

The Conflict between US and Iran in Designing the Persian Gulf Security Order¹

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Abstract: Behind the conflict between the US and Iran currently on the Iranian nuclear issue, there is actually a deeper conflict between the two nations on designing the Persian Gulf security order. Since the end of the Cold War, the US has been trying to establish the Persian Gulf security order following its idea of the new world order, which stresses that the security order in this region should be based on the US military existence and the democratic reformation in the local nations. However, with its strength and influence increased after the Iraq War, Iran is also trying to establish an Islamic Persian Gulf security order to resist the US influence in the Gulf region. As the two security orders designed by the US and Iran are much different in structure, concept and character, the conflict between them is probably going to become more fury in the future.

Key Words: US; Iran; Persian Gulf; Security Order

In recent years, when the world has been concerned about the conflict between the US and Iran on the nuclear issue, few people have noticed that there is actually a deeper conflict between the two countries on the Persian Gulf security consideration, because both of them are wishing to establish a new security order in this region according to their own designing. As the most important energy resource of the world, the Persian Gulf's security situation has been a matter of concern by the international society for many years. However, the reasons that have caused the Persian Gulf instability and insecurity are involved not only with the problems of the regional nations themselves but also with the interference coming outside of the region. In the Persian Gulf region, the religious sects' conflict and the regional hegemonic expansion in the past years have caused several local wars and intensively difficult relations among the Gulf nations. At the same time, the western nations outside of the region headed by the US also have interfered with affairs in the Gulf region with various excuses to ensure the safety of the energy supply and transportation after the Cold War. Especially, the US has deployed a certain number of military troops in the Gulf region through the military agreements signed with the Arabian monarchial nations in the region and have increased its military force after the Iraq War in 2003. It is clear that the goal

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of the US is to establish a security order similar to its new world order on the basis of its military existence. But the foreign military force which has appeared in the Islamic Holy Land not only has caused the dissatisfaction of the local people, but also has become the main reason for the Muslim extremists hostile toward the Western nations and to attack them with terrorist approaches. Therefore, although the US has tried various measures including military ways to establish its security order, it is still facing many difficult problems such as Iraq reconstruction, the Iran nuclear crisis, transnational terrorism, and proliferation of WMDs. Simultaneously, since Iran has become the most powerful nation in the Persian Gulf region after the Iraq War, it also wants to cooperate with the other nations in the Gulf region to establish an Islamic security order under its dominance which exclude the US military interference from this region. This means that the conflict for the security order in the Persian Gulf region is the real clash between the US and Iran behind the contradiction on the nuclear issue. As the potential crisis in this contradiction between the US and Iran is difficult to resolve and it is inclining to more serious conflict, the international society should pay high attention to it.

I. The Efforts Made by the US to Establish Its Security Order in the Persian Gulf

After the Cold War, a series of issues with regional and international influence happened in the Persian Gulf that caused the US to move its security interest attention to this region. Three US presidents, George Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, have tried various ways including military approaches to guarantee the energy resource security in the Persian Gulf region for the US and its alliances. At the same time, the US also wishes to establish its Persian Gulf security order and to take it as a part in its new world order put forward after the Cold War. When the Gulf crisis erupted in 1990, President George Bush clearly expressed the goal that the maintenance of the stability of the Gulf region should be the most important security issue after the Cold War, because the US and the other West nations are deeply relying on the petroleum resource in this region. Therefore, when Saddam Hussein began to invade Kuwait in August 1990, President Bush immediately decided to take military action against his military force and quickly forced the Iraqi army to withdraw from Kuwait in 1991. With the victory won in the Gulf war, President Bush then proposed the idea of the new world order after the Cold War. It is clear that the maintenance of the security in the Persian Gulf has formed an important part in the new world order from the beginning.

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the US government and society began to realize that the most serious security threat for the US should come from the international terrorism related with the Middle East region. Especially, when most terrorists who created the September 11th tragedy were

proven to have been from Saudi Arabia, US President George W. Bush adjusted the US Middle East security strategy goal in the Persian Gulf region and developed his anti-terrorism war. In this strategy, the US government stressed that it would strike the terrorist force in the Persian Gulf and to establish the security order in this region with military means. In 2003, the US army invaded Iraq according to the principle of “preventive attack” or “preemptive strike” and overthrew the regime of Saddam Hussein. It is clear that the purpose for the US to launch the war against Iraq was not only to respond to the attack of Al-Qaeda and the Muslim radicalist force, but also wish to push the front line of the anti-terrorism war to the Persian Gulf region. Then it would be possible for the US to eliminate the Al-Qaeda and its supporters in Afghanistan and Iraq and to keep the US itself from the attack of the terrorism.

