

# Regional Perspectives on Iran

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While Iranian officials reap internal political benefits from a narrative that they are besieged defenders of the Iranian revolution, their actions have deepened Iran's isolation within the Middle East and drawn in the United States and other outside powers to defend Iran's neighbors against the threat of Iranian military aggression. For the last 35 years, Iran has both united its enemies and increased their number.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the United States helped strike in July 2015 caused concern among U.S. allies in the Middle East. Although the agreement removed the looming near-term threat of a nuclear-armed Iran, it heightened regional anxieties because it seemed both to lift curbs on Iran and to turn a blind eye to Iranian efforts to expand influence in the region. U.S. allies also feared that the United States would see the agreement as a justification for limiting its military engagement in the Middle East, while Iran would build its influence as it filled the

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resultant power vacuum. To a surprising degree, Israel and its Arab neighbors share similar assessments, and they are quietly aligning their policies.<sup>1</sup>

Despite deep-seated historical enmity between Israel and the Gulf Arab states over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, concern about Iran has brought these sides together.

Iranian invective against its neighbors and its funding of armed groups that undermine regional security create a unifying sense of unease. Iran's widely rumored nuclear weapons program has been a contributing factor, but for

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1. Israel and the Gulf Arab states have a long history of enmity, driven by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Gulf Arab states have funded Palestinian nationalist organizations, several of which have targeted and killed Israeli civilians. They also led a long and bitter boycott against any business willing to trade with Israel and worked to delegitimize Israel in international forums. Arabs see the list of Israeli offenses as long, from lethal attacks on civilians in the West Bank and Gaza and surrounding states to seizing land that Muslims and Christians view as holy. The countries do not currently have diplomatic relations, and Gulf Arab officials are generally unwilling to recognize their Israeli counterparts.

its neighbors, not the only decisive one. What truly unifies Iran's neighbors are their relative contentment with the status quo and their strong belief that Iran is a determinedly revisionist power. That belief manifests itself in different ways given the various countries' very different political context, but it has the same effect: it draws Iran's neighbors closer to each other and into a closer embrace with the United States.

Israel has long been in the sights of the Iranian political leadership. In part, Iranian hostility is genuinely held, arising out of Muslim solidarity and an objection to a Jewish government presence within what they see as properly Muslim territories. But there is an instrumental angle as well, and animosity to Israel benefits the current Iranian government in several ways. First, anti-Israeli hostility helps Iran's image in the Arab world. Iran ordinarily would not have much reach there, being a Shi'ite Persian power bordering a region that is largely Sunni and Arab. Divisions of language and religion should cripple Iran's efforts for influence. Yet, appealing to the Arab street's sympathy for the Palestinians and hostility to Israel, Iran can claim it is doing more to push a popular Arab cause than Arab governments do.

Second, anti-Israeli hostility represents a powerful rejection of the shah of Iran's policy of rapprochement with Israel before the Iranian Revolution. Israel's diversified economy and Western orientation were a powerful lure for the shah, who desired both for Iran. Hostility to such ties represented both a rejection of the shah's Western aspirations and the revolutionary regime's embrace of a genuinely Islamic identity. As such, this hostility serves to demarcate the split between the old political order and the new.

Third, an enemy like Israel helps rally the Iranian public around the government, because it is simultaneously powerful and remote. The larger Iran looms in Israel's sights, the more the Iranian leadership can present Iran as Israel's peer. That adds to Iran's prestige, especially since its conventional military capabilities pale in comparison to those of Israel. While Israel can and does send soldiers across the border to surrounding states, and even bombed an Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981, Israel is far enough from Iran that most battles are fought through proxies such as Hezbollah rather than on Iranian soil.

Senior Iranian officials have been vociferous in their denunciations of Israel. Perhaps most famous is the statement of then-president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, which reportedly argued for "wiping Israel off the map."<sup>2</sup> The current supreme leader of Iran, who constitutionally controls Iran's armed forces, has a long history of anti-Israeli rhetoric. He said in 1990,

Regarding the Palestine issue, the problem is taking back Palestine, which means disappearance of Israel. There is no difference between occupied territories before and after [the Arab-Israeli war of] 1967. Every inch of Palestinian land is an inch of Palestinians' home. Any entity ruling Palestine is

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2. A vibrant debate has broken out over whether this represents what Ahmadinejad really said. See, for example, Ethan Bronner, "Just How Far Did They Go, Those Words against Israel?," *New York Times*, June 11, 2006, [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/weekinreview/11bronner.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/weekinreview/11bronner.html?_r=0).



