

FOUR SCENARIOS AND NO RECOURSE?

SAUDI ARABIA AND IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Thomas Birringer

The West faces a dilemma with the Iranian nuclear program: taking military action against Iran or an Iran which possesses nuclear weapons – both alternatives bring considerable risks and seem more and more inevitable in the face of Iran's progress to acquire nuclear capabilities. Up to now, the carrot of supporting the peaceful use of nuclear energy has been just as ineffective as the stick of sanctions. If it is not possible to find a compromise, the only option remaining is to either accept an Iran which has nuclear weapons (or is capable of acquiring these at any time), or to take military action.

For Saudi Arabia, as the largest power on the Arabian side of the Gulf, the situation is even more difficult. After all, the compromises, which may seem possible from a Western perspective, would not be acceptable to the Saudis, who claim a leading role in the region. This article will primarily discuss the various interests of Saudi Arabia as the largest of the Gulf States and the most important supplier of natural resources in the world. This is done by setting out four scenarios. Firstly, the paper describes two scenarios, which are not desirable from the West's point of view; then, it will set out two further possibilities, which are viable options and may even lead to pleasing developments in the West's eyes, but which are just as unacceptable from the Saudi perspective. All in all, the alternatives for action are much more complicated for Saudi Arabia than they are for the West.



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As announced in September 2010, Saudi Arabia is planning to purchase arms from the USA to the value of 60 billion U.S. dollars. This would be the largest arms sale ever made by the USA. The weapons systems in question are predominantly used for defensive purposes. However, people consider an armed conflict as increasingly likely in Saudi Arabia, where the country is not itself the aggressor, but threatens to be drawn into the fight.

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Since the start of Barack Obama's presidency, the USA – Saudi Arabia's most important ally – has been sending fewer warning signals towards Iran. The USA does indeed have a strong military presence in the region owing to the wars in Iraq and, in particular, Afghanistan, as well as the Fifth Fleet, which is stationed in the Gulf.¹ However, its forces are committed. Israel considers Iran's nuclear program more of a threat than the USA or Europe do, not least of all because of the strong rhetoric used by Iran's president, Ahmadinejad, who continually disputes Israel's right to exist. In the past, the Israeli Air Force has frequently attacked targets in Arabic countries, which were production sites for weapons of mass destruction, and constantly prepares for an attack on Iran, which is comparatively further afield. Even public opinion in the two countries – both Iran and Israel – indicates that attention is currently focused quite rightly on a possible Israeli attack, whereas a few years ago, it seemed likely that the USA would be the protagonist.

For months now, there have been repeated reports that Saudi Arabia has granted – unofficially and confidentially, of course – Israel an air corridor along its northern border to Jordan and Iraq. Although the rumors have been stringently denied, there are increased signs that any Israeli attack on Iran would be silently accepted. Meanwhile, Iranian spy rings have been discovered in Kuwait and Bahrain, which have been charged with destabilizing the two countries from within in the event of war. At the beginning of July 2010, the ambassador of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was quoted in the American press as saying, with surprising bluntness, "a military attack on Iran

1 | The headquarters of the Fifth Fleet are in Manama, Bahrain.

by whomever will be a disaster, but Iran with a nuclear weapon would be a bigger disaster.”²

While the West has stepped up sanctions, the situation between the regional powers in the Gulf, namely Iran and Saudi Arabia, seems to have intensified. Are the Gulf States in favor of a military option for Iran, or is the propensity to accept such an option growing at least? The consequences of such military action are presented here as the first of the four scenarios; the subsequent scenarios describe the possible alternatives.

SCENARIO ONE: MILITARY ACTION

The individual effects of such a military strike are often discussed; however, the collective impact receives little attention. As a result of the Obama administration’s apparent position, it is generally assumed that Israel would be the sole aggressor.³ Thus, the analysis concentrates on the expected reaction of Iran towards Israel. It is anticipated that there would be rocket attacks by Hamas from the Gaza Strip and by a better armed Hezbollah from Lebanon. It is unlikely that there would be a direct response from Syria.

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Less has been written about Iran’s possible reaction towards the Gulf States. In the case of an obvious air corridor for Israeli fighter jets over Saudi Arabian territory – and, potentially, other Arab states in the Gulf – it is highly probable that Iran would take action against these countries. In addition, Iran also has potential to retaliate by threatening the West’s supplies of natural resources. This implicates an existential threat for Saudi Arabia and

2 | Ambassador Youssef al-Otaiba, from an interview conducted as part of the Aspen Ideas Festival organized by the Aspen Institute in Aspen, Colorado, Reuters, cited in *Gulf in the Media*, July 24, 2010, http://www.gulfinthemedial.com/index.php?m=politics&id=528349&lim=&lang=en&tblpost=2010_07 (accessed September 23, 2010).

