

Strange Impasse – Arabs and Israel see Iran as threat.

Financial Times A List, 24 November 2013

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The setting was as bizarre as it was stunningly beautiful - a luxurious seven star resort and spa built on the edge of the Empty Quarter - one of the largest deserts in the world where sand dunes are as high as mountains, falconry is a reactionary sport, dune buggies whizz you around the three-mile-long estate and the seafood is fresh from Gulf waters just two hours away.

The security conference - held annually by the United Arab Emirates - is one of the most frank and open in the Arab world. Last week's invitees were senior officials from more than a dozen Arab countries, a heavyweight contingent of US officials and experts and some European foreign ministers. For a moment you would think you were at the UN, save for the sand outside.

The opening act laid bare what was to follow. Israel's President Shimon Peres addressed the audience by satellite from his office - an extraordinary gesture from the UAE. On one subject, Peres knew he had an Arab audience listening attentively: Iran.

First, Israel and then Arab officials expressed enormous anger and mistrust of [the possible nuclear deal between the US and Iran](#) - but for different reasons. The deal subsequently signed on Sunday in Geneva immediately led to predictable criticism from the Arabs and the Israelis.

The Israelis don't trust the Americans negotiating any halfway house deal that does not completely end Iran's nuclear ambitions. For the Israelis, [any deal that does not wipe clean the memory of nuclear technology from the brain of every Iranian scientist is no deal at all](#). The Americans have politely been ignoring such criticism.

Arab leaders have different criticisms - that a nuclear deal may be worth having, but it only deals with one issue, while the Arab states suffer from multiple slaps in the face by Iranian belligerence. There is Iran's long-term support for Hizbollah in Lebanon, which is now fighting as Iran's [proxy force on the side of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad](#). There is the Iranian support for Hamas, which divides the Palestinians, and Iran's mobilisation of the Shia minorities in the Gulf states and Yemen to try and overthrow the ruling families. Moreover, Iran is fuelling Shia-Sunni sectarian violence across the region, say the Arabs.

According to Arab leaders, Iran's undermining of the Arab world is being ignored by the Americans, who will walk away hand in hand with Iran leaving the Arabs to deal with these other problems. What the Arabs want is a far more comprehensive deal with Iran that addresses all their concerns. Sanctions should only be lifted when the Iranians stop their interference in the Arab world. The American answer is: Wait until we fully resolve the nuclear issue. The result was a harsh castigation of US policies by Arab officials for leaving them in the lurch. And who is the Arab world's closest ally in helping them take on the Americans and continue isolating Iran - why Israel of course!

This coming together of Israel and Arab leaders on the issue of Iran pains the Americans and Iran but there is little they can do about it.

Israel and the Arab world's fears of Iran's destabilising policies in the region are real. But the Arabs should give the new Iranian regime [an opportunity to see what foreign policy changes it will bring to the region](#).

I am convinced that Iran cannot compromise on its nuclear programme without seeing the errors of its unproductive policies in the Arab world. If Iran is serious about wanting to end its isolation, it has to start in its own neighborhood.

For Arab leaders, their growing anti-Americanism in the short term brings them closer to the Arab street. But that is no substitute for new policies and reforms. Those Arab states only marginally affected by the Arab spring cannot forever rely upon harsh repression or cash dole-outs to buy their people's support without instituting some substantive political reforms. Minorities in the Arab world, like the Shias or Christians, have to be treated with respect and as equal citizens.

For its part, the Obama administration has got one thing straight, which should be appreciated by Arab regimes: Washington has no desire, interest or aim to put another American invasion force on the ground in the Middle East.

The US is loathe to intervene in other countries beyond a certain point. The Arab world, too, must cease seeing the US as the only partner that can guarantee regime survival in the Arabian Gulf. The smallest Gulf states now need a strong, clear and articulated foreign policy that creates greater harmony in the neighbourhood and internal reforms. That is why, in the long term, the Iran deal will be beneficial.