

Iran-GCC Relations under President Ahmadinejad: 2005-2009

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Abstract

The election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad in Iran in June 2005 came to have an enormous impact on Iran's foreign relations, including Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. The present article looks into the state and dynamism of bilateral relations between Iran and the GCC during the 2005-09 period. Placed in the context of the background of relations between the two sides since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and specifically the 8 years of confidence-building and détente under Khatami, the article discusses the factors that affected these bilateral relations during the period under review. It is argued that such factors as Ahmadinejad's peculiar foreign policy outlook and discourse, relations with the U.S., diverging postures towards Israel, threat perceptions, Iran's rising regional stature and influence in the post-2001 period, and also dispute on the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf and the name of the waterway, have each affected the state of relations. The review also shows the resilience of economic and trade ties between the two sides beyond the mere political realm and the outstanding issues and disagreements. Considering the inevitable negative impact of the continuing tension and conflict between Iran and the U.S. on the state of relations between Iran and the GCC, the paper emphasizes the imperative of confidence-building measures and policies by all the parties concerned – within the region and beyond. It concludes that any meaningful improvement – and ultimate rapprochement – in the U.S.-Iran relations, even though far-fetched or illusive at the time, would help these relations and the mutually-beneficial establishment of regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf.

Keywords: Ahmadinejad's Foreign Policy, GCC, Persian Gulf Islands, Détente, U.S. Foreign Policy, Israel, Nuclear Program

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Introduction

The election of Mahmood Ahmadinejad in Iran in June 2005 came to have an enormous impact on Iran's foreign relations, including Iran's relations with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. After experiencing an 8-year long period of relatively tension-free relations – which I tend to call a period of honeymoon - under former President Mohammad Khatami, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, based on their perceptions of Ahmadinejad's constituency as well as his campaign rhetoric, were reported to be apprehensive of substantial change in Iran's foreign policy. This was particularly the case in light of the then heightened tension between Iran and the Western countries over Iran's nuclear program and its repercussions for the Persian Gulf security and stability, as reflected in the expressions of growing concern on their part, including in the GCC official communiqués. They feared – and presumably continue to do so – that a military attack on Bushehr nuclear facilities by Israel or the United States – or jointly - because of Ahmadinejad's harsh anti-Israeli rhetoric and Israel's much-propagandized perception of “existential threat” from a nuclear-armed Iran, would have serious adverse impact on them, or might even engulf them in the ensuing conflict. Moreover, while Ahmadinejad's call for “wiping Israel off the map” had been welcomed on the Arab street, whether in the Persian Gulf or in the rest of the Arab world it did not sit well at all with the conservative Arab polities. However, as it turned out, Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian president to attend a GCC summit during the past three decades. His subsequent visit to the United Arab Emirates



was also the first such move by an Iranian head of state.

The present article examines the developments in the relations between the two sides of the Persian Gulf, taking into account the general features of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy. The main question is what factors have affected the actual developments in the state of bilateral relations during the 2005-2009 period, which despite purported serious concerns, appeared to have continued more or less at a reasonable level. The article looks into the wide range of factors that have affected the state of relations during the period under review and discusses, in some detail, the impact of such factors as the background to the relations, including the 8-year Khatami period, continuing disputes with the U.A.E. over the three islands, diverging postures towards Israel, the unfolding crisis on Iran's nuclear program, GCC threat perceptions with regard to Iran, and the relations with the U.S. The author believes that the existence of significant mutual interests between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, in particular economic and trade ties, have accounted for maintaining the bilateral relations, even under a generally colder atmosphere and serious differences on various issues.

General Features of Ahmadinejad's Foreign Policy Orientation

Mahmood Ahmadinejad was the only candidate during the presidential campaign in the spring of 2005 who preferred to focus on domestic, particularly economic, issues in his platform. His obvious neglect of addressing foreign policy issues was quite glaring in the course of the election campaign. That situation changed substantially soon after he won the race and took office; he proved extremely vocal in pronouncing his views and positions on a wide range of foreign policy and international issues – which, as is widely known, came to be quite controversial in a number of areas. As an important part of the change in the country's foreign policy orientation, he tried to shift the earlier, traditional higher focus on relations with the European countries to much expanded cooperation with China and Russia in



what came to be called “Look to the East Policy.” Emphasis on closer ties with the Muslim World, African countries, and also a number of radical and leftist Latin American countries also came to be part of the new foreign policy orientation. However, as it tuned out, and quite early in his term, the most formidable challenge to the new orientation and outlook manifested itself in the area of the then unfolding dispute on Iran’s nuclear program – which, needless to say, did not reach any conclusion during the period under review. And the fact that the controversy has continued up to this very date is certainly beyond the purview of the present article.

