sign of fellow GCC members' support for the UAE's position. But the issue irritates Iran and may be achieving the status of a lost cause, as it was not mentioned in this year's final statement. Instead the UAE foreign minister told journalists, "The UAE's islands are occupied territories in reality," and called for a peaceful solution through bilateral or multilateral negotiations or arbitration. This sounds like a concession by the UAE, which has sought to avoid direct negotiations Iran's only offered option, fearing a disadvantageous settlement.

In the last few years, the GCC has been a troubled group, with its smaller members trying to escape the dominance of the perceived regional hegemon, Saudi Arabia. US diplomacy has played its part in this process, breaking the longstanding habit of dealing with the conservative Arab Gulf states via Riyadh. This has enabled Washington to develop bilateral military relationships with "facilities" ("bases" being a politically sensitive word) for the rapid projection of U.S. air and naval power and the repositioning of military equipment. The policy was crucial to the speedy success of the 2001 attack on Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But when Washington tried to follow through by negotiating bilateral trade relationships, Riyadh was furious. The 2004 summit in Bahrain was marred by then-Crown Prince Abdullah's refusal to attend over this issue.

A Renewed Saudi Bid for Leadership

This year's summit was fully backed by Saudi Arabia and was known as the "Fahd Summit" after the Saudi monarch who died in August. Now the king, and the primary beneficiary of high oil prices, Abdullah has been burnishing his diplomatic credentials, hosting an Islamic summit in Mecca in early December. But the issue of Iran intervened once again when Ahmedinejad, at a final news conference, called the Holocaust a "myth" and suggested that Israel be moved to Europe. Riyadh's embarrassment -- the summit had been intended to condemn extremist thought -- had been complicated by a measure of apparent sympathy across the Arab world for the Iranian leader's views.

Analysis of the GCC final statement shows, apart from not wanting to offend Iran, an adherence to the usual pan-Arab issues. It condemned Israeli actions, even though three members (Qatar, the UAE, and Oman) have limited relations with Jerusalem. It also called on Israel to give up the Shebaa Farms, a pocket of Syrian territory that Damascus now says is part of Lebanon. The GCC leaders also denounced the February 2005 killing of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri, reportedly by Syrian agents. They adopted this position despite the Arab League head's accusation that GCC leaders were exerting undue pressure on Syria.

Mixed Message for U.S. Diplomacy

Washington will be pleased by the public comments of Gulf officials regarding a possible nuclear accident in Iran. Such a scenario, quite likely given Iran's location in an earthquake zone, has been a repeated theme of American diplomacy for years. However, the reluctance to confront Iran is a concern. Gulf officials' stated preference for quiet

diplomacy, as mentioned by the new Saudi ambassador to Washington, Prince Turki al-Faisal, often translates into silent diplomacy -- or even no diplomacy at all. The issue of Iran's suspected nuclear weapons program will not go away. The unwillingness of Iran's neighbors to confront the issue, and the lack of progress in European negotiating efforts, adds to Washington's diplomatic burden.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of the Washington Institute and author of its 2003 policy paper, "The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy."

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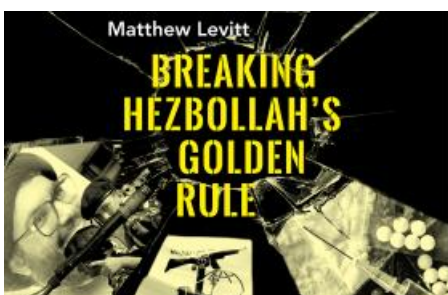
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