Besides striking at the terrorism, the US also wishes to maintain its energy interest in the Persian Gulf region through establishing its security order in the region. As the main energy resource of the world, the oil and gas provided by the Persian Gulf region is closely related with the economic development and social stability in the US. So it has become an important task for the US government to guarantee the security of the energy supply and transportation in the Gulf region. At the same time, the US government has kept traditional good relations with the oil producing nations such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for many years. The military action against Saddam Hussein in 1991 taken by President George Bush showed that the US government was afraid that Iraq would further invade Saudi Arabia after occupying Kuwait and control most of the oil resource in the Persian Gulf region. In 2003, when President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair launched their war against Iraq, they also aimed to guarantee the security of the oil production and supply in the Persian Gulf through controlling Iraq. After the Iraq War, the US has actually established reasonably stable connection with Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Iraq, the three main oil producing nations in the Persian Gulf region.

However, the US government is clear that military interference can only stop the invasion and keep the regional stability temporarily, but it cannot maintain real long term security situation. Therefore, by taking military action, the US government is also making effort to promote the democratic process in the Persian Gulf region according to its idea of new world order. The US government under President George W. Bush has stressed repeatedly in the Iraq political reconstruction that the establishment of the democratic government in Iraq was the necessary condition to keep this nation stable and it would become an important example for the other Arabian monarchy nations in the Gulf region. President George W. Bush also expressed his strong view that, “The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution.”³ At the

³ “Bush Demands Mid-East Democracy”, BBC News, 6 November 2003,



same time, the US has also been promoting democratic reform in the Arabian monarchy nations, because the US government has concluded after the September 11th that the autarchy would necessarily lead to terrorism. In this conclusion, the US government pointed out that it was the autarchy system in the Arabian nations that had caused the strong anti-US emotion and the large number of terrorism radicals who appeared in the Arabian world. Therefore President Bush stressed that only “free governments do not build weapons of mass destruction for the purpose of mass terror. Over time, the expansion of liberty throughout the world is the best guarantee of security throughout the world. Freedom is the way to peace.”⁴ Currently, the purpose for the US government to establish the democratic regime in Iraq is to prove that the US can change the Arabian nations in the Middle East through the process of democratization. However, the democratization process promoted by the US government in the Persian Gulf has not gotten the expected success because of the various frustrations in the Iraq political reconstruction and the negative attitude of the monarchy nations in the Persian Gulf region toward the Western democratic system.

II. The Change of Iran from “Exporting Islamic Revolution” to “Establishing the Islamic Persian Gulf”

As a nation with the largest population, largest geographic dimensionality and richest energy resource in the Persian Gulf region, Iran has become the most powerful nation in strength and influence in the region after the Iraq War in 2003. With such a change, Iran is also considering to design a security order in the Persian Gulf region under its dominance. For this purpose, Iran has transferred its foreign strategy from “exporting Islamic revolution” to establishing an Islamic Persian Gulf in the past years. At the same time, Iran is publicly calling on other Middle Eastern nations to promote the security cooperation among the Persian Gulf nations and to prevent the US from invade the Persian Gulf with its military force.

As early as in 1970s, Iran had already been the most prosperous and developed nation in the Persian Gulf region under the reign of Shah Pahlevi. However, when the Islamic Revolution led by Khomeini succeeded in 1979, the relations between Iran and its neighboring nations began to move into high tension. Since the Shiite Islamic revolution totally denied the monarchical political system and Khomeini alleged to export the Shiite Islamic Revolution to all Arabian nations, the Arabian Sunni monarchical nations were deeply worried about the development of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. In the 1980s, they even supported Iraq to contain Iran with Iranian-Iraqi war. At that time, Iraq was a nation with the

http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/3248119.stm

⁴ Muqtedar Khan, “Prospects for Muslim Democracy: The Role of US Policy,” *Middle East Policy*, No. 3, Fall 2003, p.2.

