The First Two Steps to Cope with Military Asymmetries in the Middle East (II)
Listing Security Concerns and Motives behind Weapon Programs in the GCC States and Iran

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Abstract
Establishing a zone free of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DV) in the Middle East requires a cooperative, ‘give and take’ approach to arms control, reduction, and disarmament. Without providing a blueprint, we suggest a strategy for coping with the ‘jungle’ of military complexities by presenting the lists of security concerns of the participating countries at the Middle East Conference as a first step. As a second step, we propose to identify the motives and interests behind WMD and DV programs, which also reflect domestic factors such as historical experiences, military-industrial-bureaucratic interests, and broad domestic power constellations.

Taken together, these security concerns and motives behind WMD and DV programs constitute the major stumbling blocks on the gradual way towards a WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East. The dialectical, yet asymmetrical relationship between conflict formations/coalitions and weapons is also relevant for assessing confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs). Hence, the immediate conclusion is to conceptualize weapon/DV-related CSBMs as the next step along the incremental path towards a WMD/DVs Free Zone. While a previous issue has analyzed Egypt, Israel, and Syria, this Policy Brief deals with the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council vis-à-vis Israel and Iran, Iran vis-à-vis the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. vis-à-vis Iran.

This Policy Brief draws on a number of contributions from participants of the Academic Peace Orchestra workshop held in Alghero, Italy, from May 23–25, 2012. Members of the working group came from Germany, Iran, Israel, Lebanon, Switzerland, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States.

Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery vehicles (DV) do not exist in a vacuum: they are embedded in a political – domestic, regional, and international – context. Despite their destabilizing features, these weapons are not a threat in themselves. Yet, they become so and are perceived as such, once countries factor them into their overall foreign policies, reflecting the conflict structures, alliances, as well as domestic power constellations and motivations for military activities. Specific weapons matter more in some political contexts than in others: Israel fears Iranian missiles that can reach its territory, especially if they were nuclear tipped. But it does not fear Tehran’s weapons across the board. Conversely, the Assad regime regards Iranian missiles not as a threat but as an asset against its adversary, Israel.

Asymmetries in the Middle East (II)

Analyzing Threat Perceptions, Motives, and Interests as a Way Out of the ‘Jungle’ of Military Complexities

These insights are of utmost importance in adequately conceptualizing an arms control/disarmament process. If the Middle East is to get rid of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery systems and to establish a WMD/DVs Free Zone, a cooperative, ‘give and take’ approach to arms control, reductions, and disarmament must be found. However, weighing weapons of different categories against each other is difficult. Static comparisons by category, meanwhile, can be misleading if a numerical balance in one category ignores large disparities in other sectors. In addition, while soldiers and weapons may easily be compared quantitatively, perhaps more relevant factors such as motivation, loyalty, skills, and training of the fighters as well as command, control, and communication capabilities do not lend themselves to such neat quantification. The same holds true for technical and organizational quality.

Without presuming to provide a blueprint for experienced negotiators, we suggest a strategy for coping with the danger of getting lost in the ‘jungle’ of military complexities by initially avoiding a debate on WMD/DVs in terms of ‘objective’ data reflecting military capabilities. Instead, it is more productive as a first step for the participating countries at the Middle East Conference (MEC) to present their lists of security concerns. Hence, in this Policy Brief we will initially analyze the perceptions of foreign policies and military arsenals. Addressing these factors constitutes a core condition of success for any arms control/reduction process. For our analysis it will be relevant to give rough assessments of the degree of tensions and intensities of conflicts as well as their potential for escalation, based on the assumption that relationships among actors at the country level differ, and that they vary over time.

As a second step, we propose to identify the motives and interests behind weapon programs in the WMD and DV area because threat perceptions and security concerns, expressed by the representatives of the regional participants, are not the entire story. Motives and interests reflect domestic
members of the six Gulf states appears to have mellowed considerably over the past decade or so. Aside from the core issue of Palestine, Israel and that group of countries have generally found common ground in their efforts to preserve the current regional order. Both agree on the principles of the nation-state system and a regional security architecture which ensures a balance of power that is believed to provide stability.