In analyzing the new foreign policy orientation after 2005, it was hardly a secret that Mahmood Ahmadinejad was, for all practical purposes, a total newcomer to foreign policy matters. Moreover, he did not appear to have a known foreign policy team of his own, which, given his background and political constituency, caused some apprehension that he might appoint [many] former military [Pasdaran] personnel to diplomatic posts – whether at the Foreign Ministry or at missions abroad. It was feared that such a move would create further difficulties for the country’s already problematic foreign relations. Despite some high-profile pronouncements on “exporting the revolution,” – reminiscent of the earlier days of the Islamic Revolution – and ostensibly in ways deemed incompatible with the existing realities in the international system, the actual changes in the composition of the diplomatic cadres, at home and abroad, remained limited. Whatever the particular circumstances and considerations at work, it can be said that once again bureaucratic logic prevailed. But, as predicted by observers at the time - including the present author - the new aggressive discourse in foreign policy was bound to lead to heightened tension with the Western bloc [EU3 and the U.S.] with the distinct possibility of referral of Iran's nuclear case to the United Nations’ Security Council (Hafezian, 2005). Heightened tension with the U.S. in particular, especially in Iraq where both sides were deeply engaged in an open rivalry over expanding their respective areas of



influence, also came in to play the critical role in pushing the referral of the nuclear case. It is now history that those fears and predictions of observers and analysts materialized soon and the referral did in fact take place in early 2006.

As it often happens with the change of administrations, a dominant theme of the discussion in policy-making and academic circles at the time revolved around the new government's inevitable predicament to strike a balance between continuity and change in Iran's foreign policy. An unmistakable shift had occurred from Khatami's pronounced emphasis on dialogue and removal of tension with the outside world to Ahmadinejad's more assertive and at times clearly aggressive outlook. As observed by an Iranian analyst back in August 2005 shortly before Ahmadinejad's first trip to New York to attend the annual meeting of the UN General Assembly, the Iranian President could not add to Iran's friends and sway the undecided in Iran's favor. Instead, it was analyzed, that he antagonized potential friends by his fiery speeches - rekindling the memory of revolutionary Iran a quarter of a century earlier (Afrasiabi, 2005: 3). Moreover, his peculiar "assertive" tone and discourse in foreign policy appeared to have contributed to his perception within certain quarters in the international community as a new "revolutionary leader" who viewed challenging the West as a personal asset - a perception, which one has to admit in all fairness, was never rejected by Ahmadinejad nor he ever appeared to even attempt that.

Iran-GCC Relations under Khatami

The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, with its pronounced anti-Western ideology and the initial revolutionary zeal and political motto to "export revolution," placed the country on a collision course with much of the region, particularly in the Persian Gulf area. The establishment in 1981 of the Co-operation Council for the Arab States of the [Persian] Gulf, shortly after the Iraqi invasion of Iran in September 1980, did in fact represent the collective response of the



six members of the Council - Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain – to what they perceived as the revolutionary threat from Tehran. Whether real or imagined, fears of the spread of Iran's Shia Islamic Revolution pervaded the Sunni-dominated, conservative Persian Gulf sheikhdoms in the early 1980s (Henderson, 2005: 2). While both Iran and Iraq were excluded from the regional arrangement, the Ba'athist regime of Iraq, notwithstanding earlier difficulties with its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf, was strongly supported by the GCC members its war against Iran - Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular.

The end of the war in 1988 changed the situation, especially between Iran and Saudi Arabia, as the biggest Arab state in the Persian Gulf. This was a direct result of the new "pragmatic turn" in Iran's foreign policy under President Hashemi Rafsanjani who, in 1991, openly advocated the notion of collective security in the Persian Gulf. Iran's opposition to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait (August 1990) and strict maintenance of neutrality in the armed conflict that ensued between Iraq and the Allied forces led by the U.S., laid the cornerstone for eventual rapprochement with the Saudis. But, as it turned out, it took several more years of reciprocal confidence-building before the two countries could actually normalize their relations. Iran and Saudi Arabia - as alluded to by an Iranian ambassador to Riyadh in mid-1990s - were considered the two "pillars" of stability in the oil-rich region – a sentiment that seemed to be shared in general terms within the Iranian foreign policy-making apparatus.

The presidential elections in May 1997 and Khatami's landslide victory on a reform platform helped to further distance Iran's foreign policy from previous and or earlier "provocative" slogans and measures. The main foreign policy strategy in the post-1997 period, a hallmark of Khatami's personal pro-dialogue tendency as well reflecting the changing times and circumstances, came to be known as removal of tension and promotion of confidence-building and



“détente” in the relations with other countries (Azghandi, 1999: 1043). The perceptible change, it should be underlined, was an indication of Khatami’s understanding and appreciation of two inter-related basic problems in Iran’s foreign relations. First, he believed that Iran’s interactions with the outside world were overburdened by tension and, also importantly, that continuation of that unhealthy situation was harmful and damaging for Iran. Second, he also appeared to be of the view that responsibility for part of that situation was borne by Iran’s diplomacy. His clear conclusion – and policy orientation – was that the situation needed to be rectified. As part and parcel of the new outlook and policy, Iran sought to remove past misunderstandings and undertook efforts to avoid getting into dispute and conflict with the outside world, which was analyzed, among others, as recognition of the prevailing realities at the international level in order to preserve the country’s security (Assadi, 2001: 115).

The new policy under Khatami led to substantial and rapid improvement in the relations with the Persian Gulf countries – which, when compared with the earlier periods of mutual suspicion and even open animosity as during the Iran-Iraq War – could be termed a period of “honeymoon.” The trend of these fast improving relations reached its peak with Khatami’s visit to Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain in late May 1999. His visit to Saudi Arabia, the first by an Iranian head of state since 1979, was warmly received by the Saudi leaders (Akhavan Kazemi, 2000: 134). It in fact paved the way for agreements between the two countries on a wide range of areas and issues, including in the field of “low” security cooperation in 2000. The two countries, previously mired in deep mutual suspicion and tension, seemed to have found much in common, including in their traditionally highly competitive roles in the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), not-so-friendly liaison within the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), and also their new-found sense of common threat from extremist terrorist groups (Afrasiabi, 2005: 3).