Shiite as the majority but with the national power controlled by the Sunni minority. Therefore, it was naturally logical for Iraq to become the main power to prevent Iran from exporting its Islamic Revolution to the neighboring nations.

However, with the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime in the Iraq War launched by the US in 2003, Iran has gotten rid of its containment from Iraq and has become the most powerful nation in the Persian Gulf region. Besides this, Iran also has totally changed its relation with Iraq, because it is unavoidable for the Shiite people in the two nations to unite with each other. In the reconstruction of Iraq after the war, the Shiites have gradually won the local and national elections with the advantage of their majority population and have controlled the dominant political position in Iraq. Under the influence of the Shiite political force, the relationship between Iraq and Iran has improved rapidly. As a matter of fact, the Iraqi Shiite Muslims originated from Iran. The Iraqi Shiite leader Ayatollah Ali Sistani was born in Iran and studied in the Qom religious school in Iran. Especially, Khomeini is the spiritual leader of Shiite in both Iran and Iraq, because he was exiled to Iraq in the 1960s. Besides these factors, most Iraqi political leaders, including Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, were exiled in Iran under the reign of Saddam Hussein. So it is natural for them to have a strong tendency to develop good relations with Iran. Therefore, with the Shiites gaining the political dominance in Iraq, the relations between Iran and Iraq tend to be promoted as a kind of alliance. Facing the rapid development of the close relationship between Iran and Iraq, the King of Jordan Abdullah II pointed out that a "Shiite Crescent Area" is appearing in the Persian Gulf region.⁵

Though the threat from Iraq was eliminated after the Iraq War, Iran still feels that its security is under threat from outside, because a large number of the US army is staying in the Persian Gulf. As for the reason of the hostile relation between Iran and US is concerned, there was a deep historic shadow left by the "hostage crisis" in the Iran Islamic revolution in 1979 when the staff of the US embassy in Iran was detained and held hostage for a year. Recently, the Iranian people have further deepened their enmity to the US, because the US has undertaken economic sanctions and military threats against Iran for its developing nuclear program. Facing such a situation, the only way for Iran to guarantee its security and to insure its leading position in the Persian Gulf is to strengthen the cooperation with the neighboring nations to resist the interference from the US. To realize this strategic goal, Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki pointed out on the opening ceremony of the 18th Persian Gulf International Conference on June 17, 2008, "The first priority of our foreign policy is regional cooperation and convergence."⁶ At the same time, he regarded the trans-regional powers as the

⁵ Juan Cole, "Outlook: Shiite Iraq," *Washington Post online Chat*, August 16, 2008,

http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/04/r_outlook081604.html

⁶ Hengame Ahmadi, "Regional Cooperation: First Priority in Foreign Policy," *Iran News*, Tuesday, June 17,



main factor of instability and insecurity in Persian Gulf and called on “reviving the region’s historical position requires designing local solutions for cooperation between Persian Gulf states based on cultural, economic and political conditions.”⁷ Mottaki also appealed to all the Persian nations to dialogue on the security issue and to take the various dialogue platforms as the stable foundation for the economic and political union in this region.

Actually, the Iranian government had already made efforts to mend its relations with its neighboring nations before Mottaki put forward the idea of the Persian Gulf region security cooperation. First, through the effort of the both sides, the relationship between Iran and Iraq has been greatly promoted. The visit of the Iranian president Ahmadinejad to Iraq on March 2, 2008 has symbolized the beginning of the new era of the positive relations between the two nations. As President Ahmadinejad pointed out during his visit, “We can talk like friends and brothers, we can reach common understanding in all areas, and we are planning to fully develop the relations between our nations.”⁸ In this visit, Iran and Iraq signed seven cooperation agreements, including insurance, custom tax, industry, education and transportation. At the same time, Iran also promised to provide one billion USD for Iraq reconstruction.⁹

Besides developing a positive relationship with Iraq, the Iranian government is also making efforts to promote its relations with the GCC nations and to build up confidence with them. Since the Islamic Revolution broke out in Iran in 1979, the relations between Iran and the GCC nations have suffered a long hard period. Owing to the Iranian influence Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani’s government publicly declared its intention to give up spreading the Islamic revolution to the Persian neighboring nations and most Arabian monarchical nations in the Persian Gulf region would select a moderate political position, Iran and the GCC nations have eliminated their mutual prejudice and turned their relations from hostility to contact and dialogue. Especially, since Seyyed Mohammad Khatami was elected the Iranian president in 1997, the Iranian government has adjusted many of its policies to promote relations with the GCC nations. The Iranian government even wishes to expand the GCC as the “Persian Gulf Cooperation Council” that will include Iran and Iraq and take it as the foundation for establishing the security order in the Persian Gulf.

