



Statement before the  
House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa

“Iran’s strategy towards the Gulf Cooperation Council:  
A look after the Camp David Summit”

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*The views expressed in this testimony are those of the author alone and do not necessarily represent those of the American Enterprise Institute.*

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Honorable Members. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on an issue so important to U.S. national security.

### **Iranian views of GCC competition in the Middle East**

Since the 1979 Revolution the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy has been driven by a desire to reshape the Middle East in its ideological image. Tehran seeks to spread its concepts of Islamic governance, to oppose the state of Israel, and to assert its regional hegemony by displacing the United States as the dominant regional power. Due to a relative disadvantage in conventional military power, Tehran has pursued these objectives primarily through clandestine operations for the past thirty-six years. In particular, Iran has utilized its "Resistance Network" of partners, proxies, and terrorist groups, including the Lebanese Hezbollah while employing a suite of deterrent capabilities including ballistic missiles and asymmetric naval platforms.

The United States and Israel are not the only obstacles to Iran's objectives in region, however. Leading the Middle East, and more importantly, the global Islamic Community, requires challenging Tehran's most powerful Arab Sunni rivals. Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's Iraq, countering the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Gulf states has dominated Iran's calculations. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states as a whole possess formidable economic, political, and conventional military power that arguably surpasses Iran's.

The Iranian regime's brand of Shia Islam will always be a handicap in its struggle for religious leadership of a Muslim world which is ninety percent Sunni.<sup>1</sup> The KSA, however, poses a unique ideological challenge to Tehran's attempts to assert leadership in the Muslim world. Riyadh's Custodianship of the Two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina gives the Al Saud monarchy an upper hand in the battle for spiritual leadership among Muslims, whether Sunni or Shia, who perform the Hajj to these sites at one point in their lives if able. Iran attempts to undermine the Kingdom's religious credentials by highlighting its close ties with the United States and accusing Saudi Arabia of fueling extremism and terrorism.

The contest between Riyadh and Tehran has evolved considerably since the election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. The autumn of 2006 can be considered the most recent height of Iranian power in the Middle East.

In Iraq, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) solidified a political powerbase inside Prime Minister Nuri al Maliki's new government in Baghdad, dramatically expanded their influence in the Iraqi security apparatus, and built proxy forces to target U.S. and coalition forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population," October 7, 2009, <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>.

In Lebanon and Syria, the Iranian leadership, in their view, also felt it had triumphed during this period. Iran's relationship with President Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria deepened following the 2003 Iraq War, and Iran's primary regional proxy, Lebanese Hezbollah, seemingly achieved victory against Israel in the 2006 Lebanon war. President Ahmadinejad and the IRGC were not hesitant to claim credit. The solidification of the Tehran's position in Damascus and Beirut solidified its position in the Levant. Iran's Sunni neighbors, notably the GCC states, were increasingly alarmed about expanding Iranian influence in the Middle East, but were unable to develop an effective means to push back against Tehran's growing influence and power.

The Iranian leadership saw the Arab Spring of 2011 initially as vindication of their ideology and a continuation of the 1979 Revolution's goals of exporting Islamic revolution. Tehran, however, overestimated the appeal of their limited popular governance model and underestimated the regional resistance to Persian and Shia leadership. Iran made no meaningful political inroads with Arab states in 2011 and shifted quickly to the defensive as its principle ally, Syria, became consumed in a civil war.

Iran's conflict with Saudi Arabia has escalated to direct covert attacks in recent years as well. In October 2011, federal authorities broke up a plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States and claimed the conspirators were under IRGC Quds Force direction. The Saudi national oil company, Aramco, was the also the victim of damaging cyber attack in August 2012 that was traced back to Iran.

Iran believes the United States and the GCC are behind the unraveling of President al-Assad's regime and as well the rise of the Islamic State (IS) in Iraq and Syria. Not only would the loss of an allied government in Damascus—the key conduit to supplying Lebanese Hezbollah—place Iran's "axis of resistance" at risk, but IS in Iraq is a direct threat to Iranian territory. If Iran succeeds in its support of these governments, we will likely see a formidable integrated Shia expeditionary force able to threaten U.S. allies throughout much of the region, most notably Israel and the GCC.