As described by Seyyed Mohammad Sadr, former Deputy Foreign Minister for Africa and the Arab World and also later presidential advisor, Khatami and his government were determined to bolster relations with the Arab states and “push to the backburner” the unsavory political memories of the past. In his words, “Some Arab countries have responded positively to such an approach, while others have either shown no reaction or initially welcomed the proposal but changed heart later – as was the case with the King Hussein of Jordan.” (Tehran Times, 2005). Despite discernible improvements in the state of relations and obvious reduction in the level of open tension between Iran and the GCC – both as a collective body and its individual members – it is of note that certain difficulties continued to remain and haunt the relations. A number of areas of particular difficulty merit mentioning; two areas of a general nature and three others of a specific nature. The general difficulties relate to the U.S. and Israel. The decades-old close relations between the GCC members and the U.S., including in the military-security field, and the American presence and direct influence in the area of critical importance to Iran and its national security environment, have had a strong bearing on the bilateral relations. The GCC-U.S. close liaison on the one hand, and the on-going dispute between Iran and the U.S. since 1979 on the other, have continued to cast their cumulative long shadow over the relations between Iran and these countries. Similarly, the quite different approach and policy towards Israel respectively by Iran and the GCC and its member states have also served as create difficulties in the relations. As for the specific issues of disagreement and dispute, three prominent issues come to the fore; one, dispute over the three Iranian Islands of Abu Musa and the Tunbs in the vicinity of the Strait of Hormuz between Iran and the U.A.E., two, use of a fictitious name for the historical name of the Persian Gulf, and three, Iran’s nuclear program.

Taking the above outstanding issues between Iran and the GCC, and considering the nature and dynamism of each of them, it could be



said that the obvious thaw in the state of relations under Khatami, and even the general improvement that ensued, could have hardly led to their effective and final resolution. The UAE's claim on the Iranian islands, which has been systematically pursued by Abu Dhabi since early 1990s at all GCC meetings at various levels and received the Council's total support, even that of the Arab League, has left little room for any meaningful discussion between Iran and UAE on their differences with regard to the implementation of the provisions of the 1971 Memorandum of Understanding between Iran and Sharjah on the Abu Musa Island. So has been the case also with regard to the use of a fictitious name ["Arabian Gulf"] for the Persian Gulf, which has been found extremely irritating and unacceptable by Iran since the practice began back in the late 1950s. (Nazarahari, 2010). The state of relations with the U.S., so critical to the GCC and its members and so conflictual and illusive to Iran, diverging positions and policies towards Israel, and looking at Iran's nuclear program as a source of threat, could not but have constrained the state of bilateral relations between Iran and the GCC.

Arab Reactions to Ahmadinejad's Victory

Mahmood Ahmadinejad's landslide victory in second-round run-off elections in June 2005 against a well-known heavyweight rival as former President Hashemi-Rafsanjani – with an established reputation for moderation and pragmatism – and coming after the 8-year period of reform under Khatami, came almost as a total surprise. As indicated earlier, given his background, constituency, and strong, populist discourse, many quarters, within the region and beyond, tended to analyze the development as destabilizing in an inherently turbulent region and a sharp reversal for Iran's pro-dialogue, pro-détente foreign policy under Khatami. Notwithstanding the fact that such concerns were shared, albeit to different degrees, among Iran's immediate neighbors, several Arab countries welcomed his election as the new Iranian president. The Arab countries of the Persian Gulf



sent warm messages to the new president – which was quite understandable within the established routine diplomatic practice. Ahmadinejad, on his part, also reciprocated such diplomatic gestures with pronouncements emphasizing his wishes for improvement of relations, as a matter of priority, with the Arab and Muslim world (Agence France-Presse, 2005). The ailing Saudi King Fahd was among the first to congratulate Ahmadinejad. Similar sentiments were expressed by Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. The GCC expressed the hope that the new president would work towards "turning a new page" in Iran's relations with its neighbors (Agence France-Presse, 2005). Such official expressions of "hope and optimism" were, however, dampened with less-optimistic cautionary notes by analysts warning that Ahmadinejad's election would worsen the Islamic Republic's ties with the oil-rich states of the Persian Gulf. The well-known Kuwaiti academic-columnist Ahmed al-Rubei – a former minister of education - commented that the "victory of the new president will lead to Iran's isolation in the region." Iranians countered that the "détente" policy with the Arab and Muslim World would continue under the new government. In the course of his first press conference after the elections President Ahmadinejad emphasized that "Great progress has already been made, and more progress will be made." He went on to add that: "We will witness development of relations with the Muslim World and countries of the region. It will be a priority in our foreign policy. The Persian Gulf is a gulf of peace and justice. We seek understanding and friendly relations with the countries of the Persian Gulf to defend our [common] its interests." (Agence France-Presse, 2005).