Facing the active attitude of Iran, the GCC nations also have provided a moderate response. Recently, the tendency of the GCC nations in their position on Iran’s nuclear issue has clearly shown the change in their attitudes to Iran. Most GCC nations have expressed that they wish this issue to be solved through regional consultation. They also advised Iran to accept the EU’s suggestion about foreign negotiations and not to

2008.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ [http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1029/42361/6947872.html\(2008-03-03\)](http://world.people.com.cn/GB/1029/42361/6947872.html(2008-03-03)).

⁹ [http://news.eastday.com/eastday/06news/world/w/20080302/u1a3438784.html\(2008-03-02\)](http://news.eastday.com/eastday/06news/world/w/20080302/u1a3438784.html(2008-03-02)).

confront the US in a direct military way. As an obvious fact, it is the sympathy and concern of the Arabian people on the Iranian nuclear program that has promoted the change in the attitude of the GCC nations. The GCC nation leaders have realized that “appearing too close to the US position and alienating Iran might become a liability in the light of their internal political dynamics.”¹⁰

Except this, Iran has also stressed that the purpose for its nuclear program is only for peaceful energy availability. As Iranian officials have pointed out, Iran only wishes to change its energy structure by developing the nuclear program and it is always ready to help its neighboring nations to develop their nuclear energy at any time. The Iranian government has repeatedly made clear that it will oppose the proliferation of WMDs, especially the nuclear weapons. Therefore, Iran will develop its nuclear program under the supervision of the IAEA. As far as the “Iranophobia” across the Gulf region is concerned, the Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki explained that this is only “the plot promoted by the enemies of the Iran Islamic Republic to portray its benign nuclear program as regional threat.” Mottaki also stressed that “localization does not necessarily mean end of cooperation since we confront hegemonic approach and military invasion.”¹¹

After the hard work of both sides for a long time, the relations between Iran and the GCC nations have been greatly promoted. As an important symbol, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as the first national leader, has attended the GCC Summit in Doha in 2007. This means that the relations between Iran and the GCC nations have transferred from tension to cooperation. As both sides have realized that the cooperation could bring up one or another benefits in the region’s economy and politics and that conflict would cause disadvantages for each other, Iran and the GCC nations are willing to open the door for the regional dialogue. This situation development surely will form an important foundation for the regional security cooperation in the future.

III. The Difference between the US and Iran in Their Security Orders

Superficially we would say, the purpose for both US and Iran to establish the regional security order in the Persian Gulf is to maintain the security and stabilization in this region. However, since the two security orders have so many differences in security structure, security concept, and security character, it is unavoidable for them to have contradictions and even conflicts between each other. These conflicts will not only lead to the effort of the both sides to no positive results but also to a more serious security crisis in the possible near future.

¹⁰ Stuti Bhatnagar, “The Changing Face of Iran-PGCC Relations,” *Abstract of the 18th International Conference on the Persian Gulf*, Tehran, 16-17 June 2008, p.25.

¹¹ Hengame Ahmadi, “Regional Cooperation: First Priority in Foreign Policy,” *Iran News*, Tuesday, June 17, 2008.



In security structure, the security order designed by the US is based on its military existence in the Persian Gulf. Recently, the US has deployed more than 100,000 troops in Iraq through the Iraq War and has maintained a certain amount of troop and military bases in the GCC nations through the US military agreements with these nations. Usually, the US keeps about 7,000 troops in the GCC nations. Among these nations, Qatar is the location of the US Central Headquarters. There are 3,400 troops and an air force base in Qatar. Besides Qatar, there are 1,500 troops and the headquarters of the 5th Fleet in Bahrain. Obviously, the US military existence in the Persian Gulf region is absolutely unacceptable for Iran. The Iranian government has always insisted that the maintenance of the Persian Gulf security can only rely on the cooperation of the nations in this region and the US military existence in this region should be totally cleared away. The Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki especially has stressed that "security in the Persian Gulf can materialize only through internal forces. You cannot import security."¹² It is clear for the Iranian government that security order in the Persian Gulf should be framed with Iran as its dominant power and with the cooperation of the all Persian Gulf nations to keep the security and stability in this region.