3 | Cf. Anthony H. Cordesman, Abdullah Toukan, *Study on a possible Israeli Strike on Iran’s Nuclear Development Facilities*, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), Washington D.C., March 14, 2009, http://csis.org/files/media/csis/pubs/090316_israelistrikeiran.pdf (accessed September 23, 2010).

the Gulf States. For Saudi Arabia in particular, oil exports are the main source of income. Any interruption to these would have a major impact: it is feared that a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz would bring oil and gas exports from the Gulf States to a near standstill. Approximately 40 percent of all the oil transported by sea globally passes through the strait between Oman and Iran.⁴ Imports of essential goods for the Gulf States would also be affected.

On the other hand, however, Iran would harm itself with such measures as the majority of its own ports are in the Persian Gulf, which is known on the other side as the Arabian Gulf. Besides, there are alternative means of transportation – or these are being worked towards. There

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is a Saudi-owned East-West pipeline, which transports oil to the Red Sea, from where it can be shipped. Various ports with different oil, gas and container loading facilities on the East Coast of the UAE and in Oman have been expanded in recent years.⁵

Any direct attack by the Israelis on Iranian nuclear facilities would pose a threat to Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates particularly if the target were the nuclear power station in Bushehr in Southern Iran. Any potential radioactive cloud, which originated from Bushehr, would reach the densely populated regions of these countries as a result of the prevailing wind conditions.⁶ The question is, though, whether Bushehr would actually represent a primary target since the key facilities used for producing nuclear weapons are located elsewhere.⁷

4 | Cf. Christoph Plate, Die enge Straße von Hormuz. Was passieren kann, wenn Iran die Zufahrt in den Persischen Golf blockiert, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 06, 2008, http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/international/die_enge_strasse_von_hormuz_1.777620 (accessed September 22, 2010).

5 | Cf. *ibid.*

6 | Cf. Cordesman, Toukan, 90-92.

7 | In their study, Cordesman and Toukan indeed describe the consequences of an attack on Bushehr; however, they remark that the more likely primary targets would be the enrichment facilities (centrifuges) in Natanz, the nuclear technology center in Isfahan and the reactor facilities in Arak, all of which are considerably further North or Northeast. Cf. Cordesman, Toukan, Study on a possible Israeli Strike on Iran's Nuclear Development Facilities, 35.

On top of this, measures for direct retaliation by Iran are also likely: the target of any initial counter-attack might be the American military bases in Bahrain and Qatar. However, the Americans would probably retaliate with such force that Iran would be unlikely to attempt such an attack in the first place.

Another possible target could be the drilling platforms of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States. Both onshore and offshore installations would be easy targets. The states are also vulnerable because of their strong dependency on a relatively small number of desalinization plants. Depending on the target, any attack would have long-term and far-reaching ecological consequences for the Arabian Gulf: attacks on oil wells in the Gulf would trigger an environmental disaster on the scale of that seen in 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico. However, the shallow waters could make it easier to stop the oil flow in the Gulf.

These consequences are based on the assumption that Iran would take direct action against one of its Arab neighbors as retaliation. However, these states also possess military capacities, which should not be underestimated, and Iran still expects that its Arab neighbors would be biased towards their own side. On the other hand, military coordination is relatively weak among the Arab Gulf States, even though the body for its regional cooperation, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), was founded in 1981 as a response to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the resultant threat.⁸ In reality, the GCC has only proven itself as a platform for economic cooperation. Nevertheless, Iran is likely to refrain from direct retaliation on Saudi Arabia or the other Gulf States – not least because of American protection, and might instead concentrate on destabilizing these countries from within.

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After all, there is the question of how Shiite groups within the populations of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States, particularly Bahrain and Kuwait, would respond in the

8 | Cf. the article by Christian Koch in this edition: "The GCC as a Regional Security Organization".

event of a military strike.⁹ Within Saudi Arabia, the Shiite minority lives almost entirely in the densely populated Eastern Province on the Gulf. The country's oil reserves are also mainly found in this region.