Former secretary of state John Kerry stands with his fellow foreign ministers from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—representatives of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and the GCC itself—on April 7, 2016, at the Four Seasons Hotel in Manama, Bahrain, amid a series of multilateral meetings focused on regional issues.

Source: Photo by U.S. Department of State, available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Secretary\\_Kerry\\_StandsWith\\_His\\_Fellow\\_Foreign\\_Ministers\\_From\\_the\\_Gulf\\_Cooperation\\_Council\\_Amid\\_a\\_Series\\_of\\_Meetings\\_in\\_Manama\\_\(26227101111\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Secretary_Kerry_StandsWith_His_Fellow_Foreign_Ministers_From_the_Gulf_Cooperation_Council_Amid_a_Series_of_Meetings_in_Manama_(26227101111).jpg).

illegitimate unless it is Islamic and by Palestinians. Our position is what our late Imam [Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini] said, “Israel must disappear.”<sup>3</sup>

The Israeli government has understood the depth of Iranian hostility, and it has responded to it. While Israel prepares itself for a wide number of threats, many of those threats have some link to Iran. Iran supports armed groups that engage in terrorism and irregular warfare, including Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Iran’s potential military threat to Israel has also emerged as a central issue for Israeli national security. In many ways, Israel sees Iran behind both its immediate threats—the array of Iranian-backed proxy groups—and its longer-term threats, represented by the Iranian nuclear weapons program.

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3. Akbar Ganji, “Ayatollah Khamenei and the Destruction of Israel,” *Boston Review*, November 1, 2013, <https://bostonreview.net/world/ganji-khamenei-israel>.

On the political level, Israeli politicians have used the Iranian threat as a welcome unifying theme in the face of divisive internal politics. Israel faces deep splits over religious-secular divisions in public life, economic policy, and strategy toward both its own Arab population and the Palestinian population within its international borders. Iran, by contrast, is a simple and straightforward matter, made more so by the apocalyptic proclamations of the Iranian leadership toward Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has stressed Iran as an issue in his domestic political campaigns, and has made opposition to Iran a central theme in his international engagements. In September 2012, he famously addressed the United Nations General Assembly with a cartoon drawing of a bomb with a fuse and argued that Iran was merely a year away from having enough highly enriched uranium to build a nuclear weapon. In an address to a joint meeting of Congress in March 2015, Netanyahu spoke exclusively about the threat Iran poses to Israel and the world.

For Netanyahu, Iran validates his view that Israel is surrounded by enemies and therefore remains in a perpetual state of war.<sup>4</sup> He references Jewish history, especially the Holocaust, to justify his focus on Iran and persuade his audiences that Iran is the reincarnation of Nazism and previous attempts to exterminate the Jewish people.<sup>5</sup> In May 2016, Netanyahu's defense minister bitterly resigned and attacked the prime minister for exaggerating the Iranian threat. The next month, he argued that the Iranian nuclear program "does not constitute an immediate, existential threat for Israel," and Israel's genuine threats were precisely the internal cleavages that alarm over the Iranian threat helps obscure.<sup>6</sup>

While Iran represents an easy target for Israeli politicians, it represents a much more complicated target for the Israeli military. In contrast to the Israeli political cacophony over the Iranian threat, the Israeli military has adopted a strategy of quiet deterrence. A strikingly clear policy document issued in 2016, *IDF Strategy*, focuses explicitly on Israel's deterrence strategy and the need to maintain a deterrent threat.<sup>7</sup> While Israel has been increasingly successful deterring the states on its borders, Iran poses a more complicated problem. In part, there is the straightforward issue that if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapons capability, it could endanger Israel, thereby deterring Israel from responding to an Iranian attack (although, to be sure, Israel is widely reported to possess at least 200 nuclear warheads, representing a very real and substantial deterrent to Iran).

Less theoretical is Iran's support of a range of violent nonstate actors that threaten Israel from within and beyond its borders. Former head of Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Military Intelligence

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4. In a meeting with members of the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Netanyahu reportedly told Knesset members, "You think there is a magic wand here, but I disagree. I'm asked if we will forever live by the sword—yes." See Barak Ravid, "Netanyahu: I Don't Want a Binational State, but We Need to Control All of the Territory for the Foreseeable Future," *Haaretz*, October 26, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.682374>.

