

A Great Partnership: Iran, Iraq and the GCC

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Introduction

The Persian Gulf is facing ten simultaneous problems:

- 1) New challenges in regard to the Arab Spring/Islamic Awakening in the Middle East and North Africa,
- 2) Arab-Israeli conflict on the Peace Process,
- 3) Terrorism in the name of Islam,
- 4) Extremism,
- 5) Israeli possession of weapons of mass destruction,
- 6) Militarization of the region,
- 7) Foreign military presence,
- 8) Iran's nuclear crisis,
- 9) Widening the gap between Iran-Iraq with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members on Syria and etc.
- 10) The lack of a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf. Moreover the GCC is particularly concern because Iran is a non-Arab state in the region with a unique revolution and governance model based on Shia, the second largest denomination of Islam.

Relations between Iran and its Arab neighbors in the Persian Gulf have historically been strained under the rule of both Pahlavi monarchy and Islamic Republic. Since 1980 and the Iraqi invasion of Iran, the most powerful Arab nation's army with the full support of GCC for the aggressor, the relations experienced the most hostile era.

How to build trust between Iran and the GCC has remained the most critical issue to deal with.

GCC's Strategic Concerns:

The strategic concerns of the GCC shaping its geopolitical calculations on Iran include:

- 1- Iran's demographic weight which has no equivalent among any of the GCC nations. Iran's population with nearly 80 million is more than three times that of the six GCC member-states combined.
- 2- Iranian human resources are demanded throughout the region due to their advanced education, professional skills and training. Around 500,000 Iranian workers and businessmen are living and working in United Arab Emirates alone.⁹
- 3- The religious and revolutionary nature of Iran's system of governance and political dynamics.
- 4- Iran's influence in the Muslim world and Arab nations such as Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon and Palestine.
- 5- Iran's centuries-old deep-rooted family ties between millions of Arabs and Iranians on both sides of Persian Gulf which continues to date.
- 6- Iran's popularity in Arab streets due to its unrelenting support for the Palestinian cause, with vital political, military, social and economic backing for popular resistance movements such as Hamas and Hezbollah.
- 7- Iran's opposition to the Western military presence in the region and continuing criticism of GCC strategic alliance with Western Powers—specifically the US.

- 8- Iran's objection to militarization of the region by Western countries. In 2011, the US tripled its arms sales to \$66.3 billion, accounting for three-quarters of the global weapons trade—with GCC countries taking the lion's share of the trade with Saudi Arabia alone the biggest purchaser of US weapons worth \$33.4 billion.¹
- 9- Iran's capability in sensitive technologies such as nuclear, chemical, biological and missile coupled with its self-sufficiency in defense industry.
- 10- Iran's shoreline which spans almost the entire length of the Persian Gulf and is by far more than any other Persian Gulf countries combined.
- 11- Fears regarding the Persian Gulf's intra-regional balance of power, especially after US invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan which the GCC considers a big win for Iran because the US eliminated Saddam and Taliban, the two major national security dilemmas of Iran, a significant loss for GCC.

Major Elements of Mistrust

Some major elements of mistrust in recent decades are:

- 1- Till early 1900s, Bahrain was Iran's fourteenth province with a seat in the Iranian parliament. In late 1960's and early 1970's, the Shah of Iran agreed to the independence of Bahrain and in return the British recognized the Greater, Lesser Tonb Islands and Abu Musa as longstanding part of Iranian territory. The continued territorial dispute with UAE, has laid the foundation of a major mistrust between Iran and GCC.

¹ <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/weapons/R42678.pdf>

- 2- Iran, from the beginning, considers the formation of GCC as a system established just to confront Iran.
- 3- From an Iranian perspective, the security and stability of the Persian Gulf has been dominated by Western powers, with no major part played by regional countries. Instead, Iran stresses the need for the region to take more prominent role for its own security and stability.

While the GCC maintains the only way to preserve security and stability is through political-military and security alliance with superpowers.

- 4- The GCC fully supported the invasion of Iran by Iraq with over hundred billion dollars of financial support. The war cost hundreds of billions of dollars and about one million lives and injuries. Saddam also authorized use of chemical weapons on Iranians—killing thousands and injuring many to this date.