As time passed by, stronger reactions to Ahmadinejad's posture and pronouncements emerged in the region. In his first public statement about Iran's new government in January 2006, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al-Faisal described some of Ahmadinejad's statements as "extremist" and expressed his wish for Iran to remain faithful to its [NPT] obligations and steer away from military nuclear



activities. He further promised that his country would never enter a nuclear arms' race, even if Iran were to obtain nuclear weapons (Beeston, 2006). The announced postponement of Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki's planned visit to Saudi Arabia at the time served to reinforce the suspicion that the openly critical pronouncements by key Saudi officials were not aberrations but rather ominous signs of a growing rift in the bilateral relations - which could be ascribed, one way or another, to the entire GCC. The appearance in January 2006 of a quite harsh story in Khaleej Times Online, a Dubai-based newspaper, criticizing Ahmadinejad's statements and actions and also calling on Iran not to endanger its own national interests, reflected the changing mood in the area – especially so given the fact that Dubai has always had the best of relations with Iran, among the seven Emirates in the UAE and by far in the entire Persian Gulf (Khaleej Times Online, 2006).

In December 2007 President Ahmadinejad attended the annual summit of the GCC in Doha, Qatar - the first ever such move by an Iranian president since the Council had been created in 1981. While addressing the meeting as an observe-guest, he stated that “We call for peace and security without any foreign influence” and went on to propose the “establishment of economic and security pacts and institutions among the seven states” here to “serve the people of our region” and assure “peace and prosperity for all” (Alsharq Alawsat, 2007) Aside from a brief statement by the Qatari presidency to welcome their Iranian guest and a few brief words promising subsequent examination of his proposals (Bahaa, 2007), no mention was made in the Summit's final communiqué of Ahmadinejad's participation at the summit or the proposals he made. Back in In Iran, Ahmadinejad was challenged, in political and academic circles, on the political wisdom of attending a practically self-invited meeting and the unacceptability of sitting under the GCC flag bearing an objectionable name for the proper, historical name of the Persian Gulf. Worse still, the GCC final communiqué once again reiterated the UAE claim of



sovereignty over the three islands – despite the presence of the Iranian president - which further complicated the internal bickering on the wisdom of the initiative without influencing, in any way, the deliberations or the outcome of the Summit.

Continued Dispute over the Three Islands

Since 1992, the dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates over the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf has clouded Iran's relations with the GCC and its member countries – even though to differing degrees. Discernible improvement in the relations during the Khatami years merely managed to keep the outstanding difficulty under control and prevented it from overshadowing the unfolding ties and interactions in other fields and areas. What actually happened after Ahmadinejad took office was that the issue was highlighted at the GCC annual summit – much more than the immediate previous years. The GCC Secretary-General Abd al-Rahman al-Attiyah stated in Abu Dhabi on 18 December 2005 that Iran continues to occupy the islands in spite of many U.A.E. calls for "direct, peaceful negotiations" or the matter's referral to the International Court of Justice (RFE/RL Iran Report, 2005). A day later, Iran's Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hamid Reza Asefi rejected the GCC position on the islands as "baseless and unacceptable". In line with the Iranian approach to the dispute, Asefi further underlined that Iran and the U.A.E. should pursue bilateral talks towards resolving misunderstandings vis-à-vis Abu Musa (Iran Daily, 2005). As aptly observed at the time by an editor of Jane's Country Risk: "The Iranians are very, very sensitive about anything that comes close to the island." (BBC News Online, 2005).

Despite the continuing dispute over the islands and its negative impact on political relations between Tehran and Abu Dhabi (Fattah, 2005), economic and trade ties between Iran and Dubai has continued as in the past, and even expanded in certain respects. The special relationship with Dubai dates back to the 1980s, during the Iran-Iraq



War, when Dubai became a crucial transshipment point for goods and supplies, It was estimated that in 2007 about one-fifth of Iran's imports came from the UAE, mainly through Dubai. The fact that about half a million Iranians live in the Emirates, with assets estimated at US\$300 billion, speaks for itself. Moreover, Some 9,500 companies in the Emirates have an Iranian partner owning up to a 49 percent stake (International Herald Tribune, 2008). About 300 weekly flights between the two countries, mostly to and from Dubai, point to the vibrancy of the economic and trade ties. In the wake of the adoption of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution 1696 on Iran's nuclear program in July 2006 which led to the plummeting of Tehran Stock Exchange, many Iranian investors moved their assets into Dubai's stock market. The phenomenon reflected the resilience of economic ties over and above political and diplomatic difficulties. Continuation of financial relations between UAE banks and Iranian banks even after the adoption of two more UNSC sanctions resolutions on Iran and despite overt U.S. pressures, is also reflective of the same fact.

Divergence in Positions towards Israel

In October 2005, President Ahmadinejad called for Israel to be "wiped off the map." While on a trip to Mecca some time later, he called the Holocaust a "myth" used to create a Jewish state in the Middle East. His "provocative" pronouncements on Israel received two contradictory responses in the Arab world. While almost all Arab leaders remained silent and chose to ignore his statements, many on the Arab streets welcomed them. The stark difference in response reflected, on the one hand, the actual constraints of the conservative Arab governments vis-a'-vis both Israel and the U.S., and on the other, the prevalent sense of frustration among Arab masses.