5. Numerous articles have highlighted the influence of Benjamin Netanyahu's father, Benzion Netanyahu, who was a scholar of the Spanish Inquisition, on shaping the prime minister's worldview. See, for example, Avner Ben-Zaken, "The Father, the Son (Bibi) and the Spirit of Catastrophe," *Haaretz*, May 24, 2015, <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.657593>.

6. Ben Hartman, "Ya'alon Pans Netanyahu as Fear-Monger, Announces Run in Next Election," *Jerusalem Post*, June 16, 2016, <http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Yaalon-Israel-doesnt-face-any-existential-threat-not-even-Iran-456978>.

7. Belfer Center, *Deterring Terror: How Israel Confronts the Next Generation of Threats* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center, 2016), <http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/files/IDF%20doctrine%20translation%20-%20web%20final2.pdf>.

Amos Malka writes that the latter problem is especially confounding because the “equation of deterrence” between a state and a terrorist organization is largely asymmetric. This is illustrated by two important concepts: “the weakness of power” and “the power of weakness.” According to Malka, the weakness of power is “the inability to translate potential force and a clear strategic advantage into effective deterrence.” Its corollary, the power of weakness, is the “capability of the weaker side . . . to create local or functional power to deter the stronger side and/or extend its room for maneuver asymmetrically.”<sup>8</sup>

The IDF’s answer to this new threat environment is “deterrence through a continuous uninterrupted offensive effort” or the concept of the “campaign between wars.” The objective is an ongoing and routine series of covert and overt military operations intended to strengthen deterrence, postpone war, and lengthen the time between Israel’s military conflicts.<sup>9</sup>

Israel has sought to develop its deterrence against Iran by striking Iranian allies. In September 2007, Israeli jets quietly destroyed Syria’s al-Kibar nuclear facility before it could be operationalized. But Israel has largely failed to deny Hezbollah sophisticated antitank and antiship missiles such as the C-802, which incapacitated an Israeli Navy corvette during the 2006 war, or drones that have repeatedly probed Israeli airspace.

Israel’s strikes against Iranian allies have served their purpose to be sure, but they have also incurred costs to Israel. The consistent use of disproportionate retaliation, as well as the destruction of civilian infrastructure, has drawn widespread international criticism.<sup>10</sup> Israel can achieve gains on the battlefield, but its victims win gains among sympathetic global publics.

Israel’s most visible effort to deter Iran is its force structure. For decades Israel has sought to maintain a technological edge or a qualitative military edge (QME) against its enemies to compensate for its lack of geographic depth and for its smaller armed forces. U.S. support has been instrumental in building and maintaining Israel’s QME, which has become enshrined in U.S. legislation. But QME is increasingly more difficult to maintain and only partially addresses Israel’s complex threat environment. Israel’s acquisition of the F-35 joint strike fighter will enhance its deterrence against Iran, if Iran believes that Israel would launch a military strike against the country, though the F-35 will not change Israel’s deterrence equation against Hezbollah, Hamas, or Jihadi-Salafist groups. Short of an explicit military threat against Iran with clear redlines, Israel’s ability to deter Iran from both supporting nonstate actors and cheating on JCPOA terms is limited. Only the United States and other signatories to the agreement have direct influence to deter Iran from cheating, either through imposing snapback sanctions or other penalties. Israel could threaten to use force should Iran violate the agreement or take certain actions related to its nuclear infrastructure, but that could potentially put Israel at odds with the United States and other key states. Moreover, given past speculation about Israeli military strikes against Iran, it is unclear

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8. Amos Malka, “Israel and Asymmetrical Deterrence,” Institute for Policy and Strategy, 2, [http://blogs.brandeis.edu/siis/files/2014/04/Malka-\\_Israel\\_and\\_Asymmetrical\\_Deterrence.pdf](http://blogs.brandeis.edu/siis/files/2014/04/Malka-_Israel_and_Asymmetrical_Deterrence.pdf).

9. See Gadi Siboni, “The IDF Strategy: A Focused Action Approach,” *INSS Insight* no. 739, Institute for National Security Studies, August 27, 2015, <http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=10446>.

