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Strategic engagement: Iran, Iraq and the GCC

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Road towards sustainable friendship requires establishing a regional cooperation system among hostile neighbours

By Seyed Hossein Mousavian | Special to Gulf News
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Image Credit: AP

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government is increasingly ready to use force to stop the opposition from gathering support.

The Gulf is facing new challenges in an array of issues, such as: Arab awakening in the Middle East and North Africa, Arab-Israeli conflict on the peace process, extremism, the widening gap between Iran and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on the crisis in Syria and tensions over Iran's nuclear programme.

Relations between Iran and its Arab neighbours in the Gulf have historically been strained under the rule of both the Pahlavi monarchy and the Islamic Republic. Since 1980 and the GCC support of Iraq's invasion of Iran (1980-88), relations experienced the most hostile era. How to build trust between Iran and the GCC has remained one of the most critical issues facing the region.

The strategic concerns of the GCC, which shapes its geopolitical calculations on Iran include: Iran's demographic weight, which has no equivalent among any of the GCC nations; ample human resources; the religious and revolutionary nature of Iran's system of governance and political dynamics; its influence in the Muslim world and Arab nations such as Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, Lebanon and Palestine; opposition to the western military presence in the region; criticism of GCC's strategic alliance with western powers, specifically the US; mastery in sensitive fields such as nuclear, chemical, biological and missile technologies, coupled with its self-sufficiency in defence industry; and last but not least, fears regarding the intra-regional balance of power specifically after the removal of Saddam Hussain and the Taliban — two major national security dilemmas of Iran.

There is also the ever-present suspicion that the GCC and Iran are engaged in fomenting regime change in

the other's domain. The GCC's concern is that the Iranians are aiming to export their revolution in the region, to create a Shiite crescent coupled with aspirations to obtain nuclear weapons.

On the other hand, Iran considers the formation of the GCC as a system solely established to confront it. The GCC gave its full support to Saddam's invasion of Iran (1980-88) and his use of weapons of mass destruction, a war that cost Iran hundreds of billions of dollars and loss of a million lives and casualties. Tehran considered the GCC support of Iraqi aggression as a clear move to break up Iran and bring regime change.

According to US State Department diplomatic cables, released by WikiLeaks, after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005, some GCC leaders pushed the US to attack Iran and "cut off the head of the snake". Even today, the GCC is supporting western sanctions placed on Iran by complementing them with an 'oil war' and increasing oil output to compensate for shortfall from the Iranian oil embargo. Such a policy is considered by Iran as a major effort to break its economy and support US efforts to bring about regime change.

Although the mistrust is deeply rooted on both sides, Iran, Iraq and the GCC share a number of interests and concerns, including avoiding a fourth war in the region, fighting drug trafficking and organised crime, combatting terrorism and extremism, preventing a clash of civilisations which can lead to a significantly greater degree of animosity among the West and the Muslim nations; safe maritime passage of oil shipments through the narrow Strait of Hormuz and security for a quarter of the world's international energy exports,

promoting the role of the Muslim world in the international arena; and last but not least, managing crises in Muslim countries.

The question is whether the current tensions can be defused and efforts made to focus on areas of mutual interest and build a new relationship between Iran and the GCC. My diplomatic experience suggests it is a possibility and necessity.

The relations between Tehran and Riyadh experienced its most hostile era due to Saudi Arabia's support for Saddam during the invasion of Iran and the 1987 violent crackdown on Iranian pilgrims in Makkah that left 275 dead and around 2,000 injured. Regardless of such hostilities, in the mid-1990s, while serving as the Iranian ambassador to Germany, I was commissioned by then Iranian president Rafsanjani to visit Jeddah as his representative on a secret mission to revive Tehran-Riyadh ties.

During my stay, I held three rounds of lengthy closed-door meetings on an array of bilateral, regional and international issues with then Saudi crown prince Abdullah Bin Abdul Aziz, which went into the late hours of the night. The details of the agreement were finalised with the late Prince Naif, the interior minister and the late King Fahd, and then presented to Iran's president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. They both agreed and welcomed the broad engagement, which solidified cordial relations between the two countries for almost a decade.

The Saudi crown prince and I agreed on a comprehensive package for reviving relations, including cooperation in the fields of politics, security, economy and other areas. Relying on this comprehensive

agreement, relations between the kingdom and Iran experienced a honeymoon period from 1996 until Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005. The revival of Tehran-Riyadh relations also had a positive impact on bilateral ties between Iran and all the member countries of the GCC. I believe the breakthrough in Tehran-Riyadh relations and the content of the package agreed upon provide adequate persuasion that Iran-GCC can significantly improve their relations.

No doubt, a strategic engagement amongst Iran, GCC and Iraq is vital to the future of the region. The US, like the UK, would ultimately have to leave the region, while Iran, Iraq and the GCC are destined to remain neighbours, either as friends or foes.

The road towards sustainable friendship and strategic engagement requires establishing a regional cooperation system among Iran, GCC and Iraq to promote political, economic, cultural, social and military cooperation. Such a move would be vital to strengthening trust and building confidence, paving the way for jointly fighting threats to security, peace and stability in the region.

Iran's quest for regional power can be achieved through cooperation and participation in a joint regional security pact. It would also enable Iraq to play an independent role in regional developments, achieve economic stability and security, and revive its status in the region. Such regional cooperation will transform hostile rivalry between the regional powerhouses — Saudi Arabia and Iran — into cooperation and shift the current Cold War status quo to a strategic engagement. Needless to say, Iran-US rapprochement would be an essential element to realise regional cooperation, and this is

where the GCC can and must play a constructive role rather than be a spoiler.

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 Gulf in consultation with Iran, Iraq, and other states of the region. This was a key task for the UN secretary-general, but unfortunately no efforts were made to implement this essential mandate. There is a need to revive it. Cooperation with Iran will prove essential in regulating its rising power within the framework of a security and regional cooperation treaty, which will be the best way to stabilise Iraq, calm down Arab allies of the US, promote peace in the Middle East, and even facilitate a peaceful resolution to Iran's nuclear crisis. This formula will prove to be an enduring and the least expensive strategy for effective cooperation among regional and international powers.

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