Ahmadinejad's incendiary remarks at the OIC summit, held in Saudi Arabia, which was intended to present Crown Prince Abdullah as the new king of Saudi Arabia and as a moderate, and reform-



mindful ruler on the international stage, proved disappointing to Abdullah (Molavi, 2006). While Saudi officials in Riyadh, like other Arab leaders, remained silent on Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli statements, the major exception came from Saudi Arabia's then ambassador to the United States. Referring to the Holocaust as a "horrific genocide," Prince Turki al-Faisal stated in an interview that "As far as Saudi Arabia is concerned, [the Holocaust] is a historical fact, you cannot deny that, and people should move forward from that." Further adding that the Arab world had "made our peace" with the Jewish state, Turki noted that in 2002 the Arab League had adopted a Saudi Plan that would result in the creation of Palestine and recognition of Israel. In his words, "It is a done deal for us. We are not going to go back on that" (Regular, 2005).

As for the difference between the positions of Arab leaders and the Arab masses, a poll conducted in December 2005 proved quite telling. It showed that Middle East Arabs feared Israel more than they feared a nuclear-armed Iran. 43% of those polled in five Arab countries said they believed Iran was trying to develop nuclear weapons. Yet when asked to choose which two countries posed the biggest threat to them, only 6% selected Iran. Israel was considered as the most threatening, according to 70% of respondents, and the United States came in second with 60 percent 60% of those polled said they believed Iran had a right to develop nuclear weapons. Asked which world leader they disliked the most, 45% said then Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, while then U.S. President George W. Bush came in second at 30%. The favorite foreign leader was then French President Jacques Chirac. The poll also demonstrated that Arabs did not trust American intentions in the Middle East. Oil and the protection of Israel were listed by those surveyed as the top American objectives in the Middle East. Human rights and spreading democracy came in last (Halpern, 2005).

Two more events helped deepen the gap between Iran and the GCC states over the question of Palestine-Israel conflict. First was



the 33-day war in Lebanon in summer 2006, and the second the 22-day Gaza hostilities in December 2008-January 2009 between Israel and Hamas. Given Iran's open, solid support for both Hezbollah and Hamas in their anti-Israeli campaign, in both cases, conservative, Sunni Arab leaders saw the wars as part of Iran's efforts to extend its influence in the region through proxy wars, especially after the fall of Saddam Hussein and the emergence of a pro-Iran new government in Iraq. As reported in the Arab media at the time, they were also concerned that Iran's support for these two radical Arab movements would as well place conservative Arab governments in an embarrassing position, including vis-à-vis their own populace. While Jordan's King Abdullah expressed concern about the emerging "Shia Crescent", the blunt statement in December 2008 by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak reflected the depth of such a concern. He accused the Islamic Republic of trying to subsume its Muslim neighbors, and stated in so many words that "the Persians are trying to devour the Arab states" (Jerusalem Post, 2008). Indications are that the GCC states, given the immediate proximity to Iran, tend to share similar concerns.

Perceptions of Iran's Threat

As indicated earlier in the article, the Islamic Revolution in Iran created reverberations in the surrounding region, especially in the Persian Gulf area, and gave rise to serious apprehensions on the part of conservative, pro-status quo Arab governments. One specific area of concern in the early years of the Revolution related to their fears about Iran's intentions, particularly with regard to "exporting revolution" and instigation of Shia minorities in their countries. Change in times and circumstances, and adoption of a decidedly different approach and policy by Iran as of late 1980s – under both Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami – helped ameliorate those fears for large measure. The fall of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq in early 2003 and the emergence of the new ruling Shia-Kurdish coalition with



close ties to Tehran served to revive some of the old fears in the region, including in the Persian Gulf area. Publication of an article in December 2005 in the Washington Times alleging that “Bahrain could be the next stop for Iran” looking to extend its influence reflected such a concern (Dalogl, 2005). Emphasis in the same article on the U.S. determination to fight the Iranian encroachment - not only through prevention of Iran’s extension of regional influence, but through changing the existing political system – pointed to the prevalent views and outlooks in the area with regard to Iran on the one hand and the U.S. on the other.

Another area of apprehension towards Iran in recent years has concerned Iran’s developing nuclear program, even if the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, like most Arab governments, had remained all but silent on the issue previously. Even though the Iranian nuclear program came to the international fore in 2003 and had already developed into a crisis by 2004 – the last two years of Khatami’s government - Arab states tended to keep silent toward the issue (Anousheh, 2005). Such a politically-motivated silence, however, went against the U.S. preference to see development of an active Arab-Muslim reaction to Iran’s nuclear dossier. It raised concerns among American authorities. As observed by an American analyst in December 2005, Washington was not happy to witness reluctance to confront Iran on the part of the Arab rulers in the Persian Gulf (Henderson, 2005: 2). As underlined in the same analysis, “Gulf officials” had expressed preference for quiet diplomacy – which in the American analyst’s view “often translated into silent diplomacy - or even no diplomacy at all.”