At the same time, Israel’s interest in maintaining its regional military superiority, especially its nuclear monopoly, and Saudi Arabia’s desire for an unequivocal leadership role in the region do not create any direct military competition between GCC states and Israel. The perception of Iran as a common menace has created new room for maneuver between Israel and the GCC countries. Israel has already softened its traditional objections to U.S. arms sales to the Gulf states. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia still backs the Arab Peace Initiative. In sum, the threat to the GCC states from Israel, and vice versa, is seen by the elites on both sides as more imagined than real. The relations between Israel and GCC states remain cold rather than hostile and the potential for militarized conflict is low.

Structure of This Policy Brief

In Policy Brief No. 13 (by Christian Weidlich and Bernd W. Kubbig et al.), we have analyzed security concerns, motives, and interests behind WMD and/or DV build-ups of Israel, Egypt, and Syria. In this issue, we will consider the driving forces behind the armaments policies of:

- the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council vis-à-vis Israel and Iran;
- Iran vis-à-vis the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia; and
- the United States vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic of Iran.

When combined, Policy Briefs No. 13 and 14 will present a fairly comprehensive picture regarding security concerns and motives behind WMD and DVs activities in the Middle East.

In our view, examining threat perceptions constitutes a promising starting point and a first step for the complex agenda of the Middle East Conference with its ambitious goal of creating a WMD/DVs Free Zone. Our analysis will provide an overview of the regional conflict constellations and identify the most important and urgent security concerns. Based on these insights, it will be possible, in a third step, to conceptualize confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) as elements along the incremental path towards the envisaged WMD/DVs Free Zone.

The GCC States’ Security Concerns towards Israel and Iran

The suspicion Israel has traditionally been viewed with by the conservative factors such as historical experiences, military-industrial-bureaucratic interests, and broad domestic power constellations including the media and public opinion. To be more specific: we will include indigenous factors in our analysis of the build-up or procurement strategies for WMD/DVs whenever possible. Taken together, the lists of security concerns and these motives and interests constitute the major stumbling blocks on the gradual way to the ultimate objective of a WMD/DVs Free Zone. Nevertheless, it is of special importance to ask each regional state what it can do to make the WMD/DVs Free Zone in the Middle East a reality.

The GCC States and Iran: An Uneasy Relationship

Relatively speaking, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) tend to view Iran with more suspicion than Oman, which essentially seeks isolation from regional developments, or Qatar, which aims at bolstering its diplomatic standing on both sides. Iranian differences with Saudi Arabia and others in the GCC are mostly played out indirectly via proxy groups, which increasingly characterize the competition in emerging battlefields such as Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. Nonetheless, relations between Iran and the GCC states tend to be complexly layered. The UAE, which shares a longstanding territorial dispute with Iran over the Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb islands in the Gulf, but for whom Tehran has historically been an important trading partner, is a good example of this complexity.

As a whole, however, the GCC countries perceive Iran to be the primary threat to political stability in the region. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Gulf states
generally see Tehran as opposed to the regional status quo, seeking the redistribution of regional power in its own favor. The GCC members have increasingly expressed their concerns for three reasons: first, because of Tehran's perceived regional leadership aspirations; second, because of the negative impact on regional stability by Iran's nuclear program; and third, because of suspected Iranian political interference, whether domestically or more generally in Arab affairs, especially where it is based on sectarianism. From the GCC perspective, even a near-nuclear Iran could be emboldened to pursue its objectives with greater vigor.

The potential of direct escalation is rather low. Despite diplomatic relations between the GCC states and Iran, confrontations are growing, however, and relations are expected to worsen rather than improve as new battlegrounds open up and the region moves towards increasing polarization following the Arab Spring. In such a context, their alliance with the United States remain the single most important international partnership for the GCC members. The strategic relationship between the U.S. and the GCC guarantees that both are able to protect their regional political and economic interests by ensuring socio-political stability, and enables GCC access to advanced weapon systems which supports the military capability required to deter any direct or indirect threat of Iranian intervention.

Motives and Interests behind Arms Procurements in the GCC States

Traditionally, the defense policy in the Gulf countries has been designed to support a credible conventional deterrent, creating what is essentially a defensive posture with a very limited but increasingly potent ability to conduct offensive operations. Yet, GCC capacity to embark on any sustained military operations using Western-manufactured equipment without the support of its main international partners remains limited due to its dependency on operational and logistic support from the United States and other allies.

