

# The Nuclear Agreement with Iran and the Growing U.S. Strategic Partnership with the Arab Gulf States

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The proposed nuclear agreement with Iran has created deep concerns on the part of America's Arab allies over the possibility that it could lead the United States to turn away from its present strategic partnerships and somehow shift to Iran. It has also reinforced the tendency to create conspiracy theories about U.S. willingness to support its Arab allies, U.S. withdrawal from the Gulf, and U.S. relations with other regional allies and Arab states.

Many of these fears are the product of the fact that few in the Gulf and Arab world know the full extent of the existing U.S. strategic partnerships, the recent increases in the U.S. role in the region, and the extent to which the United States has steadily built up the scale and depth of its military ties to the Arab Gulf states, its cooperation in counterterrorism, and its role in providing the Arab Gulf states with far more modern arms and military technology than is available to Iran.

These issues are addressed in depth in a new CSIS study of the U.S. strategic partnership with the Arab Gulf states and the Gulf military balance. This study is entitled [The Arab-U.S. Strategic Partnership and the Changing Security Balance in the Gulf](#).

This study not only addresses the nuclear issue, but the other threats Iran poses in terms of missiles, conventional forces, asymmetric warfare, and its support of state and non-state actors like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Assad Regime, Shiite movements in the GCC states, Shi'ite militias in Iraq, and the Houthi in Yemen.

Chapter XII of the study provides a broad survey of U.S. forces in the Gulf and total power projection capabilities. It shows that the United States is making continuing efforts to create both a stronger strategic partnership and give the Arab Gulf states a decisive military superiority or edge over Iran that involves major new arms transfers that will continue to build up Arab capabilities through at least 2020.

It does show that the United States and Arab states face major challenges in dealing with Iran, the crisis in Iraq, the civil war in Syria, the crisis in Yemen, and extremist movements like ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Al Nusra Front. There is a need for a more effective mix of strategic options, better strategic cooperation, and more coherent efforts at force modernization and interoperability. Both the United States and Arab states are at fault, and change is needed in many areas.

At the same time, Chapter XII also shows that progress is being made, that the U.S. and Arab Summit in May 2015 shows the value of better cooperation at the top levels of national security leadership, and that key U.S. policy documents like the USCENTCOM posture statement, U.S. strategic planning guidance, and Quadrennial Defense Review firmly commit the United States to maintaining and strengthening its strategic partnership with its Arab allies and particularly with the Arab Gulf states. It highlights critical areas of cooperation, key improvement in U.S. power projection forces, and the nature and scale of the U.S. arms transfers that will improve every aspect of Arab military capability in the Gulf.

Several other chapters in the book cover key aspects of U.S. and Arab strategic partnership that explain both the depth of this partnership as well as how it impacts on Iran:

- Chapter II shows how the combined impact of Arab Gulf and U.S. military spending vastly exceeds that of Iran and gives the partnership a decisive lead in the resources for deterrence and defense.
- Chapter III shows the Arab Gulf states' lead in arms imports and technology transfers and the role of U.S. arms transfers.
- Chapters IV-VII show the lead in U.S. and Arab Gulf states' conventional forces by service and branch, and balance of asymmetric warfare capabilities.
- Chapters VIII and IX cover the Iranian missile threat and U.S. and Arab Gulf efforts in missile defense.
- Chapter X covers the nuclear threat.
- Chapter XI covers the balance and key issues in Iran's expanding regional influence, extremism and terrorism, failed state wars and paramilitary and security forces.

The U.S. and Arab Gulf states already seem to achieve a consensus in supporting the nuclear arms agreement with Iran – a view expressed officially by Secretary Carter after his visit to Saudi Arabia on July 22<sup>nd</sup>. It is still far from clear, however, how the nuclear arms agreement will play out and impact over time, and there is no clear indication it will affect either the other threats Iran poses or the kind of different threat posed by ISIS, Al Qaeda, and similar movements.

This raises a key question for the Obama administration and Congress: Is it time for more formal security arrangements and guarantees between the United States and all its key allies in the Gulf and Middle East? What do its Arab partners want and how would they like to see the partnership strengthened?

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