Open expressions of concern about Iran’s nuclear program from Arab quarters, including in particular in the Persian Gulf, soon after Ahmadinejad took office in summer 2005 reflected changing times and moods. Despite the well-known fact that the Iranian policy in the nuclear program is not decided by the president only and the entire leadership apparatus in the country is in charge of the dossier,



however, it appeared that the mere presence of a moderate-minded, pro-dialogue Khatami at the helm had proved reassuring enough – to the Arab world, among others - that the unfolding nuclear crisis would be managed with discretion and resolved peacefully. That sense of reassurance seemed to disappear once Ahmadinejad came into office with a high-profile hard-line posture and pronouncements – which soon led to the total reversal of the nuclear policy under Khatami, especially with regard to resumption of enrichment and cooperation with the IAEA. The new situation raised fears that the United States or Israel – or jointly - might resort to military action against Iran's nuclear facilities and ignite a new war in the region with unpredictable, catastrophic consequences for the entire region. Possible military attack on Bushehr Reactor was, needless to say, of more immediate concern to the Arab states in the Persian Gulf, who were equally concerned that an active posture and policy on the issue would also risk antagonizing Iran – which they could hardly afford.

Reacting to the unfolding situation, the leaders of six Persian Gulf states met in December 2005 to discuss two specific issues before them; Iran's nuclear program and the UN-Syria standoff. They were apparently concerned that an escalation in either or both situations could further add to the region's instability already mired in the crisis in Iraq. On the eve of the meeting in Abu Dhabi, an Arab Gulf official commented: "There is concern that Iran's nuclear program could be weaponized. At the end of the day, they [Iranians] are building a nuclear reactor across the Gulf. There is also concern that if there is any military action (against Iran), Iran might retaliate and attack pro-U.S. allies in the Gulf." (Regular, 2005). As reported, the summit participants thoroughly discussed Iran's nuclear program, especially the proximity of the Bushehr nuclear power plant. The U.A.E. Foreign Minister Rashid Abdullah al-Nuaimi said that the GCC states were "extremely worried and concerned" about the plant and the consequences of any mishap there. Oman's Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi – a traditional close friend of Iran with a long record



of mediating activities between Iran and its neighbors in the Persian Gulf - also said that the GCC was not pressuring Iran over its program and sought "good relations" with Iran, but he urged talks to resolve outstanding questions on this program, with due regard for "the environmental impact" of the Bushehr plant (RFE/RL Iran Report, 2005). It is also of note that as discussed in the Arab media at the time, from their perspective, the nuclear technology that Iran had acquired was not state-of-the-art, and hence, susceptible to a possible Chernobyl-type catastrophe with all its potential consequences, on which they needed to talk to Iran (EL-Hokayem, 2005). The GCC Secretary-General al-Attayah observed then that the GCC states did not fear Iran's program if it were peaceful, though if it were not, "the issue will not be neglected." In his words, "We do not want to see" the Bushehr reactor "which is closer to our coast than Tehran" posing "perils and damages to us." (RFE/RL, Iran Report, 2005). As observed by American analysts, such public remarks by the GCC officials on the consequences of a possible nuclear mishap in Iran were greatly pleasing to Washington.

Notwithstanding a wide range of public statements by GCC officials expressing concern on various issues related to Iran's nuclear program, the Summit's final communiqué stopped short of mentioning the program – which was welcomed – and praised – by Iran, also because the communiqué called on Israel to open its nuclear program to IAEA inspections and supported the idea of a nuclear-free Middle East. The Summit's avoidance of pronouncing itself on the Iranian program was criticized in some Arab quarters, including by Abdullah Bishara, the former GCC Secretary-General. It was believed that such a silence on the prospects of a nuclear Iran was troubling and did not help the future stability of the region.

Arab states in general, and the GCC members in particular, prefer a non-nuclear Iran, but on this they have been caught in a very difficult position between the requirements of close liaison with the West and the U.S. on the one hand, and the practical strategic



implications of living next to their gigantic neighbor across the Persian Gulf waters. Qatar's negative vote to the UN Security Council resolution 1696 on Iran's nuclear program in July 2006 – the sole negative vote- despite obvious U.S.-Western pressure, reflects the inherently difficult position of being seen as openly siding with the U.S. against Iran. Looked from the other side, indications are that the Arab states who have taken a less aggressive or a more accommodating approach to the nuclear issue (negative vote to the UNSC resolution by Qatar in 2006 and by Lebanon in 2010) have expected Iran to reward the gesture or at least remember their cooperation (RFE/RL Iran Report, 2005). Responding to the further escalation of tension between Iran and the Western bloc on the nuclear issue, the GCC member states appear to have felt the need to involve themselves, one way or another, in the matter – as manifested in the meeting with the permanent members of the UN Security Council in December 2008. According to the British Foreign Secretary David Miliband, the point of the meeting was for the six powers [5+1] to discuss the concerns of Arab states about Tehran's atomic ambitions (Reuter, 2008). The meeting was severely criticized by Iran. In a strongly-worded statement, Speaker of the Iranian Majles [Parliament], Ali Larijani, warned the Arab states “not to interfere in Iran's nuclear case, thus harming their own image and prestige.” (Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 2008). While it is true that Tehran does not look at the Arab states in the southern shore of the Persian Gulf as a major threat to its security (El-Hokayem, 2005), however, the tenor of such a harsh official reaction to the idea of possible involvement of the GCC states in the nuclear case clearly showed the extreme sensitivity felt by Tehran in this regard.

Iran, GCC, and the U.S.