Washington is deepening ties with its GCC partners and has authorized an unprecedented arms package with Saudi Arabia that includes advanced fighter jets and attack helicopters with an estimated

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volume of approximately $60 billion over ten years. The United Arab Emirates has focused on its air and missile defense requirements, purchasing the PAC-3 and THAAD missile defense systems, as well as the MGM-140/168 ATACMs group of tactical ballistic missiles, which will cost the UAE more than $17 billion. Bahrain and Kuwait are believed to have also acquired, or are seeking to acquire, similar capabilities. While missile defense systems would probably not be covered by the agenda of the Middle East Conference, Iran, the main driver of all of these (potential) purchases, has in turn expressed concerns about those American supplies (see POLICY BRIEF No. 12 by Sven-Eric Fikenscher and Michael Haas).

The United States as the Security Provider of the Gulf States

As these arms deals demonstrate, the United States continues to provide security for the Gulf States. Saudi Arabian procurements are especially important in the context of its quest for leadership in the region – also because of its unique position as the guardian of the holy cities – and its intensifying rivalry with Iran, which has manifested itself in an interventionist policy towards Bahrain and Syria.

Together with its strong military presence in the region, the U.S. policy of extended deterrence has so far had a restraining influence on the nuclear aspirations occasionally expressed by Saudi Arabia. No member of the GCC is known or reported to have ever pursued activities related to the production of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons. For the moment it is premature to speculate on potential changes in Saudi Arabia's nuclear policy or to gauge how far its (potential) ambition of securing its own nuclear deterrent in response to a potential Iranian arsenal could be restrained.

As the Arab Gulf states do not possess the manufacturing capacity to fulfill their conventional defense requirements, they are highly dependent on the United States in the realm of military technology. Likewise, it is the U.S. with its advanced technology that is best able to serve the 'glitter factor' as an element in the purchasing strategies of the Gulf countries. A continuation and deepening of the U.S.-GCC defense-industrial relationship is therefore highly likely.

Iran’s Security Concerns towards the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia

Tehran’s foreign policy is predominantly determined by the composition of its domestic politics. Two schools of thought have dominated after the events of the Islamic Revolution: the revolutionary and the internationalist. The revolutionary school is committed to its interpretation of unchanging Islamic values, the struggles of the Muslim world, and the fight against what it perceives as Western imperialism. Members of the second group attach primary importance to the country’s wealth and global standing, and to the economic well being of the average citizen. More recently, the perceived threats to Iranian security has resulted in the empowerment of the Pasdaran and the establishment of a kind of military-industrial complex. The regime has kept, despite massive opposition, its revolutionary order – institutions, ideological atmosphere, and ideas – more or less intact.

The most powerful idea that shaped the Revolution was an end to foreign intervention. The events of 1979 have also changed the geopolitical orientation of the country in terms of an overnight transformation from being one of the closest strategic allies of the United States, to being one of its most vehement opponents. The Iran-Iraq War exerted a strong influence on both the public and the leadership in Tehran. Iran felt isolated in its war with Iraq since the latter had the full support of relevant countries of the Arab and Western world, which either backed the regime of Saddam Hussein or ignored its use of chemical weapons. Until 2003, Iraq and the United States were regarded as threats, whereas after the U.S. invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Iran's threat perceptions and foreign policy priorities changed with increased American presence posing the major challenge. There is no longer a buffer or physical space between the Islamic Republic and United States forces; they are literally neighbors. Even though the American military presence in Iraq has ended, 40,000 soldiers will remain in the greater Gulf region, both aboard ships and in bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. In addition, thousands of U.S. troops will be stationed in Afghanistan until 2014 and beyond.
The United States as the Major Threat to the Iranian Regime

The Iranian elite sees American opposition to its foreign policy agenda and continued grip on power as the central threat, and this perception shapes Tehran's security strategy. This has not changed under the Obama administration which has been the major driving force behind a tougher sanctions policy both on the bilateral level and in a multilateral context. Security issues remain at the core of the bilateral confrontation, which is marked by high tensions and a medium to high potential of escalation. In Tehran's view the overarching goal of the U.S. is regime change. This perception is rooted in the history of American involvement in Iran, including the overthrow of its democratically elected government in 1953 and Washington's subsequent support for the Shah. Furthermore, Iran fears that its nuclear installations might be attacked either by the United States or jointly with Israel which is considered another menace by Tehran. Israeli leaders in particular have not minced words about their intention to carry out attacks against Iranian nuclear facilities should its nuclear program go ahead.

