

## Iran's role in the Gulf: Beyond politics

### I. Introduction

Regional systems are increasingly shaping interactions at the global level, and of these the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) subsystem is arguably the most complex, dynamic and unstable. Given the centrality of this subsystem to international stability, however, interactions here are having a significant impact on the conditions of the prevailing international order. It is the implosion of the regional order which is casting the longest shadow on the international system, as well as on the patchwork of states and communities whose complex relationships were often hidden from view in the past by the strong hand of ruling authoritarian regimes.

MENA regional instabilities are deepening regional fragmentation and divisions, thereby intensifying regional rivalries. As the energies of the Arab order become drained by continuing civil strife, regime collapse, regime fragility, economic malfunction and the drive to protect the broken shell of so many hitherto strong Arab states, the purdah on the hollowness of state power has finally dropped, exposing the Arab order to deep penetration by non-Arab states and sub-state and non-state actors. What we see now is a patchwork of strident, collapsing and diminished state actors all competing for space against each other and also against the myriad of non-state actors who have sneaked into the multiple vacuums created by the erosion and corrosion of state power in so many MENA countries.

But into this vacuum have also stepped countries of the Gulf, which have acquired a stake and a direct role in the balance of power

in the wider subsystem. In following maximalist policies in pursuit of their own ambitions they are at the same time also significantly affecting relations in their own (Gulf) sub-region. The Gulf, also referred to as the 'Persian Gulf' or 'Arabian Gulf', is of course one of the international system's strategic sub-regions. The Gulf is at once part of the MENA subsystem for its prevalent Arab and strong religious identities, and of the broader Asian regional order as the heartland of Asia's western edge – West Asia. Therefore, it is regarded as strategic not only for its vast hydrocarbon resources and the considerable financial strength of some of its members, but also for the huge economic potential that Iran and Saudi Arabia display.

Due to its geo-strategic location and also its global significance as the cradle of Islam, as the heart of Sunni-Shia differences, and due to its deep pan-state cultural influence, this sub-region is a unique regional security complex with the capacity and the potential to shape the wider order in the MENA subsystem. Thanks to growing energy links, trade and investment partnerships and deep cultural ties, it also directly influences the security dynamics of other Asian regions – in South Asia, Central Asia and Southeast Asia – with which the Gulf states have differing degrees of interaction. The Gulf is a penetrated sub-region, moreover, in which over the horizon powers have held sway for much of modernity and to which European powers attached great value as their empires expanded eastwards into Asia.

As a result, the Gulf's place as a staging post, a source of abundant energy, an arena of rivalries and a fountainhead of great wealth had been established well before the modern

state had become a feature of its political character. Nevertheless, the arrival of the modern state across the Gulf has had a considerable impact on relations between its societies and communities, often driving them apart, but at times also providing the institutional glue – as in the case of the Gulf Cooperation Council – for cooperation and dialogue. But it can be argued that Iran, as the Gulf's 'civilisational' state, has had a unique role in this sub-region and that its politics and policies have directly affected and impacted the inter-state and inter-community relations of its states for generations. The drivers of Iran's domestic politics, however, have only since 1979 been manifesting themselves in Iran's regional policies

## II. The Gulf in Iran's discourse

For Iran, the Gulf is an area of great importance: important in terms of symbolic recognition of its cultural narrative as the longest residential power in West Asia, and important in terms of Tehran's national security calculations. The Strait of Hormuz is the chokepoint through which much of Iran's most precious export commodity, as well as those of its Arab neighbours, leaves for international markets; and it is an arena which outside powers have dominated for decades – from Tehran's perspective, outside powers which have since the Iranian revolution challenged Tehran's influence in the sub-region.

As its oldest, largest and most populous country, imperial and revolutionary Iran came to view the presence of the West since the nineteenth century as a balancer against Iran's natural position as the Gulf's dominant power. Iran neglects the Gulf at its peril, for this is where its destiny is shaped. The chokepoint of the Strait of Hormuz is the country's economic and security lifeline and as its neighbours' futures are also tied to this waterway, Iran sees it as an important pressure point in its relations with its Arab neighbours.