It would be false, however, to imply a priori that because of their religion all Shiites were disloyal to the Saudi state and would, therefore, be sympathetic to – or even stand up for – Iran's cause. Besides religious affinities, social interests and national ties play just as important a role. Some of the Shiites in the region are descendants of Persian families, which emigrated there, and are by and large businessmen. Very often, these Shiites are relatively liberal and less receptive to a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. These Shiite mercantile families often belong to the wealthier sections of society; they are much worldlier and are considered modernizers within their own country. Therefore, they are viewed suspiciously by the ruling Sunnis in Saudi Arabia, who tend to apply to Wahhabi views.

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Furthermore, native Shiite groups can also be found on the Arabian side of the Gulf. While the susceptibility to fundamentalism might be more likely, not least of all because of the socio-economic circumstances, an automatic loyalty to Iran cannot be ascribed to these ethnic Arabs. In Saudi Arabia and beyond, there is evidence, however, of alienation between the Sunni regimes and the Shiite subjects. Time and again, the Shiite groups find themselves in a worse economic position. They often lack access to positions in the administration or the military. As a result, they are often disadvantaged when it comes to the distribution of the wealth derived from the oil and gas resources.

Against this backdrop of economic and social discrimination, Iran's attempts to exert influence do occasionally bear some fruit. For example, the largest Shiite group in Bahrain, the Wifaq, which also happens to be the most

9 | Cf. Katja Niethammer, Familienbetriebe mit Anpassungsschwierigkeiten. Perspektiven und Grenzen politischer Reform in den Golfmonarchien, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *SWP Study S19*, Berlin, July 2008, 19.

dominant political force in the country's parliament,¹⁰ is close to the ideology of the Islamic Revolution, or as they call it, "rule by the legal scholars." Photographs of Khomeini and the leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, can regularly be seen in the streets.

Bahrain is, however, a demographic exception since the Shiites make up about seventy percent of the population. There are significant Shiite minorities in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar. This is generally viewed as an instability factor. It is difficult to measure if and to which extent these segments of the population would take Iran's side in case of an attack on Iran that could be associated with the other Gulf States. According to the Sunni-Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, Shiites are seen as heretics in Saudi Arabia.

Moreover, it would be incorrect to link the question of the population's loyalty to the government in Saudi Arabia solely to the issue of religion. In Saudi Arabia in particular, the country's affiliation with the West, especially the USA, is very unpopular. Many conservative Sunnis consider this path to be wrong and are prepared to take violent action. Even today, there are repeated attacks by Al Qaeda and others in Saudi Arabia. In the event of a war with Iran, these would be bound to increase.

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SCENARIO TWO: IRAN AS A NUCLEAR POWER

If there is no military strike and sanctions continue to remain ineffective, it seems likely that Iran will acquire a nuclear weapon. The nuclear program would at least reach a stage where such a weapon could easily be built. This would be a particularly unpleasant scenario for Western nations, especially Israel. However, it may be assumed that the Iranian leadership would behave rationally, inasmuch

10 | Following the elections in 2006, Wifaq currently holds 17 of the forty seats in parliament. Since political parties are banned in Bahrain, it is merely a group. In advance of the forthcoming elections on October 23, 2010, a few prominent Shiites have been arrested in Bahrain. Cf. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Regional Program Gulf States, *Länderinformationen Bahrain*, <http://kas.de/golfstaaten> (accessed September 23, 2010).

as it would not use its nuclear weapon immediately (to attack Israel, for example).¹¹

After all, the decisive issue in nuclear deterrence is second-strike capability. This is a given for Israel – if not by its own means then thanks to the USA's protection. Initially, Iran would not possess this second-strike capability, as the number of Iranian nuclear weapons would be limited. Thus, in view of retaliation, an attack would be suicidal, even though Israel would be within range of Iranian Shahab-3 missiles. Iranian missile systems do not, though, have intercontinental range capabilities.

Should Iran possess a nuclear weapon, the result would most likely be greater influence for the country within the region. For Israel this would not only mean losing the outstanding, albeit unofficial status as the only nuclear power in the region. Compared to Europe, the perceived

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threat of Iranian nuclear weapons is greater because of the proximity and range of the missile systems. In addition, there is also the issue of increased vulnerability due to a higher population density: "Just two or three nuclear explosions could desolate Israel completely and physically wipe it out".¹² This also applies to the majority of the smaller Gulf States or to the few cities in Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province.

Therefore, the states in the region are seeking an answer to Iran possessing a nuclear weapon. A nuclear power will no longer respond to conventional threats or military sanctions and a non-nuclear power has no political influence over that country. This would result in a shift in power for several aspects of the relationship between the Gulf States towards Iran, from the occupied islands in the Gulf right up to influence on the Shiite minorities or the security of oil and gas transportation routes.