Iran reversed its policy towards Israel drastically after the 1979 Revolution, a major change based more on dogmatic ideology than pragmatic state interests.¹ The harsh anti-Israel rhetoric of the Iranian leadership served to advance the country's credentials as a major regional and Islamic power.² President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's anti-Israeli foreign policy views the Jewish state as a major regional rival - although there is a sizeable geographical buffer between both countries and the Jewish state has no territorial claims within Iran's traditional sphere of influence.³ Iran is also accusing Israel of fighting a covert war against its nuclear scientists and of sabotaging its nuclear facilities. To balance Israel's superior air power, Tehran relies on sophisticated missile forces, capable of reaching its adversary from well inside Iranian territory, as well as on the support of Hamas and Hezbollah in retaliating against Israel in case of an attack. However, the potential of an escalation resulting from an unprovoked military attack on Israel is rather low.

With regard to Riyadh and the GCC states, Tehran usually does not admit that it feels threatened by its Arab neighbors. Iran's ground forces are superior to those of the GCC monarchies and are well equipped for the defense of its territorial integrity. However, if one factors in air and naval forces, the quality of Iranian armaments, as well as the American military presence in the region, the resultants power constellation clearly favors the United States and its Gulf allies. In 2009, General David Petraeus bluntly stated that even the UAE Air Force could easily destroy Iran's Air Force.⁴ Saudi Arabia's Air Force is also well-equipped and could strike Iranian targets; its operational capabilities are, however, dubious. According to one assessment, while "Tehran may never admit to being vulnerable [...] many of their systems are outdated and there's little reason to believe reservists and paramilitary units could resist or repel a sustained bombing campaign."⁵ Even though Iran's military forces are twice as large as those of Saudi Arabia, Tehran's ability to project military power is limited to its missile arsenal and regional proxies. Due to the recent arms purchases and the close cooperation with the U.S., the GCC states and especially Saudi Arabia are increasingly perceived as posing a direct threat to Iranian security.

Although regime change through a military invasion is not an option at the time of this writing, the war against Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein remains fresh in the minds of Tehran's elite. Neither the Obama administration in the U.S. nor the Netanyahu government in Israel has ruled out the military option of attacking the Iranian nuclear and missile-related infrastructure – the latter in accordance with the well-established 'Begin Doctrine' of preventive military action against regional WMD programs. An Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz was described by American officials as a 'red line' that would provoke an immediate response and force the United States to "take action and reopen the strait."⁶ Washington continues its policy of containing Iran through a comprehensive sanctions regime and regional alliances. In the past decade or so, this traditional approach has been complemented by a series of initiatives which are aimed at the roll-back of Iran's nuclear program (see POLICY BRIEF No. 12 by Sven-Eric Fikenscher and Michael Haas).

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**Motives and Interests behind Iran’s Nuclear Program and Its Missile Activities**

Tehran’s nuclear activities began in 1957 under Reza Shah Pahlevi in the context of the global ‘Atoms for Peace’ enthusiasm. Later, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini gave up his reticence about this technology and re-started nuclear activities in the country after the catastrophic experience during the First Gulf War of being attacked by Iraq with chemical weapons. During that war about 100,000 Iranian soldiers and civilians were killed or wounded by nerve and mustard gases. One in ten of these victims died before receiving treatment and about 5,000 to 6,000 still receive regular medical care for the painful effects of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons. The role of some Western companies in providing material and know-how for the Iraqi chemical weapons used against Iran has not been forgotten in the country. While Baghdad enjoyed the support of important Arab and Western states, Tehran found itself isolated. The 1991 U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait may also have contributed to the conviction among Iranian leadership that a nuclear capability was necessary to deter a similar invasion.