Iran's references to security cooperation with its neighbours therefore tend to focus on freedom of navigation and access. Iran feels compelled to defend it in its own national interest, and at the same time limit what it regards as the intrusive presence of outside powers in the sub-region, namely the US. Yet, the more Tehran insists that Gulf countries themselves be the primary protectors of the waterway, the closer Iran's neighbours draw to the US patron. Iran's approach to matters of 'collective security' also sets it apart from its GCC neighbours, as they do not necessarily bestow upon Iran the role of the guardianship of the chokepoint and instead tend to see it as potential disrupter in the Gulf. Iran's naval manoeuvres, its threatening statements about blocking the Straits if its national security is threatened, and its cat and mouse naval games with the US Navy feed the GCC's deep concerns about Iran's regional ambitions.

Far from being a shared destiny and a focus of a common cause, the strategic importance of the waterway has ironically helped to divide Iran from its GCC neighbours. So, while Iran rationalises its policies on the basis of its natural geographical, demographic and ideological supremacy, many of its neighbours have instead come to see them as Iran's drive for domination and, worse, for hegemony.

Thus, political upheavals, inter-state tensions, communal differences, religious divisions and political instability have made of the Gulf a securitised sub-region, but one of great importance to the local states and great and major powers beyond.

## III. All change: Iran's role following the fall of Baghdad

Iran's relations with its Arab neighbours have been in flux since the 1960s, and while initially it was the dominance of the Pahlavi machine that small and vulnerable neighbours feared,

following the Islamic revolution in 1979 concerns of Iranian aggression and interference in their domestic affairs became paramount. As a result, the first 10 years following the revolution were fraught with the danger of conflict spilling over to burn the entire sub-region, yet the 1990s was a decade of rebuilding and rapprochement between Iran and the GCC. With Iraq isolated for its attack on Kuwait in 1990, Iran had the space to develop a constructive dialogue with its neighbours, which its reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, championed from the first day he took office in 1997.

The new millennium, however, saw a rapid worsening of relations as Iran's fortunes in the region changed dramatically following the 11 September 2001 terror attacks on the US. While the Saudis were under siege for their support of Salafi movements internationally, within two years of the terror attacks Iran had watched its two main regional adversaries in Afghanistan (the al-Qaeda-backed Taliban government) and Iraq (the Saddam Hussein-dominated Ba'ath regime) be swept away by the might of the US military. Although Iran remained on the US target list and although Tehran remained highly suspicious of America's military interventions in the region following 9/11, and of Washington's intentions towards Iran, it was nevertheless also true that US action had provided Iran with a great strategic window through which to extend its influence.

The 2003 war, which unseated Iraq's anti-Iran Ba'athist ruling order, was therefore an undeniable boon for Tehran. Following a short period of anxiety about Washington's broader intentions in the wake of President George W. Bush's 'axis of evil' declaration in January 2002, Iran settled into capitalising on Iraq's post-Ba'ath and post-Sunni order to create a series of political, economic, social and cultural inroads into Iraq so as to make its position there unassailable. Iran's derived

'victory' in Iraq unnerved Iraq's other Gulf Arab neighbours and fuelled the fires of tension between Tehran and several GCC capitals.

Not surprising then that Iran's relations with its GCC neighbours ran aground during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, and despite efforts by the GCC side – for example inviting the Iranian president to attend the 2007 GCC summit in Doha – security and political tensions rose over Iran's role in Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen, over its defiant nuclear posture, over its confrontational stance on the three islands dispute with the UAE (with Ahmadinejad visiting Abu Musa in defiance of the GCC/Arab positions), over alleged attempts on the life of Saudi diplomats in the US, and over bellicose statements regarding the security of its southern neighbours for their alliance with Washington, leaving the GCC party underwhelmed by Iranian, and US, actions.

Tensions over Iraq, followed by the fallout from Iran's growing presence in several of the post-2011 Arab uprisings states, compounded fears about Iran's nuclear programme feeding Tehran's wider ambitions, thus creating a broad narrative and picture in Arab and Sunni circles of a Shia-Persian force on the march from Iran with the intention of establishing hegemony in their neighbourhood. With the crisis in Syria out of control and increasingly clear indications that Tehran's negotiations with the P5+1 (five Permanent Members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) were unlikely to lead to a peaceful settlement of the nuclear dispute, by the last year of Ahmadinejad's presidency the GCC states were desperate for signs of change in Iran's behaviour. The final communiqué of the Second US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum held in September 2012 made clear that the:

“... officials expressed their grave concern over Iran's ongoing military

and financial support for the Assad regime and Iran's continued efforts to expand its nuclear program and enriched uranium stockpile in violation of its international obligations. Ministers called on Iran to uphold its international responsibilities under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and United Nations Security Council resolutions and to fully and transparently cooperate with the International Atomic Energy Agency. The officials called on Iran to commit seriously to a constructive diplomatic process with the P5+1 to restore international confidence in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program. They expressed deep concern about continued Iranian interference in the domestic affairs of GCC member countries and called on Iran to respect international norms in this regard."<sup>1</sup>

Yet, the message out of Tehran was one of defiance. Amidst the crippling sanctions, the most stringent in modern history according to US President Barack Obama, Iran's foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi hailed victory for Iran against the global powers in the February 2013 nuclear talks in Almaty. This was hardly the news the GCC states wanted to hear. The Majlis National Security Council member Mohammad Ismail Kothari stated that "the Iranian nation's resistance to Western pressure and sanctions, and its steadfast position on nuclear energy, has defeated the hostile policy of the Western countries – and this defeat has made them more flexible in the talks."<sup>2</sup>

Not surprising then that the (rather unexpected) election to the presidency of the politically experienced insider Hojjatoleslam Hassan Rouhani in 2013 was greeted with

relief across the region. Despite being a core elite member and with strong ties to the leadership, the West too took delight in the return of a self-declared moderate and pragmatist to the presidential helm in Iran. Though a cleric, Rouhani nevertheless drew his sails close to the Rafsanjani-Khatami camp – a centrist posture with ties to what remained of the reform camp. Rouhani's election campaign continuously focused on his vision of a peaceful Iran at ease with its neighbours and the international community.

On the GCC side, scepticism was tinged with hope that Rouhani's election would mark a new dawn in trans-Gulf relations. Indeed, several GCC countries, most notably Oman but also Qatar and Kuwait, positively welcomed the promises being made by the new administration in Tehran, Oman having made significant efforts to rehabilitate the Islamic Republic even before Rouhani's electoral success. Muscat, of course, had already broken the ice for the next president by facilitating the most constructive direct bilateral US-Iranian talks over Iran's nuclear programme in March 2013.

The political changes in Iran were indeed significant regionally, for they raised in the GCC states the hope that Rouhani would not only improve relations with them, but also revamp Tehran's policies towards the Arab 'transition countries', notably Syria but also Yemen, Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. In trying to moderate its regional role, Tehran would contribute to the GCC's efforts to stabilise the Arab region, cooperate in the rebuilding of Iraq and desist from agitating the Shia population of Bahrain in particular.

#### **IV. Rouhani's détente**

As already noted, during the presidential campaign Rouhani was signalling a change of

<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, *Joint Communiqué From the Second Ministerial Meeting for the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum*, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Fars news agency, March 1, 2013.

heart, as well as direction, in Iran's regional relations. In a significant interview he said:

"If elected, improving and expanding relations with neighboring countries at all levels is a major priority in my future administration. Iran shares borders with fifteen countries over land and sea. All of them are important for us."<sup>3</sup>

Rouhani was also clear on Iran's relations with the key GCC states. "On your question regarding Saudi Arabia", he said in the same interview,

"I plan to reverse the recently exacerbated [and] unfortunate rivalry between the two countries into mutual respect and mutually beneficial arrangements and cooperation to enhance security and restore stability in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia can collectively play a positive role in dealing with major regional issues, such as the security in the Persian Gulf. My future administration neither intends to intervene in any other countries' internal affairs nor permit others to do so in Iran. The question of Bahrain is of concern for us. We believe that the political independence, national integrity and security of Bahrain are important factors for the stability and security of the region. In this context, the aspirations of Bahraini people to seek their legitimate rights, like in any other country, should not be compromised. If elected, I will engage closely in diplomatic interaction and cooperation with all countries in the region to remove the clouds of misunderstanding and rivalry. In this region, our areas of common interests are much larger than disparate points of disagreement

and contention. I will search for common grounds within our region and beyond to promote greater understanding and cooperation."<sup>4</sup>

This was the outline of a roadmap for the improvement of Iran's relations with neighbouring Arab countries.