10. The UN’s Goldstone Report following the 2008–2009 confrontation with Hamas is an important example.

whether a future Israeli threat would be credible enough to deter certain Iranian activities or decisions.

In notable response to its neighbors, Israel has been reluctant to engage in proxy wars with Iran, especially in Syria. While Israel historically made common cause with some Christian groups in Lebanon during the Lebanese civil war, it has resisted much direct involvement in Syria's ongoing civil war, occurring across the Golan Heights. This is for at least two reasons. First, Israel is deeply hostile to the jihadi groups fighting the Assad government, as they are hostile to Israel. As much as there is enmity with Syria, the alternative looks no better for Israel. Second, and perhaps more importantly, Israel has successfully deterred Assad and his patrons for years. Deterring jihadis would be a whole different kind of challenge for the Israeli military, and it would have an uncertain outcome. Israel seems trapped in not wanting either side to win, but it certainly is not troubled that each side is preoccupied fighting an enemy other than Israel. There are persistent reports of Israeli coordination with some of the non-jihadi forces fighting Assad, and of Israel providing medical treatment to injured fighters and others.<sup>11</sup> It remains unclear how much of that effort is a covert action intended to boost the fortunes of the Free Syrian Army, and how much is intended to create a counternarrative to the vociferous state-sponsored anti-Semitism that has flowed out of Syria for decades.

Israeli government attitudes toward a potential threat from Iran are easier to discern than those of the Gulf states for several reasons. In part, as a democracy, Israeli political leaders are quite open about their perceptions of threats and what to do about them. They work hard to win over the broad citizenry to their point of view. The press and academia are similarly open, and they frequently put forward a wide variety of viewpoints and alternative analysis. Even though its operational details are heavily guarded, the Israeli military is also relatively open to public scrutiny, and its officers and veterans are widely quoted in the press and elsewhere.

By contrast, many of the Gulf Arab states are more closed. They tend to see security strategy as a prerogative of the ruler, and royals generally populate the highest reaches of the military and security establishment. While all of the Gulf Arab states have legislative bodies, they are deferential to the ruling families and generally abstain from open discussions about alternative strategic postures. Military budgets are not subjected to legislative scrutiny, nor are treaties submitted to elected bodies for ratification. It is surprising, then, to note that while Gulf Arab leaders have been outspoken about the threat they feel from Iran, the preponderance of what they have said and written is in English and not in Arabic. Thus although there is a global English-language debate about both the nature of the Iranian threat and the proper response to it, in Arabic there is more of a consensus not only that Iran is a threat but that rulers' response to that threat is legitimate and internally uncontested.

For many of the Gulf states, Iran's hostility long predated the Islamic Republic, and will survive long after it. When asked about Iranian support for sectarian divisions in the region almost 10 years ago, a senior Gulf royal observed, "The Iranians have only been Shi'a for 500 years. They have been

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11. See, for example, Dov Lieber, "Is Treating Syrians a Humanitarian Gesture or Strategic Policy for Israel?," *Times of Israel*, March 20, 2016, <http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-curious-case-of-israels-syrian-patients/>.

Persians for millennia.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, officials in the Gulf Arab states bristle at terming the body of water on their shores the “Persian Gulf,” for fear of legitimizing Iranian claims of regional dominance. The Gulf Arab states supported Saddam Hussein throughout the 1980s, seeking to build up Iraq as an Arab balancer against Iranian regional dominance. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing until today, they assembled massive arsenals of U.S. weaponry including more than a hundred billion dollars’ worth of fighter jets, attack helicopters, missile defense systems, antiarmor missiles, tanks, and advanced frigates. Integral to the Arab states’ strategy was the knowledge that arms agreements entail long engagements of training and maintenance that would keep the United States interested in their fortunes for decades to come. Each Gulf state save Saudi Arabia also has at least one U.S. military base (U.S. troops were at the Prince Sultan Airbase until withdrawn under domestic pressure following 9/11; the United States maintains a mission advising the Saudi National Guard at a base outside Riyadh). In addition, many of the Gulf states maintain supplementary security relationships with European countries such as France and the United Kingdom, driven by weapons sales and training.

Among the GCC states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have been most outspoken about the threat from Iran, and they have been the most active responding to what they see as the new threat environment emerging after the JCPOA.