There is less doubt that Iran had a “structured” nuclear weapon program prior to the end of 2003 and according to the International Atomic Energy Agency there are also “indications that some activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device continued after 2003” and may still be “ongoing.” However, Western intelligence agencies, above all the American services, have repeatedly stated that they believe that Iran, guided by a cost-benefit approach, has not made a basic decision on whether to acquire nuclear weapons. U.S. Secretary of Defense and former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Leo Panetta, stated before Congress: “The intelligence does not show that [Iran has] made the decision to proceed with developing a nuclear weapon. That is the red line that would concern us.”
Within Iran, even if one considers differing political views, public opinion remains nearly unanimously in favor of the nuclear program. Among the political elite, there is a clear internal consensus along these lines. In the run-up to the last elections, for example, even President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s reformist challenger, Mir Hossein Moussavi, professed his support for the project. The right to establish an independent nuclear fuel cycle is undisputed among key Iranian players across the political spectrum and considered non-negotiable.

There are competing historical, political, and strategic considerations behind Tehran’s nuclear decision-making processes. In combination with the above stated security concerns and the instability of neighboring countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan along with Central Asia and the Caucasus) as well as the U.S. presence in the region, the Iranian elite and the general public perceive the nuclear program as the only means of upholding the nation’s regional status and providing security vis-à-vis the United States. However, it has been argued that the Iranian leadership views the weaponization of its nuclear program as undesirable, as this might lead to further isolation and loss of international legitimacy.

The Motives behind Iran’s Missile Programs

As far as Tehran’s motives for the procurement and development of its diversified missile arsenal are concerned, both domestic and regional history play a role. Iranian acquisition efforts date back to the Shah regime in the 1970s. But during the ‘War of the Cities’, missiles became a centerpiece of Tehran's military strategy. The Iranian leadership began its procurement and production efforts in the mid-1980s, expanded the military-industrial base established in the era of the Shah, and entered into cooperation with various weapon-exporting countries, most notably North Korea and China. In the second half of the 1980s, Pyongyang became Tehran’s major source of missile technology as well as complete Hwasong-5, -6, and Nodong ballistic missiles. The core element of the Iranian missile program is the Shahab-3/Ghadar-I group of systems with estimated ranges of some 1,000-1,600 km.

After the Second Gulf War, which had led to the destruction of a major portion of Iraq’s military capabilities, the leadership in Tehran accelerated its production and procurement efforts. It appears that the Iranian policy elite was shocked to learn how extensive and advanced the missiles and WMD programs of Saddam Hussein were. This resulted in renewed efforts to acquire more sophisticated missiles. The Gulf War had also revealed that Iraqi ballistic missiles were the only reliable means of penetrating the United States’ air and missile defense umbrella. While the elites in Tehran continued to see Baghdad as a regional enemy after the Second Gulf War, the demise of the Soviet Union considerably changed Tehran’s threat perceptions. As the sole superpower, the United States now became the primary source of Tehran’s fears, and ballistic missiles became the core element in its asymmetrical warfare strategy to counter Washington’s regional preeminence and to deter the United States from implementing its aspirations for regime change after swiftly toppling Saddam Hussein in 2003.

From an Iranian perspective, its missile activities are a reaction to superior American capabilities. In addition, there is the fear of unilateral Israeli and/or joint U.S.-Israeli strikes against its nuclear facilities. First and foremost, Tehran's diversified missile programs have to be seen as the central element in its deterrent strategy. In case that deterrence fails, missiles will be a vital element in the implementation of Iran’s asymmetric war-fighting doctrine. They would most probably be launched against American bases, facilities, and personnel in the region and they can also be fired on targets in Israel.