However, Iran is not succeeding in its efforts presently. The situation looks increasingly dire for President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus, who is now completely dependent on Iranian financial and military support to survive. Tehran appears to have conceded that Assad will never reclaim all of his lost Syrian territory and that the focus instead should be on maintaining the land corridor between Beirut and Damascus. The IRGC Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, who leads Iran's efforts in Syria and Iraq, has reportedly hinted that Tehran may need to intervene with IRGC combat troops to defend government-held areas.<sup>2</sup> Such an intervention

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<sup>2</sup> "Qasim Soleimani: the world will be surprised by Syria over the next few days" *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, June 1, 2015, <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=350367>.

would break Iranian precedent and doctrine of avoiding deploying IRGC personnel in direct combat roles.

The struggle in Iraq against IS appears only marginally better. Iraqi government forces in conjunction with local Shia militias and Iranian proxy groups have not been able to recapture the majority of the territory lost to the extremist group. A stalemate is probably Iran's best outcome in Iraq for the near future.

Iran blames this negative turn in its fortunes, at least in part, on the new Saudi King Salman. Salman's greater willingness to work with Turkey and Qatar in supporting the Syrian opposition groups has been the single most important factor in improving Riyadh's strategy against Assad. The Iranian leadership is likely nervous this could portend further losses in their strategic competition with the GCC.

The war in Yemen is also symbolic of Tehran's fears of a new aggressive Saudi position. Iran, working mostly through their Lebanese Hezbollah partners, had been quietly working with Yemen's al Houthi rebels for years.<sup>3</sup> Unlike in Bahrain, the Zaydi Shia al Houthis provided a good opportunity for Tehran to expand its influence on the Arabian Peninsula and pressure the Saudis with minimal cost to itself. Iran likely did not believe the al Houthis were ready to run the country when the al Houthis, with the assistance of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh's military units, staged a de facto coup in January 2015. The Saudis and their Sunni allies launched Operation "Decisive Storm" in March 2015 to halt Iran's perceived expansion in Yemen. Tehran escalated its rhetorical and diplomatic support of the al Houthis in response, and even attempted to brazenly ship arms to rebel held areas. Yemen, a red line for the GCC, is now the most salient and hot theater of the GCC-Iranian contest.

Iran did not seek a region-wide sectarian conflict, but it is in the midst of one now. The Iranian leadership wants to lead both the Middle East and the entire Islamic world. Tehran's aggressive efforts to establish proxy groups, normally Shia, in multi-sectarian states and to continue to advocate forms of Islamic governance in opposition of establish state governments ironically creates the very chaos and Sunni resistance it hoped to avoid. This is the internal contradiction and fundamental weakness of Iran's foreign policy today.

### **Beyond Asymmetric Competition: the Conventional Balance of Power**

Iran's efforts to dominate the region also extend to conventional military force. Ballistic missiles have been the cornerstone of Iranian military strategy since the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Tehran lacks sufficient air and land forces to effectively project power beyond its borders. It cannot establish air superiority or deploy large combat formations abroad. Missiles are an attempted substitute.

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<sup>3</sup> Erika Solomon, "Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis open up on links," *Financial Times*, May 8, 2015.

Iranian missiles lack precision-guided warheads and cannot be employed to reliably and accurately destroy adversaries' military targets. These missiles are employed more for deterrent or coercive purposes against the GCC and Israel. GCC missile defenses, with U.S. assistance, are improving but cannot assure 100% effectiveness against an Iranian attack.

Iran understands that while most GCC countries possess far more advanced air defense, armor, naval capabilities, they continue to struggle to effectively integrate and operate their systems due to separate procurement processes and to training. Tehran also is aware that the Gulf states will remain entirely dependent on U.S. support in intelligence, reconnaissance, communication, logistics, and training to conduct major military operations for the foreseeable future.

