

The Future of US and GCC Relations: Break-up, Re-engagement or Partnership?

by *Nurşin Ateşoğlu Güney*

It is no secret that before the meeting at Camp David both Washington and the Gulf states had important expectations from each other. For the GCC leaders, it was important to get assurance on two issues. These states first and foremost wanted to attain a real security guarantee from the US in relation to the possibility of any external conventional attacks as well as about the continuing regional proxy wars that are being waged by Iran in places like Syria, Iraq and Yemen. In Washington there remained two concerns. Firstly, about gaining the confidence of the GCC states concerning the continuing Iranian nuclear deal and secondly, obtaining the support of the Emirates for US policies in the Middle East.¹ Assessments by the IR community on the fate of US-American relations post the May 2015 Camp David Summit have been numerous. Those who have considered the Camp David Summit results as either a success or failure have based their evaluations the current problematic



security issues associated with the US extended deterrence mechanism previously guaranteed. Under the current status of the Iranian nuclear program, the GCC countries have developed certain security concerns over the fate of the ongoing negotiations between P5+1 and Tehran. In order to understand the current debates concerning future relations between the GCC and America, this paper will analyse the question as to what extent Washington has succeeded in relieving the Gulf States' security concerns in relation to the possibility of a nuclear deal with Iran.

The repercussions from the Arab Spring and the lack of a comprehensive regional security framework for the past

5 years in the Middle East have either given way to counter-revolutions or state failure. The security vacuum in the Middle East was soon filled by numerous transnational non-state actors like ISIS and simultaneously leading to a proliferation of weapons. Amongst these volatile conditions experts have proclaimed that the Iranian nuclear program has reached a three month break-out capacity. And hence, the security concerns of the GCC states were not heeled down both after the signature of the 2014 Geneva Interim agreement and/or the newly concluded framework agreement between P5+1 and Tehran in Lausanne. That is why; both Washington and the GCC leaders decided to meet at the Camp David Summit in

¹ 'Has the Camp David Summit Succeeded or Failed?', *Middle East Briefing: A Weekly Publication of Orient Advisory Group*, <http://mebriefing.com/?p=1694>, last visited on 18 May 2015.

May 2015 with the aim of finding reassuring answers to the Gulf States' security concerns about Iran.

When Iran first commenced fissile material production in February 2007 at Natanz, by feeding the uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) into its gas centrifuges for enrichment purposes, the GCC countries became threatened by the possibility Iran going nuclear. Since 2007, Iran has focused on enriching uranium at two levels: up to five percent of the isotope U-235 and 20 percent of the U-235. Strikingly, Iran had by 2010 succeeded in enriching uranium to 20 percent despite the enforced/implemented sanctions, raising concerns not only for the Gulf States but international community as well.² Since 2010, the GCC states have started questioning the current and future status of the American Extended Deterrence in order to determine whether or not they have any viable alternative to the US security guarantee.

In 1980, under the Carter doctrine, Washington undertook to deploy military force in order to defend its national interests in the Persian Gulf. At the time the region was looking for a credible American security assurance against a resurgent Soviet Union and against the possibility of the Iranian Islamic revolution expanding beyond its borders. It is quite ironic that the same GCC countries are today looking for a renewal of an American reassurance in light of a possible nuclear Iran.³

Since the Cold War, the focus of the American Extended Deterrence in the Middle East has shifted from Soviet based ideological issues to regional specific traditional and non-traditional threats. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 was a crucial moment in this regard. In the aftermath of Saddam's invasion, US strategic policy changed radically by relying on the dual containment of Iraq and Iran, considered by Washington as critical threats to both Saudi Arabia and other friendly Gulf. Finally, when the American led forces under the Bush administration totally destroyed Saddam's military capability during the Gulf War, US deterrence policy towards Iran remained unchanged. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, Washington has aimed to constrain Iran from pursuing an aggressive foreign policy by military or other means vis-à-vis the allied GCC monarchies.⁴

2 Wyn Bowen and Matthew Moran, 'Iran's Nuclear Programme: A Case Study in Hedging?', *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol: 35, No:1, pp. 34-39, April 2014.

3 Derek Chollet, '35 Years on, It's Time to Extend the Carter Doctrine', *Oakwood Worldwide*, <http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/05/35-years-its-time-extend-carter-doctrine/112324/>, last visited 19 May 2015.s

4 Mark Doyle, 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran and US Extended Deter-

The GCC states are aware that several scenarios exist and options are available in the event of Iran becoming a nuclear state. The international community is in the hope and expectation that the P5+1 and Iran could avert this possibility at least for another 10 years by concluding a comprehensive agreement and extending the break-out capacity from 3 months to a year. The US is currently trying to convince its GCC partner States that reaching a comprehensive agreement with Iran benefits their overall security. However, the GCC countries are concerned that Tehran will become more emboldened after sanctions relief. Hence the Gulf States today are demanding for a credible written US security guarantee that would take shape either in the form of either the Carter doctrine or a strengthened American Extended Deterrence in the format of NATO. This could take the form of an Article 5 commitment or one based on Article 4 from the Americans in NATO's Washington Document. Alternatively, prior to the Camp David Summit, some GCC states have already made their intention clear that in the case of an Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons they will pursue their own nuclear program.⁵ Experts such as Mark Doyle⁶ believe that the GCC can be expected to adopt one of the available options faced with either a nuclear Iran, failure of negotiations to roll back Tehran's current nuclear program or the result Iran's hedging under the comprehensive deal during the 10 year period. Accordingly, at some point Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States may decide to pursue their own nuclear deterrent.

