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Observations on the 2007 GCC Summit

By Dr. John Duke Anthony

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SUSRIS Editor's Note:

National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations President and CEO, Dr. John Duke Anthony, attended the December 3-4, 2007 annual GCC ministerial and heads of state summit in Doha, Qatar. He posted the following account as an exclusive based on his observations of the meetings of the six heads of state, which included the first-ever attendance (and remarks) by a President of Iran.

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In a region of ongoing unease faced with an unprecedented array of geopolitical challenges, the increasingly economically savvy heads of state of six Gulf countries — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, the GCC — held their annual summit in Doha, the capital of Qatar, on December 3-4. What transpired in this burgeoning center of sovereign wealth and unprecedented economic development has implications that warrant the close attention of Western and other powers.

GCC Regional Concerns

This year, despite a dynamic and sunny economic front, present in addition to the summiteers were lingering old clouds and gathering storm fronts to no one's liking. The most prominent remain those accompanying Iraq, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Lebanon-Syria, and, the more recent one, the present and possibly worsening situation regarding regional war and peace prospects as it pertains to Iran. Whereas Americans and other Westerners may view each of these four phenomena as separate and distinct from one another, the summiteers that gathered in Qatar view them differently: they see them as interconnected.

Iran's Ascendance

Perhaps the most significant distinction was the presence, for the first time ever in the 26-year history of the GCC, of Iranian President Ahmadinejad, invited by the Amir of Qatar, the host country. Given the controversy associated with Iran's foreign policies and international behavior for some time, it is legitimate to question why the GCC took such a step at this moment. The question has an air of curiosity if not urgency. One reason is that many American and Israeli hawks have long since jettisoned any inclination to give Iran's leaders the benefit of the doubt on its nuclear enrichment program and its interests and involvement in the four geopolitically-related issues noted. The second reason appeared barely hours after the final summit session concluded. A drop: new and official U.S. National Intelligence Estimate reversed an earlier assessment, declaring with "high confidence" that Iran had halted the potential military-related components of its nuclear program in 2003.

While the second phenomenon occurred immediately after the proceedings had ended and therefore was not discussed, summiteers offered several possible reasons for the unprecedented invitation extended to Ahmadinejad. One is that it is in the GCC's self-

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interest to demonstrate to the Iranian president that the member-countries are not in favor of anyone confronting Iran militarily regardless of the state or extent of its nuclear research development program. This rationale is understandable in light of past summits when a quasi-joke circulated that, "America attacked Iraq militarily and Iran won." That Iran was thereby emboldened to a greater extent than any time in recent memory caused its own troublesome concern bordering on fear at each of the past two summits, a sentiment not lessened by the American Vice President's meeting with Saudi Arabian King Abdallah only a few days before last year's summit convened in Riyadh.

A second reason for inviting Ahmadinejad was explained as affording the GCC leaders an opportunity to talk with and impress upon him their concerns relating to Iran's position towards and roles with respect to Iraq. Without exception, the GCC governments seek to see Iraq regain de facto and maintain de jure its national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity. These concepts as they relate to nation state attributes are emblematic of the three most essential criteria for international recognition by and admission into the United Nations. All three criteria have an additional poignancy and relevance in this instance as Iraq was one of the then handful of independent Arab countries that participated in the United Nations' founding.

A third reason for the unusual invitation has to do with the Arab-Israeli conflict and is related to the first and second explanations in the sense that all GCC leaders are eager to remove the one reason many American officials have given since 2003 as to why they have neglected to give the task of resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict its due. It goes without saying that the summiteers in Doha have been continuously dismayed at the extent to which Washington officialdom, if only for its own interests in regional peace and stability and that of Israel as well, has refused to devote the requisite energy, courage, and statesmanship essential to reaching a satisfactory and sustainable settlement.

Without building upon the platitudes and commitments enunciated at the recent Annapolis meeting that brought together the representatives of more than 40 countries keen to see measurable progress on this front, no one at the summit in Qatar was prepared to be very optimistic about the prospects for peace between Arabs and Israelis, let alone between and among other contending parties to ongoing discord. Without early and sustained movement towards ending this conflict, neither could anyone with whom this writer spoke see any meaningful prospect for removing what

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is acknowledged to be the single greatest recruitment vehicle for radical extremists and increased manifestations of anti-American sentiments since the Bush Administration began.

Implicit in the GCC leaders' viewing the possibilities of cooperating with Iran on these interrelated issues is a threefold list of objectives. It is that Iran lessen its stridency on matters pertaining to its nuclear developments; be less supportive of its agents and sympathizers involved in violent activities in Iraq and elsewhere as well, notwithstanding agreement that armed resistance to foreign military occupation is an internationally recognized right; and generally manifest a greater disposition to be moderate in tone and less defiant in substance in its public pronouncements on issues of great sensitivity not just to Iranians and others in the Gulf region but to countries and governments elsewhere as well.

On Iran's side, it is fair to say that practically any invitation for its president to attend a GCC heads of state summit would have been accepted, as indeed this one was and without any reservation. As the Islamic Republic's leaders have long tried to convey, Tehran's stated interest lies in peaceful and productive cooperation with all of its neighbors. To that end, the Iranian president implied, as he has done repeatedly on previous occasions, that the nature and character of such ties be mutually beneficial and reciprocally respectful of each other's culture and the orientation of their respective national and religious identities.

Within hours of his arrival in Doha, President Ahmadinejad rearticulated variants of this central theme. Indeed, he proceeded to propose practical and tangible cooperation between Iran and the GCC in a dozen fields of development ranging from education, science, and technology, to matters pertaining to trade, investment and commerce in general as well as regional defense. Viewed strategically, what he proposed is a kind of Six Plus One grouping. In the event the summiteers were to agree, the members would presumably have regular meetings with a view to forging accords and understandings on a broad range of issues of common concern and interest.

While attendance by the Iranian president was not expected in the run-up to this summit, his presence definitely created a "buzz." In the view of this writer, however, there is no likelihood of Iran being invited to become a member of the GCC. Doing so would, at a minimum, require amending what is perhaps the single most important criterion for the organization's membership: namely, that the GCC, among other things, is comprised of a grouping of states whose forms of government are similar, a

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condition that Iran, as presently constituted politically and configured governmentally, cannot meet.

Further, the prospect of the GCC member countries, individually or collectively, agreeing to a long-sought Iranian strategic objective — the withdrawal of Western and primarily American armed forces from their positions and roles in matters pertaining to Gulf deterrence and defense — is even less likely to be met. At most, what could reasonably be expected would be a potential boost in favor of greater detente if not the imminent prospects of a full-fledged rapprochement. Stated differently, at hand are the prospects for a much greater atmospheric receptivity in which it should be possible for the two sides to explore the possibilities for greater cooperation on issue-specific agendas in which they have a common and compelling interest.