The Iranian military doctrines and defense acquisition strategies aim to exploit this operational advantage and compensate for its own conventional disadvantage. The IRGC will continue to expand its asymmetric capabilities in order to both deter the GCC states and to raise the cost for any future U.S. or allied actions in the Persian Gulf. The IRGC will keep investing in armed small boats, coastal defense cruise missiles, submarines, unmanned aerial vehicles, cyber, and other systems that frustrate U.S. and GCC capacity to project power into the Persian Gulf or onto Iranian territory. Iran feels it must remind the region and the world of its ability to disrupt or control the Strait of Hormuz, as we have seen with recent harassment and interdictions of international shipping in April and May of this year.

For Tehran, the conventional balance of power in the Persian Gulf will remain a defensive and coercive game in the near term. The critical question is whether Iran can or will successfully modernize its missile, air, air defense, naval and land forces in the coming decades to become a true military power that can directly challenge the GCC states.

### **Iranian views of the Camp David Summit**

As much as the Iranian leadership denounced this past May's U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David as an exercise to excite "Iranophobia" in the region, Tehran certainly enjoyed the spectacle of Washington's diplomatic missteps in convening the GCC leadership in the Maryland countryside.<sup>4</sup> The GCC's strong undercurrent of mistrust with U.S. regional policy, let alone the damaged U.S.-Saudi relationship, was very evident.

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<sup>4</sup> Najmeh Bozorgmehr and Roula Khalaf, "US-Gulf summit a show of 'Iranophobia', says Tehran," *Financial Times*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/dc10456e-f899-11e4-8e16-00144feab7de.html#axzz3f7WAoXNc>.

Iran was also likely pleased the United States did not announce significant policy changes, especially any new collective security agreements with the GCC. This was a minimal impact summit, though it was not all positive for Tehran.

Camp David publicly reinforced the idea that Iran's neighbors and much of the international community still see the Islamic Republic as a major threat. The summit showed the GCC's increased willingness to integrate its military capabilities and expand coordination on security issues. The summit's joint statement pledged to further the GCC's ballistic missile defenses, while the annex contained provisions for expanding GCC air defenses and establishing a working group to pursue "the development of rapid response capabilities" within an Arab League's "unified Arab force".<sup>5</sup> These provisions especially were likely not well-received in Tehran. More worrisome to the Iranian leadership was the commitment to expand the Gulf States' political and economic engagement with Baghdad, which could undermine Iran's core strategy in Iraq.

In the aftermath of Camp David and amid the escalating war in Yemen, Iranian rhetoric towards Saudi Arabia and other GCC members has only become more heated. A leading IRGC strategist, Brigadier General Gholam Reza Jalali, [stated](#) the Islamic Republic "must be prepared for a new type of conflict" with Riyadh and that Saudi Arabia has evolved from a "regional rival" to a "proxy threat."<sup>6</sup> Most importantly, Jalali tied these changes to a shift in American strategy. He argued the United States is no longer directly intervening in the region, but does so indirectly by reinforcing the intelligence, logistical, advisory, and political frameworks of its regional allies.

These types of comments reflect Tehran's worry that the new aggressive Saudi leadership under King Salman comes as the result of U.S. encouragement—perhaps at the Camp David summit—for the GCC to take on more of the leading role in pushing back Iran's destabilizing activities. A more active Saudi Arabia poses a risk to Iran's long-term objectives. Iran may even be worried Saudi Arabia, backed by Gulf state money and U.S. military support, will begin effectively using Iran's own playbook of regional proxy warfare against it.

### **How should we expect Iran to behave after a nuclear agreement?**

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<sup>5</sup> "U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>; and "Annex to the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.

<sup>6</sup> "Bayad barai modelhay jadid moqabela ba Saudi Arabia amada bashem/radi paye cyber Saudi der moneghishat dakhili Iran" [Have to be prepared to deal with new models of Saudi Arabia/Saudi's cyber footprints in Iran's internal conflicts] *Defa Press*, June 27, 2015, <http://www.defapress.ir/Fa/News/48882>.