At least verbally, Saudi Arabia has refrained from condemning the JCPOA, as it had reacted to an initial framework agreement two years before.<sup>13</sup> In a tepid announcement, the Saudi cabinet allowed, “The government of the kingdom sees that if there was goodwill, this agreement could represent a preliminary step towards a comprehensive solution to the Iranian nuclear program.”<sup>14</sup> Yet, alongside reassurances were not-so-quietly whispered warnings of potential Saudi responses. Parallel to statements supporting the initial deal in 2014, connected Saudis warned that the kingdom was considering developing its own nuclear weapons capabilities to match Iran’s, and suggested that the kingdom would be willing to become a pariah state and rupture its ties with the United States if it had to.<sup>15</sup> Other reports claimed that the kingdom would seek the protection of Pakistan by asking the South Asian nation either to extend a nuclear umbrella or to provide the kingdom with nuclear weapons in the event that Iran successfully developed such capabilities.<sup>16</sup>

Saudi Arabia is leading regional initiatives that aim to roll back Iranian advances, put a stop to perceived Iranian encroachment on traditional Saudi spheres of influence, and weaken Iran’s grip on its own established bases of power. These proxy conflicts span the Middle East, affecting Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and others. In Syria, Saudi Arabia has been one of the biggest supporters of rebel fighters waging a campaign against the Assad regime. The kingdom has

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12. Private conversation with an Emirati royal, January 2007.

13. Adam B. Learner, “Saudi Arabia Cautiously Endorses Iran Deal,” *POLITICO*, June 4, 2015, <http://www.politico.com/story/2015/04/saudi-arabia-iran-nuclear-deal-116694>.

14. “Saudi Arabia Welcomes Iran Nuclear Agreement,” Al Jazeera, November 25, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/11/saudi-arabia-welcomes-iran-nuclear-agreement-2013112513519366380.html>.

15. “Saudi Arabia Considers Its Own Nuclear Options after Iran Deal,” Reuters, July 21, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-saudi-nuclear-idUSKCN0PV1GC20150721>.

16. Simeon Kerr, “Gulf States Publicly Praise, Privately Fear Iran Nuclear Deal—FT.com,” *Financial Times*, July 15, 2015, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/c740cae0-2644-11e5-bd83-71cb60e8f08c.html#axzz4GClfqxt>.

bankrolled arms transfers to rebel forces (both “moderate” and Islamist) and funded covert training programs in Jordan and Turkey.<sup>17</sup> The Saudi strategy of arming and training rebels to fight in Syria came as a direct response to Iran’s continuous and large-scale support of the Assad regime, support that has taken the form of weapons, cash, foreign fighters, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) personnel (including high-ranking members).<sup>18</sup> Both Saudi Arabia and Iran know that the fall of the Assad regime would be a severe blow to Iranian interests in the region; Bashar al-Assad’s demise would cut off a vital supply line to Hezbollah (an essential component of Iran’s deterrence strategy in the region) and reverse the trend of Saudi losses in the region.

Saudi Arabia has also been operating a punishing war in Yemen since 2015 against Houthi rebels, who have waged their own battles against the Saudis for more than a decade. In an interview with *Der Spiegel*, Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir voiced the Saudi view that the Houthis are “radical militia allied with Iran and Hezbollah that took over the country.”<sup>19</sup> Many observers believe that the Houthis’ ties to Iran are far less direct than Iran’s ties to Hezbollah; further, Yemen provides a relatively low-cost way for Iran to remind Saudi Arabia of Iran’s ability to affect Saudi Arabia’s security interests.

The United Arab Emirates shares much of Saudi Arabia’s strategy. While it too issued statements of quiet support for the JCPOA, UAE officials were clearly distressed by what they saw as Western overeagerness to open up to Iran.<sup>20</sup> When EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini authored an article in the *Guardian* that discussed incorporating Iran into a regional security framework, UAE minister of state for foreign affairs Anwar Gargash chastised her, saying the article “lacks context and understanding of Iran’s regional and aggressive policy and sectarian overtones that have polarized the Middle East.”<sup>21</sup>

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17. Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, “U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels,” *New York Times*, January 23, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>; C. J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, “Saudis Step Up Help for Rebels in Syria with Croatian Arms,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/26/world/middleeast/in-shift-saudis-are-said-to-arm-rebels-in-syria.html>; Mark Mazzetti and Ali Younes, “C.I.A. Arms for Syrian Rebels Supplied Black Market, Officials Say,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/27/world/middleeast/cia-arms-for-syrian-rebels-supplied-black-market-officials-say.html>.