Another alternative might be that these states seek US assistance in attaining a reinforced US extended nuclear umbrella probably via a new treaty agreement. As one can forecast, the strengthened extended deterrence choice stands as the most preferable option before Washington. In the third option, Saudi Arabia can be expected to develop and deepen its relations with Pakistan to the extent that Riyadh may perhaps prefer to seek a Pakistani nuclear umbrella as an available and alternative deterrent against a nuclear Iran. Finally, the GCC countries in the face of living with a nuclear armed Iran may also adjust to the idea of a deterrent of last choice by seeking France's nuclear umbrella as a substitute for American Extended Deterrence.⁷ Currently the GCC countries whilst continue to worry about how Iran's nuclear prog-

rence in the Gulf', *Strategic Assessment: INSS*, Vol.16, No.3, October 2013, [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan16_3ENG2%20\(3\).pdf_Doyle.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadImages/systemFiles/adkan16_3ENG2%20(3).pdf_Doyle.pdf), last visited on 15 May 2015.

5 Mark Doyle, 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran and...', *ibid*.

6 Mark Doyle, 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran and...', *ibid*.

7 Mark Doyle, 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran and...', *ibid*.

ram will end, are at the same time very much concerned about Tehran's development of both a current and future missile and rocket capability. This because the comprehensive agreement that is expected to be finalized between P5+1 and Iranian government on the 30th June 2015 will not include Tehran's current and future missile and rocket inventory.

Today, most of the GCC states believe that conditions in the Middle East and Gulf region have radically changed and are therefore eager to confirm that the US-GCC defense cooperation will be immediately up-graded and adapted to the current volatile conditions of the region. In this regard, the GCC countries have sketched a list of demands to be met by the Americans. The GCC countries believe that the strategic balance of the Middle East has radically changed and that previous US assurances are insufficient to meet today's security threats. The US also thinks that there is a need to create new ways of revitalizing the current Gulf security in line with current conditions in the Middle East regardless of whether the Iranian nuclear negotiations are successful. In order to meet the GCC countries' security demands the US has until now relied on a strategy that is based on three foundations: (i) the existence of an American military presence, (ii) the upgrading of GCC States military capabilities and (iii) the building of regional cooperation in the Gulf.⁸ Currently, in comparison to the Cold War era, the US military personal presence⁹ in the Gulf has decreased¹⁰ from 230.000 to 50.000. Washington believes that this presence is adequate to respond to any potential crises in guaranteeing the deterrence as well as reassuring the overall security concerns. In this regard, the US has given special importance to building the military capabilities of its partners in the Gulf. The Obama administration's current approach to improving the defense capabilities of the GCC countries is aimed at balancing the regional balance between the GCC States as well as Iran. So, it is not coincidental that the Pentagon, since 2007 has approved arms sales worth over \$85bn to GCC states. Furthermore, America's awareness in the lack of an effective regional security mechanism in the Gulf has created the conditions under which the six GCC states can work

8 Barbara Slavin, 'GCC Won't Get Written Defense Guarantees at Camp David', *Almonitor*, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/gcc-no-written-defense-guarantees-camp-david-1.html#>, last visited on 22 May 2015.

9 Currently, 35.000 American military personnel is stationed in and around the Persian Gulf which includes prepositioning heavy armor, artillery, and the most sophisticated missile defense and air and naval assets.

10 Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, 'Less is More: The Future of the US Military in the Persian Gulf', *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Fall 2014, p.47.

more closely. Moreover, the US administration in order to facilitate existing cooperation between with the GCC States, organized a meeting in Jeddah in May 2015 under the presence of US Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel to lay down policy foundation work for the Camp David meeting on 14th of May 2015. This Jeddah meeting, hosted by King Salman of Saudi Arabia, was in fact launched with the objective of finding ways to improve the ability of the Gulf States to work with the US on future threats such as maritime security, cyber threats and missile defense. In the aftermath of the Jeddah meeting experts from the GCC voiced their dissatisfaction about the outcome, aimed at guaranteeing the conditions that would expand their security cooperation with the US in a more coordinated way. It is no secret that the GCC countries in the face of increasing Gulf's security challenges, have high expectations that they will obtain from Washington a written or a binding security guarantee/commitment at least similar to NATO's or a declaration similar to Carter Doctrine of 1980.

However, at the end of the Camp David Summit on 14th of May 2015, the GCC countries were not provided with NATO type assurances of automatic US aid. In the face of a perceived Iranian threat, the GCC has come away with a working plan that includes the strengthening of their military defense and offense capabilities. Under present conditions it is hard to say that GCC countries' expectations about the reassurance of American Extended Deterrence have been met in line with their expectations.

Conclusion

The Obama administration believes that the nuclear deal with Iran that is expected to be finalized on 30th of June 2015 will reduce the sense of insecurity felt by US allies. In contrast, this comprehensive agreement has created the opposite effect especially on the GCC States. They have for some time been very concerned about the extent of the Iranian nuclear program. In this regard they are looking to obtain conditions from Washington that would assure strategic equality between the Gulf States and Iran in the aftermath of a comprehensive deal with Tehran. However, they are now more concerned about the negative repercussions of the nuclear deal especially when the regime in Tehran is freed from the pressure of the sanctions. The Gulf countries in this regard are much more concerned about Iran's future behavior and want to know how Tehran's assertive regional ambitions will be addressed, especially when Iran was finally freed from sanctions of 150 billion dollars and gained access to new oil revenues. Some military specialists like Mark Doy-

le¹¹ believe that in the event of the Gulf States not receiving either a NATO style security guarantee or a similar Carter doctrine, they should at least be provided with the F-35 capability similar to that which was to be delivered to Israel in 2015. Hence, under the current conditions, the future of the relationship between Washington and the Gulf States either with the presence or lack of an Iranian comprehensive nuclear deal seems destined to many serious challenges ahead.

11 'A Nuclear-Armed Iran and...', *ibid.*

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