11 | Cf. Karl-Heinz Kamp, Wenn der Iran Nuklearmacht würde..., in: *Internationale Politik* (IP), September 2007, 104-113.

12 | *Ibid.*, 106.

Hence, is the nuclear armament of Saudi Arabia a possibility in order to limit real threat perceptions or to balance Iran's political power? Projects for the peaceful use of nuclear energy have at least been planned in several states in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia, as by far the largest Arab country in the Gulf, continues to view itself more and more as the leading nation of the Sunni-Islamic world. This manifests itself in a confident foreign policy, by which the country seeks to act as a mediator in many conflicts in the region, in the country's use of its economic power – Saudi Arabia is a member of the G20 – or, more and more, in the areas of education and culture. Nuclear armament would, however, not just come up against strong reservations from the West, but would also fuel a sinister nuclear arms race in the region.¹³

SCENARIO THREE: COMPROMISE – AT WHOSE EXPENSE?

As the "newcomer," Saudi Arabia is confronted with Iran, a traditional superpower – a claim which is, of course, accounted for with a nuclear weapon. Persia has always been the dominant power in the region. However, Iran does not just wish to achieve political hegemony, it also believes in a certain cultural superiority due to its history.¹⁴ Thus, it looks back on a rich, pre-Islamic history to a time of the great empires of the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sassanides. However, learned Persians are also aware that a number of the greatest Islamic scholars and a significant part of Islam's substantive development came from present day Iran, such as the philosopher Ibn Sina (lat. Avicenna).

**"Everyone has come to realize that there are only two powers that can exert influence in the world, and those are the USA and Iran."
(Mahmoud Ahmadinejad)**

Thus, the following statement, which initially appears megalomaniacal, can be explained from an Iranian perspective: "Everyone has come to realize that there are

13 | Cf. *ibid.*, 109.

14 | For a brief summary, cf. Wolfgang Günter Lerch, *Persische Visionen. Was steckt hinter Ahamdinedschads 'Weltmachtanspruch' Irans?*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 22, 2010, 12, or for more detail, cf. Johannes Reissner, *Irans Selbstverständnis als Regionalmacht, Machtstreben im Namen antikononialer Modernität*, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, *SWP Study S29*, Berlin, October 2008.

only two powers that can exert influence in the world, and those are the USA and Iran.”¹⁵ (President Ahmadinejad, speaking on the fringes of the UN General Assembly in September 2010 in New York in front of his countrymen.) With the aid of being a nuclear power, Iran would once again be able to exert this hegemonic claim in the region more aggressively.¹⁶

Against this backdrop, the developments that have taken place in Iran from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad represent a paradigm shift in Iranian politics. This shift can be described as a reversion to classic Persian national politics with the aim of achieving regional hegemony, which has superseded the aim of “exporting” the fundamentalist Islamic ideology inside and outside the region.

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However, outside the military field, Iran currently has very few means for realizing its hegemonic claims. The country’s economy is not in a good shape. Years of economic mismanagement by the Islamic Republic

have weakened the country. Huge sections of the country’s economy are controlled by the Revolutionary Guard and, as such, many citizens do not have access to them. The population suffers from political isolation. There is large-scale unemployment, particularly among young people, and living standards have not kept pace with those in neighboring Gulf States, even though Iran also possesses considerable natural resources. The tougher sanctions, however, also reduce the export options.¹⁷

It is, though, not just the economy that suffers. Academia and intellectual life is being suppressed by the country’s increased seclusion. Other actors such as al-Qaida have taken over the leadership of worldwide Islamic fundamentalism. The country’s conventional military power is

15 | Iran sieht sich als zweite Weltmacht neben den USA (*Die Welt*, September 20, 2010), <http://www.welt.de/politik/ausland/article9756696/Iran-sieht-sich-als-zweite-Weltmacht-neben-den-USA.html> (accessed September 23, 2010).

16 | Cf. Kamp, 108 et seq.

17 | Cf. Martin Beck, Energie und Wirtschaft in Iran, in: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung: *Internationale Politik, Iran*, 2009, http://www.bpb.de/themen/TC8MF3,0,0,Energie_und_Wirtschaft_in_Iran.html (accessed October 18, 2010).

limited and is weakened by the dualism of the army and the Revolutionary Guard. The out-dated weapons systems, which lack replacement parts, can hardly be used.