Upon his election he made it clear that he would implement the strategy of *détente*, and his selection of moderate Dr Mohammad Javad Zarif as foreign minister (a much respected diplomat with extensive overseas experience and first-hand knowledge of the West), was indicative of the seriousness of his intent. The appointment of an Iranian-Arab (Rear Admiral Ali Shamkhani) with good understanding of GCC societies and elites as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and as the leader's representative on the body was also seen by many as a positive gesture towards the Arab region. In the pursuit of *détente* President Rouhani highlighted two policies: firstly, Iran should aim to reconcile with its neighbours, particularly the immediate southern Arab neighbours. Secondly, Iran should make it its priority to find a mutually acceptable negotiated settlement to the nuclear impasse which had dogged Iran's relations with the international community, and which had cost the country dear in socio-economic terms.

Rouhani's foreign policy team signalled the seriousness of his intention to make good on his electoral promise of restoring Iran's relations with the rest of the world. Foreign Minister Zarif did not disappoint, openly focusing his efforts on rebuilding relations with Iran's southern neighbours. Firstly, Iran reiterated its close ties with post-Saddam Iraq and underlined the deepening cultural, political and economic links between the two countries. The new administration reinforced the centrality of Iraq to its regional policies

<sup>3</sup> Asharq al-Awsat, June 15, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

by offering Baghdad extensive material (financial, technical and security) support for the country's reconstruction.

Zarif also explicitly highlighted the need to improve relations with Saudi Arabia as Iran's main counterpart in the Gulf. During his tour of the four GCC states of Qatar, Kuwait, the UAE and Oman in December 2013 (just three months after Rouhani's inauguration) and a week after the visit of the UAE foreign minister to Tehran to encourage closer economic relations between the two countries, he declared in Doha that "our relations with Saudi Arabia should expand as we consider Saudi Arabia as an extremely important country in the region and the Islamic world. We believe that Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together in order to promote peace and stability in the region". He said separately: "I am ready to go to Saudi Arabia, but it is just a matter of being able to arrange a mutually convenient time".<sup>5</sup>

On the GCC side, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain remained evidently cautious, expressing continuing concern about Iran's hand in fuelling instability in the island state in the first instance, but also with regard to Iran's continuing presence in Iraq, its support for the discredited al-Assad regime in Syria and its growing presence in Yemen.

Zarif's Gulf tour had followed the landmark November 2013 nuclear deal struck in Geneva with the aim of resolving the nuclear crisis in 2014. Aware that Iran's nuclear programme had been of grave concern to Iran's southern neighbours, Zarif noted during the Kuwait leg of his GCC tour that "the solution to this issue serves the interests of all countries in the region. It is not at the expense of any state in the region. Be assured that the nuclear deal is in favour of the stability and security of the region."<sup>6</sup>

Zarif also broke another of the regime's taboos during this tour by expressing his country's willingness to discuss control of one of the three islands (the strategically important Abu Musa) in dispute with the UAE. This was a major gesture by Tehran, which unfortunately did not spark interest in Abu Dhabi in extending dialogue with Iran on bilateral and regional issues, thus blocking one of the main avenues that the new administration in Tehran was intending to cultivate in order to build confidence across the Gulf.

Nevertheless, Oman's Sultan Qaboos had already paved the way for better relations between the two sides of the Gulf by becoming the first foreign leader to visit Tehran after Rouhani's election victory to congratulate him on his success. Rouhani returned the favour by paying a high-level state visit to Oman in March 2014, pledging to deepen economic and political links between the two countries, which included a strategic partnership to provide piped natural gas to Oman from Iran's offshore South Pars gas field. The Emir of Kuwait's state visit followed in June 2014 as another indicator of Iran's gradual rehabilitation by its GCC neighbours. Symbolically and significantly, this was the first time that a Kuwaiti leader had visited Iran since the 1979 revolution. Portraying Iran as a "pillar of stability and security", Kuwait highlighted the Emir's visit as a conscious effort to open a new chapter in relations, "constituting an important turning point in the relations between the two countries" according to a joint statement.<sup>7</sup>

While the Saudi-Iranian foreign ministerial face-to-face talks would have to wait until September 2014 and the occasion of UN General Assembly gathering in New York, Iran was already making a strong pitch to

<sup>5</sup> Agence France-Presse, December 2, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Gulf News, *Zarif reassures Gulf states over nuclear deal*, 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Kuwait News Agency, June 1, 2014.