Both Tehran’s nuclear and missile activities stand for technological prowess and national pride, and they signal Iran’s determination and regional ambitions. All these aspects point to the domestic relevance and entrenchment of the entire missile infrastructure consisting of universities, institutes, companies, facilities, as well as the myriad engineers and their supporters in the politico-military establishment. In the nuclear and missile areas Tehran’s aspirations have been dominated by both its security concerns and its quest for regional primacy. One can assume that the rivalry with Riyadh, which has intensified during the last years, has become an additional driving force behind both its nuclear and missile projects. It is unclear whether the
Islamic Republic has also been pursuing activities in the biological and chemical areas. If this is or has been the case, the driving forces behind such activities would likely be similar to the ones identified for the nuclear and missile realms.°¹³

The United States’ Security Concerns towards Iran

The United States is different from the aforementioned regional states because of its dual role: on the one hand, America is a global power whose decision-making takes place in far-away Washington; on the other hand, it acts as a regional power with a large military presence. Political stability, assured access to oil, and the maintenance of its regional alliances – these elements constitute the triad of fundamental U.S. interests and objectives in the region. As a result, the goal of keeping the Gulf out of the hands of other external or regional powers has long been paramount in American thinking about the region.

In the two decades following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Washington’s policy was largely focused on restraining the external behavior of both Iran and Iraq, which was seen as highly adversarial. Over the past decade, Tehran’s nuclear ambitions have increasingly preoccupied American policy makers. U.S. support for regime change in Iran also grew to the point where in 2002 and again in 2003 Washington actually spurned serious offers from Tehran to cooperate on Afghanistan and Iraq, and to negotiate on other differences, including its nuclear program. In general, U.S. security concerns towards this regional opponent can be grouped into three main areas: Iran’s revisionist agenda, its nuclear ambitions, and the nature of the regime. However, it is not clear that one set of security issues can be resolved independently of the others, even if some of these concerns have received varying attention during different periods.

The United States and Iran’s Quest for Regional Leadership

The first nexus focuses on Tehran’s external policies including its quest for greater regional influence, its support for terrorist organizations, the threats it has directed at Israel and the United States’ allies in the Gulf, and the potential menace to the freedom of navigation which might result in the disruption of petroleum exports. Although Tehran’s efforts to ‘export’ its revolution to its neighbors have receded over time, its regional policies and asymmetric military capabilities including its relationship with regional proxies are a longstanding U.S. concern and raise the prospect of an armed confrontation.

During the 1990s, the United States developed a policy of ‘dual containment’ towards Iran and Iraq. This policy had as its centerpiece an extensive sanctions regime. Although Mohammad Khatami’s presidency witnessed instances of cooperation between Tehran and Washington, Iran soon found itself included in the “axis of evil” proclaimed by President George W. Bush.°¹⁴

The 2005 election of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad opened a period of heightened confrontation. His virulent anti-Israel rhetoric intensified the animosity between his country and Israel as well as the United States. American officials viewed Iran’s behavior towards its Gulf neighbors and its periodic threats to close the Straits of Hormuz as a serious menace to regional stability. Furthermore, Iran was accused of providing extensive assistance to militant groups targeting American soldiers in Afghanistan and especially in Iraq. With the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq complete, American policy makers continue to worry about Tehran’s growing influence in that country and its ties to militant groups.

While President Barack Obama has described the Arab uprisings as a “strategic defeat” for Iran,°¹⁵ American officials still fear that the Islamic Republic will attempt to capitalize on regional turmoil, as it has by supporting Bashar Al-Assad’s brutal repression of opposition forces in Syria. Moreover, U.S. officials accuse the government in Tehran of support for terrorist actions, including an alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States. Top American intelligence officials now believe that under certain circumstances Iran could launch terrorist attacks on U.S. soil, a ‘red line’ that has rarely been crossed.

The United States and Tehran’s Nuclear Ambitions

The second nexus of U.S. threat perceptions towards Tehran is centered on Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Since the disclosure
of its undeclared nuclear enrichment facilities in 2002, Tehran's aspirations in this field have risen to the top of the U.S. security agenda and have resulted in a further expansion of the sanctions regime as well as talk of regime change. The Obama administration has garnered even more international support for stringent international sanctions against Iran in the past two years, including a European oil embargo which began in July 2012. Like his predecessor George W. Bush, President Obama has pursued a policy of non-military coercion coupled with opaque military threats to prevent the development of Iranian nuclear weapons.

As outlined above, the perception of rising Iranian power in the aftermath of the 2003 war against Saddam Hussein has affected U.S. policies towards the region, including the re-invigoration of a regional security architecture based on enhanced military cooperation and missile defense systems with Israel and the GCC states.