Despite the unprecedented diplomatic engagement we have had over the past two years with Iran, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has not shown any indication that a nuclear deal will fundamentally alter Iran's regional policies towards the United States, our allies in the Gulf, or Israel. The IRGC may initially become even more assertive against the United States or Israel as the Iranian leadership tries to re-establish its anti-Western and anti-Zionist credentials following a nuclear deal. Tehran, however, will likely try to limit any resulting conflict escalation that could credibly endanger P5+1 support for the agreement, especially with a new U.S. president entering office in 2017.

The bulk of the funds that Iran expects to receive from sanctions relief will likely go to internal economic investment and infrastructure, as the U.S. administration argues.<sup>7</sup> This does not mean the IRGC will not have access to billions of more rials to support its efforts in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere. Tehran must preserve the rump Syrian state and prevent any weakening in its position in Iraq. These are existential problems for Tehran and we should not underestimate how far Iran will go to defend its interests in Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad.

More critically, if the IRGC decides to send combat forces into Syria to fight GCC- or Turkish-backed opposition groups, or into Iraq to fight IS, we risk potential serious miscalculations by Turkey, the GCC, and Israel. The United States must be prepared for, and try to prevent if possible, escalation by these regional powers which an Iranian intervention may provoke.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Congress will have a critical role in not only reviewing an Iranian nuclear deal, but also in tightening the oversight of the agreement's implementation and preparing contingencies for likely inevitable Iranian breaches. To support our allies in region the United States should also:

- Prevent the conventional forces balance of power in the Gulf from eroding in Iran's favor. Congress should carefully scrutinize the Iranian nuclear deal to mitigate any weakening of the arms embargo and technology import restriction regimes currently in place.
- Prevent or mitigate the loosening of any technology restrictions on Iran's ability to acquire advanced missile technology. An accurate and reliable

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<sup>7</sup> See for example, Remarks of Secretary Jacob J. Lew at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy 30th Anniversary Gala, April 29, 2015, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0040.aspx>; Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, White House, May 5, 2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/05/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-552015>; and Daily Press Briefing by Marie Harf, U.S. Department of State, April 17, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2015/04/240807.htm>.

Iranian ballistic force would fundamentally and negatively shift regional states' calculations for deterrence, coercion, and retaliation.

- Improve the GCC's deterrent counter-coercion capabilities through greater cooperation on missile defense and offensive capabilities that could mitigate or neutralize Iran as a threat.
- Work with GCC leaders to develop better strategies and operational doctrines to combat Iran's asymmetric capabilities, instead of purely focusing on helping these states acquire new or improve existing weapon systems.
- Strengthen the domestic counter-terrorism cooperation between the United States and the GCC against both IS and the IRGC Quds Force.
- Help the GCC develop better asymmetric warfare capabilities for both defensive and potentially, offensive capabilities. President Obama's comments at the Camp David summit implied that the GCC states already have sufficient resources to pushback against Iran's destabilizing activities in the region. We need to go further. The United States and the GCC have a shared interest in contesting the IRGC, especially Quds Force proxy formation and support. The formation of an Arab Rapid Reaction Force, even if only with a coalition of the willing like the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Jordan, and Bahrain, would be helpful for these types of missions.
- Re-enforce the U.S. commitment to the region's security through enhanced defense agreements with the GCC, mindful of maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge (QME). We may want to consider elevating the relationship to by signing security treaties, but should avoid pursuing concepts such as a nuclear umbrella.
- We should discourage Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other GCC states from pursuing nuclear weapons programs. We need to consider, however, aiding their civil nuclear programs if that helps alleviate concerns over Iran's future nuclear intentions.
- Focus diplomatic, legislative, intelligence, and military strategies on shaping the post-2025 environment—once Iranian uranium enrichment and nuclear research and development restrictions expire—to ensure Iran remains deterred from achieving a nuclear weapons capability. This should include ensuring that the United States maintains a robust military option to degrade or destroy the Iranian nuclear infrastructure.