Riyadh. Thus, the Iranian foreign minister explained that “neither one of us will benefit from sectarian divisions, neither one of us will benefit from extremism in this region... We can work together in order to have a safer neighborhood. There is no need for rivalry.”<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, signs of a thaw in the strained Saudi-Iranian relations had emerged earlier, in May 2014, with the formal invitation extended to Zarif to visit the kingdom. At a press conference following this news, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal said: “we will talk with them in the hope that, if there are any differences, they will be settled to the satisfaction of both countries. Our hope is that Iran becomes part of the effort to make the region as safe and as prosperous as possible, and not part of the problem of the insecurity of the region.”<sup>9</sup>

Breakthrough became a greater reality with the visit of Iran's deputy foreign minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian to the kingdom in August 2014 in an ice-breaking meeting with Prince Saud al-Faisal in Jeddah to discuss the threat of IS. Promisingly, Abdollahian described the talks, which had focused on the IS threat, as “positive and constructive”. For his side, Prince Saud went on the record to say that “both sides emphasized the need to open a new page of political relations between the two countries.”<sup>10</sup>

Thus, when the two foreign ministers finally met in New York in September 2014 the ground had been cleared for a constructive discussion about IS and their respective approaches to dealing with this organisation. Saudi Arabia's reopening of its diplomatic facilities in Iraq after a twenty year absence was also a sign of Riyadh's willingness to engage with the new Iraqi government, which Iran welcomed as a signal for the rehabilitation of Iraq into the Arab fold.

The above has traced the heavy diplomatic traffic across the Gulf following Ahmadinejad's tense period in order to show the depth of interest on both sides in breaking the deadlock of confrontation in favour of open dialogue and cooperation. So what went wrong? The problem is partly political – domestic conditions in Iran (not giving ground when your people ransack Saudi diplomatic facilities in the country) and Saudi Arabia (standing tall to the enemies of Sunni Islam and the Arabs, and not yielding when asked not to execute prominent Shia figures for their political activities) – have arguably been inhibiting a dialogue. But in reality, it goes well beyond politics. The reason arguably lies in the rapidly changing balance of power in the region and the perception that a zero-sum game strategic environment has emerged in which no party can afford to compromise. Thus, in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Afghanistan, Pakistan and elsewhere, Iran and the Saudi-led coalition appear on opposite sides.

#### **V. JCPoA, Iranian regional ambitions and Saudi blowback**

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPoA) was meant to blow away the diplomatic barriers by means of improved relations between Iran and its southern neighbours, and this is what Iranian leaders intimated following the signing of the agreement. But for many GCC states, the JCPoA failed to address their concerns about an unshackled Iran now able to exercise its undeniable power and influence in Gulf and Arab domains with impunity.

That the JCPoA did not insist on regional confidence-building as a condition of the plan's implementation left Saudi Arabia and its smaller partners fearful that Iran would continue to build its military and its regional

<sup>8</sup> Croft and Hudson, *Iran says nuclear talks failure would be 'disaster'*, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Chulov, *Saudi Arabia moves to settle differences with Iran*, 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Dakroub, *ISIS brings Saudi Arabia and Iran closer*, 2014.

security presence unopposed. Tehran arguably failed to appreciate the GCC states' profound concerns pertaining to Iran's regional role, its interactions with Shia communities in the Arab region, its influence in such core Arab states as Iraq and Syria, and its prominent role in the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre, in which the Gulf states too had clear interests. Thus, the GCC states remain concerned about Iran's apparently growing influence across a region whose Arab core has been decimated. On the Arabian Peninsula and the wider Arab region, Iran's presence continues to be seen as a counter-constructive influence.

Ironically, since 2013 and the arrival of Iran's moderate president, the GCC countries' concerns about Iran's political and military footprint have grown if anything. In Yemen, for example, Tehran quickly acquired a direct line to the government following the lightning success of the al-Houthis in 2014 in taking over much of the machinery of government in Sana'a. In Bahrain, fears of Iranian agitation amongst the Shia majority remain unresolved, and Iranian forces and their allies have emerged in Iraq as the largest contingent of foreign forces fighting IS on the ground. In Iraq in particular, gains against IS are contextualised within a Sunni-Shia prism in which Iraqi successes are viewed as victories for Tehran and its Shia allies. Further afield, GCC countries worry that in the aftermath of the anti-Muslim Brotherhood backlash, as Qatar and Egypt distance themselves from Hamas, this movement will try and rebuild its links with Tehran to compensate for the loss of Arab momentum. In Lebanon, Tehran's allies (led by its ally Hezbollah) seem to have the upper hand, and of course Iran remains the bulwark against the anti-al-Assad forces in Syria.