The result has been a fixation on the nuclear program, without which Iran would by now have been relegated to the bottom division of world politics. Many in Iran believe that becoming a nuclear power, or being on the road to achieving this status, will bring their country to eye level with the superpowers. From the West's perspective, this might represent a potential compromise which can prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon: the regime is given a certain level of influence in the region, even without an nuclear program. This could include a variety of economic aid, such as the construction and expansion of oil refineries and guarantees of Western imports. Increased participation in and consideration for the various crisis scenes in the region, from Iraq to Afghanistan, could also form part of this.

What is appealing from a Western perspective, however, is a threat in the view of Saudi Arabia. The country's importance would be weakened proportionately to any increase in Iran's status – be that as a supplier of natural resources or as a security partner. The smaller Gulf States in particular fear becoming objects of a compromise, through which increased external power will be exercised.

A "hegemon light" with Western blessing is feared. It is not without reason that the main diplomatic objective of Arab states in the Gulf has been to secure their involvement in the West's political deliberations about what to do with Iran. The background for this is a fear that one may reach an agreement with the Iranians at the expense of the Gulf States. However, this scenario will remain unlikely as long as there is a fundamentalist regime in Iran, which is fiercely anti-Western.

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SCENARIO FOUR: A TRANSFORMATION IN IRAN

Many in the West more or less place their faith in a transformation within Iran; at least ever since the opposition movement became unexpectedly popular following the manipulation of the presidential elections in summer 2009 and emerged on a nationwide scale. Nevertheless, President Ahmadinejad's power basis has already been crumbling in many areas.¹⁸

It is difficult to estimate the actual power the opposition movement has more than a year after it reached its peak. It will be crucial for further developments in Iran to see whether or not the regime can suppress this movement permanently. This will be made increasingly difficult the more the opposition becomes rooted in society.

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There is the question of just how far the "Green Movement" has a role to play outside of the large urban areas. There were reports, though, of protests in rural regions, as well.

Furthermore, it will be crucial for the opposition movement to find its support not only in academic circles, but also in other parts of the society, for example among the working class.

There is much to indicate that the opposition has now long since transformed itself from a mere reform movement within the framework of the Islamic Republic. Initially, the opposition movement was headed by important representatives of the old elite from the Islamic Revolution. Ahmadinejad, who emerged from the Revolutionary Guard, was seen as a parvenu within these circles and was never considered to have belonged to the inner circle of revolutionaries around Khomeini. As a result, the "Green Movement" was in the early days also an attempt to save the character of the Islamic Revolution from increasing militarization and nationalization by the Revolutionary

18 | Cf. Johannes Reissner, Simon Fuchs, Wahl gewonnen – Macht zerronnen? Ahmadinedschads Machtbasis nach den Parlamentswahlen, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, in: *SWP-Aktuell* 54, June 2008.

Guard. Some believe Iran is on the path to becoming a military dictatorship under Ahmadinejad.¹⁹

Many observers believe that the “Green Movement” has developed ever since the protests against the fraudulent elections held in the summer of 2009. A majority within the movement would reject the idea of the Islamic Republic. The economic misery and, above all, the country’s isolation have generated a strong desire – particularly among young people – for openness, which cannot be fulfilled within an Islamic society. Most people inside the “Green Movement” could support a secular, democratic state and an end to the rule of the religious scholars. Thus, during the protests in 2009, which were brutally suppressed, the movement has outpaced its fathers.

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The likelihood of structural transformation within Iran might indeed be remote. However, in such a scenario, a broader transformation would be more realistic. If the “Green Movement” is capable of prevailing in Iran, a secular and democratic state might become an option in the longer term. It is worth considering a few – albeit speculative – points, which shed some light on what this would mean for Saudi Arabia.

Initially, there would be no causal link requiring the newly transformed Iran to retreat from its nuclear program. Even a modernized Iran might seek to exercise a dominant role in the region and try and achieve this by means of an nuclear program. However, from a Western perspective, this scenario seems less threatening. The danger of the Iranian nuclear program is, from the West’s point of view, based on a link between nuclear weapons and an aggressive Islamic ideology or – now more likely – nationalism, which opposes Western interests. A pro-Western Iran, no matter how powerful, no longer represents such a

19 | E.g. Henner Fürtig, *Turbulente Wahlen in Iran: Die Islamische Republik am Scheideweg?*, *GIGA Focus Middle East* № 6, Hamburg 2009, 4, http://www.giga-hamburg.de/dl/download.php?d=/content/publikationen/pdf/gf_nahost_0906.pdf (accessed October 19, 2010), or Rainer Hermann, *Risse and Gräben. Ahmadinedschads zweite Amtszeit: Iran steckt in einer tiefen Krise*, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, August 05, 2009, 8.

threat. No one in the West views the nuclear capacity of a democratic state such as India as a threat.