18. “Iran ‘Sending Arms to Syria Despite Ban,’” *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2012/05/20125175553158930.html>; Eli Lake, “Iran Spends Billions to Prop Up Assad,” *Bloomberg View*, June 9, 2015, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-09/iran-spends-billions-to-prop-up-assad>; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, “Afghan Refugees in Iran Being Sent to Fight and Die for Assad in Syria,” *The Guardian*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/05/iran-recruits-afghan-refugees-fight-save-syrias-bashar-al-assad>; Ruth Sherlock, “Iran Boosts Support to Syria,” *The Telegraph*, February 21, 2014, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10654144/Iran-boosts-support-to-Syria.html>.

19. Adel al-Jubeir, interview by Samiha Shafy and Bernhard Zand, “Interview with Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubeir on Syrian War,” *Spiegel Online*, February 19, 2016, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/interview-with-saudi-foreign-minister-adel-al-jubeir-on-syrian-war-a-1078337.html>.

20. Alexander Cornwell, “Iran Nuclear Deal to Spur UAE Trade, Investment,” *GulfNews*, July 14, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/business/economy/iran-nuclear-deal-to-spur-uae-trade-investment-1.1550400>.

21. William Maclean, “Gulf Arab Power UAE Chides EU over Opening to Iran,” *Reuters*, July 29, 2015, <http://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-nuclear-emirates-eu-idUKKCN0Q324E20150729>.

Yousef Al Otaiba, the United Arab Emirates' ambassador to Washington, acutely expressed the UAE's skepticism toward Iran in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed marking the JCPOA's first anniversary. Otaiba confessed that the agreement might have made the world safer, but followed up with the opinion that it had done so "only in the short term and only when it comes to Iran's nuclear-weapons proliferation."<sup>22</sup> Otaiba went on to lament the fact that Iran has continued to act in a "hostile, expansionist, [and] violent" manner, and that since the signing of the nuclear deal "Iran has only doubled down on its posturing and provocations."<sup>23</sup> Afterward, the Emirati ambassador to Washington listed many Iranian infractions that took place after the signing of the agreement, demonstrating Iran's lack of commitment to upholding the agreement they had signed less than a year ago. He reached the conclusion that "if the carrots of engagement aren't working, we [the international community] must not be afraid to bring back the sticks"—a thinly veiled call for military and political action.<sup>24</sup>

The United Arab Emirates has invested billions of dollars in its independent military capacities in the last decade, developing a skilled jet fighter capability, an advanced antimissile capability, and small but highly capable special forces.

The United Arab Emirates has demonstrated its capacities through an active role in military operations in Yemen, deploying 30 fighter jets and a brigade of troops.<sup>25</sup> In mid-2016, however, the United Arab Emirates seemed to refocus its operations on jihadi groups operating in the Hadramawt (in the far east of the country) and the south, putting relatively less attention on Iranian-backed rebels in the north.

The United Arab Emirates' relationship with Iran is more complicated than Saudi Arabia's, however, because Iran remains such a large trading partner despite tensions between the two governments. Dhows have plied the waters between Persia and the Arab ports on the tip of the Arabian Peninsula for centuries before either Iran or the United Arab Emirates existed, and that trade has been consistently over \$10 billion a year even at the height of sanctions. There is a considerable Iranian population resident in the United Arab Emirates, and a considerable number of Emiratis of Iranian heritage. In practice, familiarity with Iran eases tensions, while the presence of Iranians makes some Emiratis uneasy that an Iranian-backed fifth column is lurking within the country.