By the same token, GCC concerns that the US would reduce its presence in the Gulf

sub-region as a consequence of relations proved to be misplaced. To reverse IS' stranglehold in Iraq (and later Syria) the US would come to rely on its Arab partners more than any other. It also became obvious in the aftermath of the fall of Mosul to IS in June 2014 that Iran would have to play a major role in the Iraq theatre – to support its new government under Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi and to help coordinate Iraqi national forces and mobilise Shia militias on the ground. Despite the expulsion of IS forces from Mosul in 2017 the conditions of Iran's presence in Iraq have not changed, thus encouraging the tensions between the Saudi-led Sunni Arab coalition, which is keen to 'prise' Iraq away from Iran and Iranian-backed Shia elite forces, and the armed popular mobilisation groups doing much of Iran's bidding in Iraq.

Iran, on the other hand, fears that IS and other Sunni Jihadi groups could be beneficiaries of financial and other support from the Arab world, part of a greater effort to securitise Iranian society. These fears were realised with the simultaneous terror attacks on the Iranian parliament and the mausoleum of Ayatollah Khomeini in 2017, as well as repeated reports since of Iran's border guards and IRGC forces confronting IS infiltrators on Iran's borderlands in the south-east and the western parts of the country.

Further, OPEC's oil output policy and pricing mechanism emerged as a new source of tension between Iran and some GCC states (Saudi Arabia in particular) at a time that the new Iranian administration badly needed higher oil revenues to overcome the economic mess left behind by the Ahmadinejad administrations. With sliding oil prices from October 2014, and prices being effectively halved in less than three months and reaching their lowest levels since 2009, Iran was left dangerously short of income to meet its running costs, let alone the aspirations of



the voters. The dramatic reduction in oil prices wreaked havoc with the Iranian government's spending plans for 2015/16, forcing it to make cuts in a number of areas. Tehran saw in Saudi Arabia's strategy of rising output a direct attack on its national well-being.

Ultimately, the tensions between Sunni and Shia communities have continued to act as a backdrop for the framing of Iran-Arab relations. Thus far neither side has been able to find a constructive way of taking inter-confessional prejudices out of political relations, and in practice so long as Iran continues to keep erect the edifice of the al-Assad regime in Sunni-majority Syria, the GCC and other Arab states (bar Iraq) will remain hostile to Iranian overtures for a collective approach to regional security. By the same token, Iran's undisputed politico-security reach into Iraq (where the Sunni minority is seen as dominated and disenfranchised by the GCC states) fuels the suspicion, rightly or wrongly, that Iran is engaged in a grand plan to carve from the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant spaces dominated by Tehran.

## **VI. Back to the future**

Of course, IS has capitalised on such geopolitical tensions to fuel cross-community suspicions by targeting Shias (and other minorities) while setting itself up as the champion of Sunni Islam. Such problems speak to geopolitical challenges that require more than pleasantries to shake off if Iran and the GCC are to make progress and if the Rouhani administration's policies are to help open a really new and constructive chapter in cross-Gulf relations. So, while

the mood in Iran-GCC relations certainly lifted following June 2013 and Hassan Rouhani's election as president of the republic, the structural barriers dividing the two sides remain intact, meaning that lasting improvements have not been made to serve the interests of all the Gulf states.

In Iran itself, it is clear that the political system has not opened up structurally, and governance institutions are increasingly in danger of becoming hostage to the same securitising forces which shaped Ahmadinejad's administration. This may be so because abroad, and despite a call for détente, Tehran's dogged support for the Syrian regime, its use of Shia militias in neighbouring countries, and its policy of manipulating Iraqi, Lebanese, Syrian and to a lesser extent Palestinian politics to serve its 'resistance front' have done much to alienate Iran's GCC neighbours and their regional allies. This has deprived Rouhani of the calming conditions which would allow him to rebuild at home during a period of peace abroad.

For all the important external successes of a negotiated settlement of the nuclear crisis – in terms of not imposing any changes on Iran's foreign policy goals, not setting clear conditions for its reintegration into the regional dialogues about terrorism, refugees and political change in key Arab states, and not depriving it of its armed non-state actors – managing the transition from isolation and pariah status was always going to be a quintessentially domestic matter. And it is there that it has stuck. Forty years since the revolution, and despite major upheavals in the region, Iran's regional behaviour remains hostage to its domestic politics.

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