In the security concept, the US and Iran also have much difference in their cognition in establishing the security order. According to the US, the security threat for the Persian Gulf comes from two directions: the attack of the Islamic radicalism and the support of Iran to the Islamic radicalism on one hand, and the WMD proliferation caused by the Iran nuclear program on the other hand. Facing such a threat, the US should establish the Persian Gulf security order to protect its four main interests: first to protect the energy production and transportation security in this region, secondly to strike the transnational force of the Islamic radicalism, thirdly to prevent the proliferation of the WMDs, and fourthly to protect the security of Israel. But from Iran's point of view, the main security threat for the Persian Gulf is the aggression from the foreign military force, especially the interference from the US. Recently, Iran has regarded itself as the main casualty of this threat. Since the Iran nuclear crisis appeared in 2003, the US has threatened many times to interfere with military force. Therefore, the purpose for Iran to establish the security order in this region is to confront the military interference to this region from foreign nations.

In the security character, there is also a contraction between the two designed security orders. For the US, the establishment of the security order depends on the democratization process in this region to a great extent. Since the end of the Gulf War in 1991, the US has argued that the foundation for the new world order should be the promotion of the democratic politics and the development of the market economy. Therefore, the crucial point for the Persian Gulf security order is to promote democratization in this region. According to the design of the US

¹² Hengameh Ahmadi, "Regional Cooperation: First Priority in Foreign Policy," *Iran News*, June 17, 2008.

government under President George Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, the reconstruction in Iraq after the war should become an example for democratic reform to promote the democratization in the Persian Gulf monarchy nations. As for Iran, the US hopes to change its theocratic regime through its interior reformation. But in Iran's idea, the character of the Persian Gulf security order should take Islamic belief and cooperation as its inner coherence. Although Khomeini had once alleged to export the Shiite Islamic revolution to overthrow the monarchy regimes in the 1980s, the Iran Government has totally given up this slogan in recent years. At the same time, the Iranian government is making great efforts to strengthen the identity of Islam, disengage the difference in the contradiction between Shiites and Sunnis in religion, and even to stress that the Persian Gulf should become the "Islamic Persian Gulf."

Considering the deep differences in structure, concept and character in the Persian Gulf security orders designed by the US and Iran, it is almost impossible for the problem to be completely solved with the change of the new government in the US and the presidential election in Iran. Although the new US President Obama has the African American heritage and some influence of Islam, he has already made clear after he was just recently elected on December 7, 2008, "We need to ratchet up tough but direct diplomacy with Iran, making very clear to them that their development of nuclear weapons would be unacceptable, that their funding of terrorist organizations, their threats against Israel are contrary to everything we believe in."¹³ This speech means that the new US government is likely to keep suppressing Iran and prevent it from "rising with nuclear program" after the Iraq War.

Recently, the conflict "hot" point between the US and Iran is directly involved with Iran's continuous efforts for its uranium enrichment activities and the US condemnation of Iran for its support for the Islamic radicalism. But on the level of maintaining the security in the Persian Gulf, Iran is expected to continue its effort to strive for the dominant position in establishing the security order in this region, because it is impossible to force the US to give up its military existence in the Persian Gulf. In such a situation, Iran will most likely regard the successful development of the nuclear program as the symbol of its power. Therefore, it is also impossible for Iran to stop its uranium enrichment activities. At the same time, Iran will probably keep providing the Islamic radical organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas with weapons and money and training their fighters to win the sympathy and support from the people in the Muslim world. The speeches and activities of the US new president and the Iranian government have shown that the conflict between both sides on designing the Persian Gulf security order will

¹³ "Obama, We Must Talk to Iran, but Threats against Israel Unacceptable", Reuters, [http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1044357.html\(2008-12-08\)](http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1044357.html(2008-12-08))



continue for a long time and it even may lead to a deeper and potential security crisis in the Persian Gulf region in the coming years.