The United States and the Nature of the Iranian Regime

The third point of American concern is the nature of the regime in Tehran. Iranian rulers draw much of their domestic legitimacy from their longstanding anti-Americanism. The 1979–81 hostage crisis still looms large in American perceptions of the Islamic Republic and continues to evoke images of radicalism and terrorism. Still, some Iranian factions do not maintain hard-line stances towards the United States and even hard-liners have shown some willingness to cut deals with Washington in the past. But particularly after the repression of Iran's own uprising in 2009 and the fears of Iranian leaders that the U.S. government might not stop at stifling its nuclear program and instead proceed to overturn the regime, many American analysts (and officials) question whether any enduring accommodation is possible with the current top political decision makers.

However, there are also questions about whether a different regime would entirely resolve U.S. security concerns. Iran’s grievances towards the United States date well before 1979, beginning with American support for the 1953 coup that overthrew the popularly elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. Subsequent U.S. support for the Shah created a deep sense of resentment towards the United States among Iranians, which continues to impact bilateral relations to this day.

Iran’s strong nationalism and self-perception as a natural regional leader might still result in considerable tensions with American regional interests, even if Iran were to be led by democratically elected policy elites. But following such a transformation, overlapping interests may be easier to identify and pursue, especially if the new leadership’s identity were not founded on anti-American and anti-Western ideology. Dangerous crisis escalation would be easier to avoid, particularly if a new government brought about direct Western-Iranian communication. Moreover, the youthful Iranian population appears to be more amenable to U.S. values and society than its government. In other words, a fully democratic Iran would not necessarily be in lockstep with Washington, but in all likelihood its regional activities and weapon arsenals would not likely be viewed with the same alarm as they are today.

U.S.-Iranian Relations: Is Accommodation Possible?

To sum up, while most American military and political officials largely view Iran as a rational actor whose leaders' primary interest is regime survival, they also see the Islamic Republic as harboring aggressive regional ambitions that directly conflict
with U.S. interests. Thus, even a non-nuclear Iran may well constitute a disruptive force in the region. The major question that American policy makers are not quite clear about is whether they can accept and reach accommodation with the current regime on regional issues and the nuclear file—or whether regime change would ultimately be necessary to address the broad array of security threats the United States perceives as emanating from Iran.

It is beyond the scope of this Policy Brief to adequately assess the importance of the domestic factors behind the U.S. military activities in the Middle East/Gulf. Yet it is safe to conclude that any gradual reduction strategy towards the demanding objective of a WMD/DVs Free Zone will have to take into account the complex driving forces behind American policies.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this Policy Brief, we have suggested two initial steps to tackle the complex military asymmetries in the region: first, listing the security concerns and external threats that each potential participant may point to at the Middle East Conference (see Table No. 1); and secondly, identifying the motives and interests which drive the military projects with relevance for the MEC mandate (see Table No. 2).

Our conflict- and coalition-centered approach on the state level has provided important insights into the structure and dynamics of the region. We believe that these conflict formations explain the principal arms dynamics and, to a large extent, the phenomenon of military asymmetries. It has also made it possible to qualify the degree of tensions between and among the analyzed states as well as a rough assessment of the conflict potential. While this issue has dealt with the members of the GCC, Iran, and the United States, the previous issue has provided a similar perspective on Egypt, Israel, and Syria. In combination, the two issues present a fairly encompassing picture of the security concerns, motives, and interests behind WMD/DVs programs in the Middle East.

Security Concerns of the GCC States, Iran, and the United States

The security concerns of the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council are mostly focused on Iran, its nuclear program, and its perceived revisionist agenda which is widely seen as destabilizing. The Islamic Republic is thought to be engaging in increasingly aggressive meddling in the internal affairs of the Gulf states, while seeking to alter the overall regional balance of power in its favor. It is feared that a further expansion of Iran’s nuclear capabilities might result in even more assertive behavior. At the same time, there is no consensus as to the exact nature and urgency of the threat, and the Gulf states’ relationships with Iran remain complexly layered, with some seeking to maintain a precarious balance. The Gulf states continue to rely on U.S. security commitments and, against the backdrop of the perceived Iranian threat, the strategic relationship with the United States has become an even more important element of their security strategies. Israel is not perceived as posing a major security challenge and while GCC relations with the Jewish state remain cold, the probability of a military confrontation is low.