As briefly discussed earlier in the article, diverging approach and policy respectively by Iran and the GCC – and its individual member states - towards the United States has acted as an important element



in the state and dynamism of bilateral relations in the Persian Gulf area. The traditionally close political, economic and even military-security relations between the GCC countries and the U.S., proved quite problematic for the post-1979 revolutionary Iran, especially with its overtly anti-American, anti-establishment outlook and posture. The Islamic Republic viewed the very establishment of the GCC in 1981 as part of a bigger U.S.-instigated scheme directed against Iran and the Islamic Revolution, especially given the support extended to the Ba'athist Iraq in its war of aggression against Iran. The Cooperation Council's growing ties with the U.S. – and in fact, reliance on the U.S. support, even physical presence, as a political-military counter-balance to the revolutionary Iran, particularly during the War years in the 1980s – served to deeply cloud the relations in the Persian Gulf. Distrust and mutual suspicion between Iran on the northern shore and the six Arab states on the southern shore was the order of the day for over a decade.

The end of the Iran-Iraq War in summer 1988 and the adoption and forceful implementation of a decidedly pragmatist foreign policy under Hashemi Rafsanjani as of 1989 opened a new page in the relations in the Persian Gulf. Iran's denunciation of Saddam's occupation of "sisterly Arab" Kuwait in August 1990 and maintenance of strict neutrality in the armed conflict that ensued substantially changed the chemistry in the area. Gradual reduction of tension in the state of bilateral relations, and discernible improvement later in the decade, especially under Khatami, helped to increase the level of mutual trust and confidence between the two sides. It should be added, however, that, as discussed in previous sections of the article, a number of areas of difficulty have continued to remain and exert inevitable constraining impact on these relations, including in particular as relates to the role and functions of the U.S. in the Persian Gulf. While the Islamic Republic has consistently called for the withdrawal of foreign – that is, U.S. - forces from the area, the GCC and its individual member states as a matter of fact have been quite



satisfied with their presence, and even supported as a matter of policy a strengthened role and function. The diametrically opposed outlooks between Tehran and the GCC capitals on regional security arrangements – without the U.S. factor from the Iranian viewpoint and with the U.S. involvement from the other side – have continued to be part and parcel of their respective official approach and policy.

The above picture, already quite complex and constraining, was further complicated as a result of the fallout from the 9/11 and its significant repercussions for the entire region surrounding Iran and the Persian Gulf. Iran's active assistance in fall 2001 to the U.S. military campaign towards removing the Taliban regime, and effective political assistance, including through the Bonn Conference, to the establishment of a new government in Kabul with the participation of pro-Iran Northern Alliance composed of Hazarah-Uzbek forces helped to bolster Iran's regional hand and status. The U.S. [George W. Bush] inclusion of Iran in the "Axis of Evil" in January 2002 – despite obvious anger and disappointment in Tehran – did not preclude subsequent tacit support for the American military campaign in Iraq in March 2003 which led to the overthrow of the anti-Iran Ba'athist regime and the emergence of another pro-Iran Shia-Kurdish coalition in Baghdad. Non-recognition and proper response on the part of the U.S. to Iran's precious assistance in Afghanistan and Iraq and the pursual instead of an overtly hostile posture and policy towards Tehran in the post-2003 years, including on the nuclear dossier, made any practical improvement [rapprochement] in the Iran-U.S. relations impossible. But, this hostile policy and its actual pursuit in post-Saddam Iraq aside, the reality on the ground had already helped secure a much better regional posture and status for Iran, particularly in so far as the position of the Shia communities was concerned.

The impact and repercussions of this evolving situation and rising Iranian regional influence on the Persian Gulf area; that is, the GCC and its individual member states, was quite dramatic. As is well



known, Saudi-Iranian relations entered a new promising phase soon after Khatami took office in 1997 and mutual confidence-building measures helped put the relations on a fast-improving curve as of 1999. But other factors, mostly extraneous, particularly the post-9/11 developments, intervened to rekindle old suspicions and mutual distrust and revive rivalries for regional status and influence, especially in Iraq in the post-Saddam period. The Saudis found the dominant position of the pro-Iran coalition in Baghdad unacceptable and endeavored, through various measures, including active support of extremist [anti-Shia] Salafi currents and terrorist groups, to militate against the situation towards undermining the Iranian-Shia regional ascendancy. The gradual negative turn in Iran-Saudi relations – which took a turn for the worse after Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 - was bound to have its impact on the state of relations with other members of the Cooperation Council – even though to somewhat lesser extent depending on the particularities of the relations with each of the other five countries. Mention has already been made of the rising concern in various Arab capitals in recent years of the specter of the so-called “Shia Crescent” and the implicit message of the imperative of countering it across the region.

Aside from such concerns, whether real or imagined or a combination of both, the actual policy of Iran in helping stabilization of the political situation in both Afghanistan and Iraq, including the active policy against Al-Qaeda and other extremist, terrorist groups, has, as a matter of fact, served as an effective counterbalance to Salafi/Sunni extremism/radicalism in the region. Having taken a clear distance from the early 1980s posture and policies with unmistakable radical and destabilizing features, the Islamic Republic has gradually and increasingly moved in the direction of working towards cooperative regional security arrangements in the Persian Gulf – even if rendered difficult to achieve thus far due to a host of factors emanating from all the parties concerned. As argued by analysts of various persuasions - Iranian, regional and Western - success of the



Persian Gulf states, inclusive of Iran, the GCC member states, as well as of the post-Saddam Iraq, in establishing a future-looking cooperative regional security mechanism depends, for all practical purposes, on the state of Iran-U.S. relations.