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Such a scenario would, however, be seen completely differently in Saudi Arabia. Iran's neighbor is threatened by the size and dominance of Iran itself, irrespective of the predominant ideology or form of government. On this basis, a transformation in Iran would bring about several unforeseeable consequences for Saudi Arabia.

Firstly, with respect to the country's role as an exporter of natural resources: Iran also possesses considerable oil and gas reserves. Readmitting Iran into the circle of the world's leading suppliers – a sensible move in order to diversify and safeguard natural resources – would diminish the role of Saudi Arabia in this respect,²⁰ albeit it not fundamentally, but it would certainly reduce the country's market power.

Many in the Gulf benefit from being the only trade channel to Iran, which would otherwise be isolated. By opening up the country, this gateway function would no longer be required. Forcefully implementing the latest sanctions, though, the United Arab Emirates have abandoned this function anyway. This is particularly important since Dubai is Iran's long-time trading partner.²¹

Of greater importance for Saudi Arabia, though, is the country's role as a territorial base for representing Western interests in the region. In the case of an Iran, which was no longer hostile, the main opponent would disappear, which was the reason for using Saudi Arabia as a military base and geostrategic partner. There would also be new alternatives for supplies and security in respect of troops in Afghanistan and other crisis hotspots in the region. There are even shared interests and potential areas for cooperation with Iran in various fields, particularly in Afghanistan.²² The

20 | Cf. Walter Posch, Die Sanktionsspirale dreht sich. Europäische Iranpolitik auf dem Prüfstand, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, in: *SWP-Aktuell* 26, Berlin, March 2010, 2.

21 | Silke Mertins, Dubai schliesst die Handelswege nach Iran, in: *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 5/16/2010, in: http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/international/dubai_schliesst_die_handelswege_nach_iran_1.5726534.html (accessed September 23, 2010).

22 | Cf. Markus Potzel, Iran und der Westen. Chancen für gemeinsames Handeln in Afghanistan?, in: *SWP Study* 16, June 2010.

security role of Saudi Arabia as the most important ally in a region otherwise riddled with crises would cease to exist.

There is also the question of what influence a secular, democratic neighbor would exert on Saudi Arabia. The Shiite fractions could draw on their Shiite neighbor as an example when calling for equal political rights. They may even receive political support in doing so. The rulers in Saudi Arabia, however, would no longer be able to repulse these advances the way they do it today – by referring to the treath of exerting terrorism and the dubious ideology of the Iranian regime. On the minority's part, the appeal for human rights would cease to be tinged with destabilization by Islamic fundamentalism, which costs credibility.

The Saudi regime would, presumably, find itself subject to increased reform pressures – with reference to its neighbor on the other side of the Gulf. Minorities would demand more rights; the population would call for greater participation. The lack of access to religious freedoms and human rights – particularly in terms of the role of women – would increasingly characterize the country's image, even more so than it does already. Against this backdrop, there is a danger that the difficult power balance in Saudi Arabia between fundamentalist religious interests and the ruling dynasty, which accepts certain reforms up to a point, will be entirely out of balance. As a result, the stability of the country would be seriously threatened.

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This scenario is even more interesting if one considers the shifts in power, which have been taking place constantly – albeit slowly – between the large powers in the region: the possible implications and scale of such a change becomes evident if one looks at Turkey, which has set its priorities for a new foreign policy that could direct towards a development as a new regional power.

SUMMARY

It is very difficult to give an answer as to which of the four scenarios is most likely. For the last scenario in particular, there is a lack of reliable parameters. However, as mentioned at the beginning, there are a few indications that a military strike is not entirely inconceivable, although this would seem to have receded into the distance following the change of administration in the USA.

Scenarios one and four make it particularly clear that an important reason for Saudi Arabia's dilemma is typical of the security difficulties in the region. In the subregion of the Gulf, there is, in parts, an incongruity between state and nation, which has consequences for regional stability.

The more important conclusion that can be drawn from the scenarios therefore is the finding that Saudi Arabia as the subregional leading power has a very limited number of options in terms of its security policy towards Iran and Tehran's nuclear program. This becomes increasingly important if one considers the new foreign policy objectives of Turkey. The resultant shifts in power, which have been taking place now for some time, will force Saudi Arabia sooner or later to safeguard the leading role it claims for itself.