Qatar seems the most conflicted in its approach to Iran. Like the United Arab Emirates, it shares important common interests. The most significant is the South Pars/North Dome gas field, which is shared between the two countries. Qatar's diplomacy has often sought to avoid angering its far more powerful partner, seeming to try to triangulate between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

In recent years, however, Qatar has appeared more alarmed by Iran's regional behavior. In response, it has helped support some of the more radical forces fighting against Iranian-backed

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22. Yousef Al Otaiba, "One Year after the Iran Nuclear Deal," *Wall Street Journal*, April 3, 2016 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/one-year-after-the-iran-nuclear-deal-1459721502>.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Saeed Al-Batati and Kareem Fahim, "Foreign Ground Troops Join Yemen Fight," *New York Times*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/04/world/middleeast/foreign-ground-troops-join-yemen-fight.html>.

troops in Syria. Qatar's arming of Syrian rebels reached the extent of supplying them with Chinese and Eastern European-made Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems (MANPADS), which the U.S. government had expressly urged Arab allies not to do.<sup>26</sup> In addition to providing weapons to groups willing to fight the Assad regime, Qatar has also helped finance the training of vetted rebels and "allowed a Qatari base to be used as an additional training location."<sup>27</sup>

Qatar was an active part of the anti-Houthi coalition in Yemen, although reporting on the Qatari contributions to the fight has declined precipitously since news came out of the initial commitment of 10 fighter jets, 1,000 ground troops, 200 armored vehicles, and 30 Apache attack helicopters.<sup>28</sup>

Kuwait has played a generally cautious role, in part because of its proximity to Iran and in part due to its large resident Shi'ite population (which is partly comprised of Iranian émigrés who came as tradesmen, and also of some very powerful old trading families). Kuwait seemed cautiously optimistic that the JCPOA would usher in sharply reduced tensions between Iran and its Gulf neighbors. In a July 2015 meeting with Mohammad Javad Zarif, Kuwait's minister of foreign affairs stressed, "All countries in the region unanimously agree that we should start a comprehensive regional dialogue with Iran, as one of the important and influential countries in the region. We collaborate with many countries and many regional and international organizations, so why shouldn't we do the same with Iran?"<sup>29</sup> The thawing of relations between Kuwait and Iran took a sharp turn toward the second half of 2015. Multiple arrests and uncovered terror plots, by groups with alleged links to Iran, quickly soured relations between the two nations.<sup>30</sup>

In Syria, from 2011 to mid-2014, Kuwait emerged "as a financing and organizational hub for charities and individuals supporting Syria's myriad rebel groups."<sup>31</sup> Private donors took advantage of Kuwait's unique freedom of association and its—at the time—relatively weak financial rules to

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26. Mark Mazzetti, C. J. Chivers, and Eric Schmitt, "Taking Outsize Role in Syria, Qatar Funnels Arms to Rebels," *New York Times*, June 29, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/30/world/middleeast/sending-missiles-to-syrian-rebels-qatar-muscles-in.html>.

27. Mazzetti and Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels."

28. "Saudi 'Decisive Storm' Waged to Save Yemen," *Al Arabiya English*, March 25, 2015, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2015/03/26/GCC-states-to-repel-Houthi-aggression-in-Yemen-statement-.html>; "Qatar Deploys 1,000 Ground Troops to Fight in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, September 7, 2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/09/qatar-deploys-1000-ground-troops-fight-yemen-150907043020594.html>.

29. Saeid Jafari, "How Iran Should Approach the GCC," *Al-Monitor*, August 3, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-gcc-relations.html>.

30. "Kuwait Charges 24 'Linked to Iran' with Plotting Attacks," *Alaraby*, September 1, 2015, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2015/9/1/kuwait-charges-24-linked-to-iran-with-plotting-attacks>; Habib Toumi, "Smuggled Arms Buried near Iraqi Border Came from Iran," *Gulf News*, August 16, 2015, <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/smuggled-arms-buried-near-iraqi-border-came-from-iran-1.1567743>.

31. Elizabeth Dickinson, "Playing with Fire: Why Private Gulf Financing for Syria's Extremist Rebels Risks Igniting Sectarian Conflict at Home," *Analyses Paper no. 16*, Brookings, December 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/playing-with-fire-why-private-gulf-financing-for-syrias-extremist-rebels-risks-igniting-sectarian-conflict-at-home/>.

channel money to an estimated 1,000 rebel brigades fighting against Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>32</sup>

The outlier in all of this has been Oman, a country that has assiduously strived to remain non-aligned amid rising tensions in the Gulf. Oman, after all, hosted U.S. and Iranian negotiators for the initial secret talks that led to the JCPOA. This appears to be partly for commercial reasons—Iran and Oman are developing an underwater gas pipeline to supply Oman—but also for strategic ones. Oman is a consistent outlier in regional initiatives, avoiding military engagement in Yemen and Syria, eschewing a 34-country “counterterrorism coalition” pushed by Saudi Arabia in December 2015, and refusing participation in a regional ballistic missile defense system. Oman carefully maintains a balance between the region’s powers, ensuring that it is useful to all as a means of protecting its sovereignty.