As already indicated, the openly hostile policy under the Bush administration and the development of a mutually acrimonious atmosphere between the two countries – which was further complicated with the nuclear crisis and also Ahmadinejad's presidency – did not allow the two countries to move towards any meaningful cooperation on regional security matters of mutual concern and interest. As aptly described by a prominent Iranian scholar of the Persian Gulf issues in 2008, US policy toward Iran and Iran's policy toward the United States have been driven largely by the ideological agendas of policymakers in each capital and by their respective needs to enhance their legitimacy before their respective domestic constituencies (Kamrava, 2008). Despite quite understandable benefits to have been derived from better relations, the two governments have in recent years chosen to pursue approaches and policies geared to the short-term political benefits of dogged maintenance of the status quo (Phillips, 2004). Even the direct negotiations between the two sides in 2007 on enhancing security in Iraq – the first ever such talks since 1980 and a de facto breakthrough - failed to bear fruit, which, in retrospect, cannot but be lamented for the lost precious opportunity. Fact of the matter is that success in that aborted process would have hardly sat well with the Arab world, including the Arab states of the Persian Gulf, who have not hidden their dissatisfaction with the rise in Iran's regional stature, nor with the prospects of Iran-U.S. de facto cooperation towards redefining the security parameters in Iraq without a meaningful Arab presence and participation. That seemingly promising process at the time, as is now history, came to naught. Even if the concerned Arab states, whether in the Persian Gulf or across the region, might have felt pleased – momentarily though - at such an eventuality between Iran



and the U.S. in the Iraqi theatre, the continuation of tension between the two countries with the possibility of an ultimate confrontation between them over outstanding issues with ominous, even catastrophic, repercussions for the same Arab states can hardly be deemed reassuring.

Conclusions

The present article has looked into the state and dynamism of relations between Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf during the 2005-09 period under President Ahmadinejad. It has discussed the changes that occurred in the bilateral relations between Iran and the GCC countries following an 8-year-long period of détente under President Khatami – which I have termed a period of “honeymoon.” The review in the article shows that a number of factors have affected the state of relations during the period under review, including Ahmadinejad’s populist and radical-sounding discourse in foreign policy, increasing tension on Iran’s nuclear program, and also such other factors as U.S.-Iran relations, diverging policies towards Israel, and the rising regional stature and influence of the Islamic Republic in the post-2001 period. The impact of such other outstanding issues as the on-going dispute between Iran and the U.A.E. on the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf and the use by the GCC [Arabs in general] of a fictitious name for the established, historical of the waterway has also been addressed in the article.

The discussion has shown that while the GCC position on the nuclear issue was generally muted during the last two years of the Khatami government, it took a clearly negative turn soon after Ahmadinejad took office in 2005 – which could be explained in light of three specific factors; Ahmadinejad’s incendiary and controversial pronouncements on foreign policy matters – including about Israel and the Holocaust - the increasing international tension on the nuclear dossier, and the increasing threat perceptions in the area emanating from Iran’s rising influence and stature, particularly in the



post-Saddam new Iraq. It was also noted that notwithstanding the aggressive discourse in foreign policy, Ahmadinejad was the first Iranian head of state to attend a GCC Summit since its establishment in 1981. Analysis of the dynamism of bilateral relations, beyond the mere political aspects which were affected, to varying degrees, by the set of factors just mentioned, also points to the resilience of economic and trade relations between Iran and the Arab neighbors to the south.

In retrospect, looking at the state of relations between Iran and the GCC during the 1997-2005 and 2005-09 periods, under two different administrations in Tehran with quite differing foreign policy and international outlooks, it can be said that the bilateral relations between the two sides tend to continue with ebb and flow and subject to a set of constants and variables. Living on the opposite shores of a strategic waterway, Iran and the Arab states of the Persian Gulf will continue to remain as neighbors with significant common interest and concerns – including regional security which each one and all of them need, not to mention oil and its unimpeded outflow and export. And if past is any indication, they will also continue to differ on a wide range of issues, both of a specific nature – e.g., the three Iranian islands and the name of the Persian Gulf – as well as such general issues as relations with the U.S., posture towards Israel, threat perceptions, regional stature, and also the prospects for regional security arrangements – with or without the U.S. presence and involvement, as preferred respectively by either side.

Looking to the future, and taking the realities on the ground in the region into account, one would tend to conclude that improvement in Iran-U.S. relations – albeit far-fetched or totally illusive at the moment – would indeed make significant difference on the state and dynamism of relations in the Persian Gulf. Any meaningful thaw – or actual rapprochement – in the bilateral relations between Tehran and Washington, with inevitably positive impact on the state of their tension-ridden interactions in such critical areas to



both as Iraq, is bound to ameliorate existing heightened concerns in the Persian Gulf – in fact, across the Middle East – about Iranian intentions, regional supremacy, the specter of the so-called “Shia Crescent”, or even the nuclear program. And in the final analysis, drawing on the past experiences, it can be said that reliance by all parties concerned, within the region and beyond, on mutual confidence-building measures and policies, and actual commitment to diplomacy and negotiation, would provide a safer route towards resolving outstanding differences and disputes of all sorts.

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