After the ceasefire, the GCC did not take any steps towards compensation for war damages. This event has left unprecedented mistrust by Iran toward GCC.

- 5- Iran-GCC relations have further soured since the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime, replaced with a majority Shia population of Iraq, closely aligned with Tehran.
- 6- Iran's position against Israel, support for Palestinians and even supports for Hezbollah to preserve the integrity of Lebanon, has given Iran the upper hand in Arab streets and Muslim world, undermining the position of US Arab allies toward Israel and the US.
- 7- The 1975 Algeria Accord between Saddam Hussein and the Shah ended decades of territorial disputes. However following the 1979 revolution, Saddam tore the Accord, invaded Iran and claimed Khuzestan Province as part of Iraq's territory.

The GCC supported the move, which gave the impression to Iranians that the GCC is after disintegration of Iran.

8- While GCC supported Saddam Hussein's aggression during Iran-Iraq war—Iran was amongst the first countries condemning Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990-91 and gave tacit support to the United States, GCC and international community's efforts to reverse Iraq's aggression against Kuwait. The GCC did not appreciate this positive gesture.

9- Iran shares more than a dozen oil and gas fields with Arab states including Iraq, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE. There are multiple disputes regarding siphoning Iranian share in these gas and oil fields, specifically Tehran accuses Doha of extracting way more than its share in the joint gas field of South Pars, which is the biggest in the world.

10- Saudi Arabia's violent crackdown on demonstrations in 1987 by Iranian pilgrims in Mecca that left 403 people dead, amongst them 275 Iranians and injuring about 2000.²

11- According to diplomatic cables released by WikiLeaks, some GCC leaders pushed the US to attack Iran. Backing US military action on Iran, Saudi King Abdullah told Americans "cut off the head of the snake."³

12- Saudi Arabia has increased its oil output to substitute Iranian oil as a major effort to break Iranian economy and support US led sanctions to bring regime change.

²<http://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/02/world/400-die-iranian-marchers-battle-saudi-police-mecca-embassies-smashed-teheran.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

³ <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/11/29/us-wikileaks-usa-idUSTRE6AP06Z20101129>

13- Ultimately the GCC and Iran are suspicious the other side is after regime change. For the Iranians the continuous support of Saddam during the war with Iran coupled with backing the US and Westerns sanctions today are clear indications. While for the GCC, they fear the Iranians are aiming to export their revolution and aspiring to have nuclear weapons.

Mutual Interests

Although the mistrust on both sides is strong, Iran, Iraq and the GCC share a number of interests and concerns including:

- 1- Avoiding the forth war in the Persian Gulf with a possible invasion and occupation by foreign powers;
- 2- Fighting against drug trafficking and organized crimes;
- 3- Combating terrorism and extremism, AL Qaeda and similar groups;
- 4- Preventing the Clash of Civilizations which can lead to a significantly greater degree of animosity among Western-Muslim nations;
- 5- Safe maritime passage of energy export through the narrow Strait of Hormuz and security for a quarter of the world's international energy exports and production with stability in pricing of the region's oil and gas resources;
- 6- Seaborne security issues to prevent disruptions in exports and foreign-sourced goods that originate daily inside the Persian Gulf;
- 7- Promoting the role and position of the Muslim world in international arena; and

- 8- Managing the crisis in Muslim countries such as Syria, Bahrain, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Regional Cooperation Initiative

The US long preoccupation with the Middle East will not be sustained forever and is gradually shifting away from the area for two major reasons:

First, the US will be the world's leading oil producer in less than five years and will be exporting oil by 2030—according to latest report by the International Energy Agency.⁴ Energy independence will undoubtedly make the Middle East less critical for the US interests.

Second, the rise of China and India will dominate the US foreign policy for the foreseeable future. There is already a gradual shift in US foreign and defense policy towards the Asia Pacific region. Therefore there needs to be a longer-term view of the regional security issues facing the Middle East and how key regional players can play a stabilizing role.

