

Iran Elections & The Gulf-Iran Relations

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Currently plagued by the sectarian proxy war in Syria, turmoil in Bahrain and an islands dispute with UAE, the presence of US forces in the Gulf, the Gulf and Iran relations have been anything but friendly lately. The most aggressive relationship that Iran has had among the Gulf countries is with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, where the history of conflicts is long.

When the British withdrew from the Persian Gulf in 1968, Saudi Arabia & Iran were considered the key power players for maintaining peace and security in the region. A relationship of cordial coexistence was developed and maintained between the Gulf and Iran until 1979, at the time of the Iranian Revolution. A peaceful coexistence changed into an uncertain relation, and then into a

rivalry which has become very hostile over the years.

The purpose of this article is not to delve into the list of conflicts and their history; neither does it aspire to give any judgments, or take sides. In fact, this article will prefer to associate itself with adage that my mother used often when us brothers used to fight; “taali dono haathon say bajti hae” (it takes two hands to clap). In this case, the brothers are the Gulf States and Iran. Unfortunately, the existence of a much required mother to solve the issues between the brothers is non-existent. This can only lead to two choices, either the brothers choose to sit down on the table to resolve their issues, or continue aggravating animosity until both fade in the sands of time. The odds too, however, are not very promising, since, the game that is being played in the Middle East and has been played for quite some time, makes these strategic and important Muslim countries, pawns in the hands of the bigger players. This gives all the more reason, for other Muslim countries to push these brothers into a dialogue to resolve their issues and set their course to peace and harmony.



And now to the elections in Iran, we see a cleric, Hassan Rohani, labeled as a moderate, coming to power. Hassan Rohani is considered to be a reformist by the political gurus, also known for his conciliatory approach and ability to broker compromises. He served at various positions, the most prominent being the top nuclear negotiator with the US, under the previous regime.

What seems to be reassuring is that, he's not a new face for the Gulf countries, esp Saudi Arabia, where he brokered pacts and agreements in the nineties that worked out for both the countries and closed embassies were reopened. Therefore, there is a sense of cautious positivity and optimism in the air.



Leaders of GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) countries, consisting of Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, have been swift in sending congratulatory cables to the newly elect. Putting their best diplomatic stance forward, the Gulf States have expressed their desire to start a new chapter in severely strained Gulf-Iran relations. It would also be right to point out that during the presidential campaign, Rohani spoke of seeking better relations with the US and Saudi Arabia, and ranking them as his top priorities. In an interview with AsharqAlawsat newspaper, Rowhani said: “With regard to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, we are determined to convert the hostility between the two countries, which unfortunately worsened in the recent period, into mutual respect and cooperation.” Critics, on the other hand, paint a bleak picture, shunning the expectations of change, commenting, that as per the governance system of Iran, the powers are not entirely in the hands of the President. The President has to depend on the Supreme Guide, who has the last word over domestic and foreign policies. Moreover, this time there was a change in the presidential candidate selection process in the shape of an additional initial screening. All the hopefuls, a total of 686 candidates, were asked to submit their papers to the Guardian Council for vetting. Out of these 686, only 8 were allowed to run, of which two withdrew. The critics suspect that, in light of the riots on the announcement of the result of 2009 elections, where Ahmedinejad won, only those candidates were permitted to contest the elections who shall carry the will of their supreme leader with a bare minimum of opposition. Rohani is in the close circle of Iran's supreme leader and therefore would be no different.

So where do we stand? Well I would still give Gulf-Iran relations the benefit of doubt. Electing a moderate and reformist as President, is evidence enough that the majority of Iranians, regardless of any role played by the establishment, realize that there is a mood of building bridges with the

external world. This symbol can be taken as a message by Iran that they are mulling over changes to their previous strategy no matter how minute they may be.

Undoubtedly, the challenges are daunting, starting with the first sin ever committed, Ego. Three strategic and game changing nations are on the table here, the US, Gulf (mainly Saudi Arabia) and Iran. And from what we have seen in the past, all three have huge egos. If we just consider the US and Iran and the nuclear standoff, a lot of push and pull is expected, Iran will try to humble the US while the US will put all types of pressures so that Iran caves in to its demands.

That "New" chapter, which the GCC countries have expressed their desire to start with Iran, comes with a lot of strings attached plus excess baggage to carry. If a positive and conciliatory approach is not maintained with lessons learned in the past, a positive and reassuring change in the Iran-Gulf (predominantly Saudi Arabia) relations cannot be expected. Emphasis is being put on Saudi Arabia, as it is the biggest player of the Gulf countries, being the largest, economically stable and progressing, largest in population and the most influential in the region, not to mention, the center of Muslim World, being the custodian of the two Holy Masjids.

Much skepticism and mistrust exists amongst the Iran and Gulf nations from the common man of the Gulf & Iran to their respective leaders. But desperate times call for desperate measures, there has been just too much blood spilt in the past already, and our hands shall continue to get soaked in blood of our Muslim brothers due to the current conflict of Syria, and to the dismay of the Muslim world, more may come in the future. As a start, ceasefire agreement in Syria, and immediate provision of medical aid to the people affected can be a solid positive gesture. Too many people have breathed their last, too many families have lost more than one dear one, too many families have become homeless, and too many are experiencing hunger, disease and mental traumas. A solution is critical.

Progress can only be achieved, if the leaders of the Gulf States and Iran stand staunchly behind their statements and commit honestly to the cause of bringing peace, harmony and prosperity to the region. I am sure that the leaders have realized that deadlocked issues be negotiated with a win-win situation, both sides must learn to be tolerant to the others' point of view and respond in a way that solves matters. The steps for improvement of relations must be mutual and concrete which consider not only the short term, but the long term objectives as well. There is much to be gained from a beneficial relationship between the Gulf and Iran like tourism, trade, knowledge exchange academic, military and otherwise. The possibilities are immense and are just waiting to be tapped into.

Pakistan can play a vital role in bringing the Gulf States and Iran closer by being a mediator. All of them are main members of Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which unfortunately, has lost luster lately, but its objectives; to preserve Islamic social and economic values; promote solidarity amongst member states; increase cooperation in social, economic, cultural, scientific, and political areas; uphold international peace and security; and advance education, particularly in the fields of science and technology, are still respected. Pakistan, with the current government, enjoys strong relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States and neighborly relations with Iran. Therefore, I would strongly urge the current government to take such steps.

It must not be forgotten that at the core we are still the last Ummah, and our strength comes from Unity. A United Muslim front is beneficial for all the Muslim States in existence. Differences of opinion have been allowed to turn into divides long enough. The call of the hour is Unity and peace, and each Muslim Nation has a role to play, a duty to perform.

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