Oman seems to have concluded what its other neighbors have not: that engaging with Iran, even from a position of inferiority, will protect the national interests. Many other neighbors made precisely the opposite conclusion. They saw Iran’s regional activities and weapons programs, and they concluded that Iran’s thirst for power and influence was one that cannot be slaked. While they differ in their combativeness, they are unified in their view that Iran represents a persistent threat to the Middle East.

Iran has a diverse set of neighbors with a diverse set of capabilities. While the Gulf Arab states and Israel take a variety of approaches to their relations with Iran, they are unified in one thing: each sees Iran as a threat to itself and to the region. This is in part because Iran’s size—more than 75 million people—dwarfs them, and in part because Iran is a non-Arab and non-Sunni power that is seeking influence in a region that is predominantly Sunni Arab. Yet, Iran’s actions play a large role in these countries’ perceptions. Time and time again the Iranian government’s actions remind these states that the Iranian government seeks to change the status quo, by force if necessary, and they must remain on guard.

For each and every country, the response to the Iranian threat is the same: to seek to bring the United States on board in order to confront Iran more directly. U.S. military capability and diplomatic ties exceed those of any of the parties in the region. The GCC states are reluctant to cooperate extensively with each other on security, seeking to deepen bilateral security cooperation with the United States rather than multilateral cooperation with each other. In some areas, such as missile defense, U.S. officials privately complain it makes no sense to provide individual assistance to GCC states, because each would be far better protected by an integrated regional system of detection and interception. And yet, more than 20 years of U.S. efforts to promote a genuine regional security framework have faltered. Mutual distrust among the GCC states has undermined effective and close security collaboration, and some also fear a collective security relationship would put distance between individual GCC governments and the United States, leaving the individual governments more vulnerable. For some in the U.S. government, the whole exercise smacks of moral hazard. That is to say, the U.S. protection drives some Gulf Arab countries to be reckless with Iran, which draws the United States in closer to protect them, which frees them to be

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32. Sylvia Westall and Mahmoud Harby, “Insight: Kuwaitis Campaign Privately to Arm Syrian Rebels,” Reuters, June 27, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-kuwait-insight-idUSBRE95P0TG20130627>.

more reckless. The outgrowth, they argue, is an increasingly costly U.S. role that actually provides diminishing security.<sup>33</sup>

The story is somewhat different with Israel, which has a massive U.S. military aid relationship but no U.S. bases and no regional allies with which it can form military alliances. Yet, in the case of Israel as well, the U.S. relationship is the ultimate guarantor of security against Iranian aggression. For some analysts, all of the talk of an Israeli strike on Iran as the JCPOA was being negotiated was not so much a direct threat but an effort to move the United States and other nations to protect Israel's interests.<sup>34</sup>

For both the Gulf Arab states and Israel, a fear that the United States might abandon the Middle East by rebalancing toward Asia is real. Similarly disturbing is the prospect that President Donald Trump might rethink the way that the United States engages with global partners, insisting that they give more and get less. They are reassured by initial signs that the Trump administration is less concentrated on Asia and more focused on Iranian malfeasance than the Obama administration had been. Iran tops the list of international threats for all of them.

In July 2016, retired Saudi major general Anwar Eshki traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Israeli officials. While Eshki claimed that his trip enjoyed no royal endorsement and was undertaken on behalf of his Jeddah-based think tank, it was widely perceived as an exploration of closer Saudi-Israeli ties. Eshki stressed that he brought up the Arab Peace Initiative to bring an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict, which originated in Saudi Arabia in 2002. It is an issue on which the two sides have differed. Eshki must have looked for common ground in his meetings as well, and Iran must certainly have been the central element in that discussion. In pursuing its security strategy, Iran has brought two of its most powerful adversaries together.

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33. President Obama was somewhat more diplomatic when he told an interviewer, "An approach that said to our friends 'You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran' would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East." Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

34. Jeffrey Goldberg, "Netanyahu Could Be Bluffing," *Bloomberg View*, March 12, 2012, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2012-03-12/in-iran-standoff-netanyahu-may-be-bluffing-commentary-by-jeffrey-goldberg>.