The perception of the US and GCC that Iran cannot play a positive and constructive role in the region is wrong. The US and GCC have never proposed a comprehensive package for bilateral, regional and international cooperation with Iran to see whether Iran can be a constructive and positive partner or not. This is something they should attempt at least once to test Iranian sincerity on advocating for regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf.

The establishment of a new security system in the Persian Gulf region representing all regional players should be the priority for the regional states and effective foreign powers especially the US. Meanwhile, major regional countries such as Iran and Saudi Arabia should

⁴ <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/13/business/energy-environment/report-sees-us-as-top-oil-producer-in-5-years.html>

provide smaller states with necessary security guarantees. The United States, for its part, should recognize Iran's legitimate concerns and interests in the region while Iran and Persian Gulf countries should adopt a more realistic approach toward the United States and global issues.

A "Persian Gulf Security and Cooperation Organization" initiative should be based on the principles such as: impossibility of any change in existing borders, respecting the integrity of other members and noninterference in internal affairs of member states.

The establishment of a regional cooperation system to promote political, security, economic, cultural, social and military cooperation among regional states is of vital importance for complete and all-out confidence building; non-interference by foreign powers in the region; the establishment of sustainable peace, stability, and security; strengthened relations among nations; and the promotion of sustainable development in the region.

14 Key Elements for a Regional Cooperation System

By United Nations Security Council Resolution 598 on Iran-Iraq ceasefire, the Council requested the Secretary-General to examine measures to enhance the security and stability of the Persian Gulf in consultation with Iran, Iraq, and other states of the region.⁵ This was a key task for the UN Secretary-General but unfortunately no efforts were made to implement this essential mandate.

However these efforts need to be revived and cooperation with Iran in addition to regulating its rising power within the framework of a security and regional cooperation treaty will be the best way to stabilize Iraq, reassure Arab allies of the United States, promote peace in the Middle East, and even solve Iran's nuclear crisis.

⁵. UNSC Resolution 598, 20 July 1987.

We need the following key elements to establish a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf:

1. The organization would include the GCC plus Iran and Iraq, based on Article 8 of UN Security Council Resolution 598.
2. A joint security committee to deal with common security concerns including terrorism, extremism, sectarianism, organized crime, asymmetric threats/warfare and drug smuggling and interferences in internal affairs of other member states similar to Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).
3. Gradual removal of barriers in political, security, economic, and cultural relations.
4. Establishment of a regional free trade bloc similar to European Union.
5. Safeguarding production and export of energy in the region and stabilizing the international energy market.
6. A joint consortium on nuclear cooperation between the regional countries for confidence building and producing nuclear fuel and other peaceful uses of nuclear energy under the supervision of the IAEA.
7. An initiative for establishment of a joint military cooperation to secure the stability and security in the Persian Gulf.
8. A regional initiative for the establishment of a WMD-free Middle East and the Persian Gulf.
9. End to regional conventional arms race in order to free up funds for economic development in the region.

10. A plan for gradual withdrawal of foreign military forces from the region and the establishment of a system in which regional countries would provide full security in the Persian Gulf region.⁶
11. A collective mechanism for peaceful settlement of disputes among member states avoiding the use of force.
12. A task force to deal with the regional crisis such as Syria, Iraq, Arab Spring/Islamic awakening and Afghanistan through regional and multilateral diplomacy and cooperation with influential international and regional players.⁷
13. A comprehensive package including all bilateral, regional and international issues for Iran-US talks. To manage the security cooperation system in the Persian Gulf, removing the tensions between Iran and the US would be essential.
14. To engage other external players like EU, Russia, China and India and respecting their shares and interests in the region to create incentives for them to be cooperative.⁸

This strategy will be the most lasting and least expensive strategy for effective cooperation among regional and international powers.

⁶ Proposal by Hassan Rowhani, World Economic Forum Meeting, Doha, April 2010. See <http://www.mehrnews.com/en/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=468577>.

⁷ Building Security in Persian Gulf, by Robert E. Hunter, Rand, 2010.

⁸ "Building Security in the Persian Gulf," by: Robert E. Hunter, published by Rand in 2010