Iran’s perceptions of its international environment are partially shaped by the composition of its domestic politics as well as its revolutionary legacy. The United States is viewed as the primary menace to the long-term survival of the revolutionary order and in the recent past thinly veiled threats of military prevention on the part of U.S. decision makers have served to reinforce this perception. Iran’s stance towards Israel is predicated on ideological dogmatism as well as pragmatic state interests. Since Israel and Iran are separated by a substantial physical buffer zone and Israel has not shown any interest in involving itself in Islamic Republic’s traditional sphere of influence, the Jewish state is an enemy of choice, rather than geopolitical necessity. Saudi Arabia has long been perceived as a regional rival, and the close cooperation of the members of the GCC with the United States in the area of armaments and military deployments is considered a threat that requires a response on Tehran’s part.

The security concerns of the United States with regard to the situation in the Middle East reflect its dual role as a global and regional power. The preservation of a state of effective predominance in the Gulf region has long been the core objective of Washington’s regional policies. Relations with Iran have been broadly hostile ever since the Islamic Revolution. An American policy of comprehensive con-
tainment and, more recently, nuclear roll-back has been in place for more than three decades. The Islamic Republic is widely seen as a revisionist state led by a regime that espouses incompatible values and adversarial strategic aims as far as the balance of power in and around the Gulf is concerned. In the eyes of key U.S. decision makers, Iran’s nuclear ambitions, its threat of disrupting the freedom of navigation, its support for terrorist organizations, and its meddling in (formerly) occupied Iraq have all lent further credibility to these concerns. Extensive support for, and security cooperation with, the Gulf monarchies and Israel are seen as an essential pillar of the regional order which the U.S. is seeking to uphold.

**Motives and Interests for WMD/DV Build-ups in the GCC States and Iran**

The GCC members’ armaments policies are designed to provide a sufficient conventional deterrent vis-à-vis Iran in particular. While they tend to acquire highly sophisticated weaponry from the United States and other predominantly Western suppliers, the offensive capabilities of the Gulf Arabs remain limited in the absence of outside operational and logistic support. In recent years, the focus of GCC arms purchases has been on combat aircraft and advanced air and missile defense systems. While the Gulf monarchies (to varying degrees) fear a nuclear Iran, it is not clear if and under what circumstances they would seek nuclear or other WMD capabilities of their own. Up to now, it appears that the combination of arms transfers and U.S. security guarantees have had a restraining effect on the possible nuclear ambitions of Saudi Arabia in particular.

**Endnotes**


3. The Arab Peace Initiative attempts to end the Arab-Israeli conflict by normalizing relations between Arab countries and Israel in exchange for a complete withdrawal from the occupied territories and a ‘just settlement’ of the Palestinian refugee problem.


13. Iran is a member state of the Biological and Toxin Weapons Convention and the Chemical Weapons Convention and it is mainly American Intelligence sources which question Tehran’s compliance with these treaties.


Further Reading


About the Academy Peace Orchestra Middle East (APOME)

The ORCHESTRA is the follow-up project of the “Multilateral Study Group on the Establishment of a Missile Free Zone in the Middle East”. The ACADEMIC PEACE ORCHESTRA MIDDLE EAST is a classical Track II initiative: it consists of some 70 experts – mainly from the Middle East/Gulf, one of the most conflict-ridden areas of the world. The ORCHESTRA is meeting regularly in working groups (CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS) on specific topics in the context of a workshop cycle from 2011-2014. The main goal of this initiative is to shape the prospective Middle East Conference on the establishment of a zone free of weapons of mass destruction and their delivery vehicles agreed upon by the international community in May 2010.

For this reason, these experts develop ideas, concepts, and background information in a series of POLICY BRIEFS which are the results of intense discussions within the CHAMBER ORCHESTRA UNITS. In this framework, the broader normative Cooperative Security Concept will be further developed, embedded, and institutionalized in the region. At the same time, the ORCHESTRA meetings serve as venues for confidence building among the experts. The networking activities of PRIF’s Project Group are documented by the ATLAS on Track II research activities in or about the Middle East/Gulf region.

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