



# SMALL WARS JOURNAL

---

smallwarsjournal.com

August 3, 2010

## The Saudi Option

by Tristan Abbey and Scott Palter

The year is 2012. Squadrons of F-15s, F-16s, and F-18s streak across the sky, swamping air defenses and neutralizing other key Iranian installations. The next wave targets the uranium enrichment facilities at Natanz and Qom, the nuclear power station at Bushehr, the conversion plant in Isfahan, and the heavy water plant at Arak. Within hours the Iranian nuclear program is crippled. As the armada returns to base, the head of state who ordered the attack readies to congratulate the pilots who carried it out.

“Peace be upon you all,” King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz says to his men. “Your bravery humbles me. The Saudi Kingdom will be forever grateful.

\* \* \*

Since the Bush administration forced the issue of Iran’s nuclear program to the fore in 2002, debating the merits and perils of a preemptive airstrike has become something of a favorite pastime.<sup>1</sup> Amid all the chatter about narrow corridors and Saudi “green lights” lies an inescapable truth: a surprise Israeli strike has never been more unlikely.

The contours of the problem have remained largely unchanged over the years. The United States risks too much by attacking Iran, while an Israeli strike is difficult to achieve without American backing. None of the countries that could conceivably grant Israel over-flight rights—Turkey, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—relishes the thought of being seen as complicit in a Zionist-Crusader foray against yet another Muslim country. Logistical requirements, namely limited refueling capacity, restrict the Israeli Air Force’s options to but a single multi-squadron assault of questionable long-term effectiveness. Tel Aviv, essentially, has one bullet.<sup>2</sup>

If anything, the situation has become more intractable. While some have suggested that Ankara could grant Israel a corridor, citing Turkish complicity in the IAF’s successful strike on the Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007, it was in 2009 that Prime Minister Erdogan stormed off the stage in Davos in anger over Gaza. The “peace flotilla” incident merely intensified what were already deteriorating relations between the two states. On top of this, Tony Blair is no longer in power and Washington is concerned principally with the roughly 180,000 troops it has deployed in both Iraq and Afghanistan. This presents American leaders with a conundrum: the more progress the

---

<sup>1</sup> There has been no shortage of failed predictions. For a time, one popular theory forecasted an American strike by the end of President George W. Bush’s second term. See, for example, “Bush plans strike on Iran’s nuclear sites,” *The Times* (April 9, 2006), and Muhammad Cohen, “Bush ‘plans air strike by August,’” *Asia Times Online* (May 28, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, “The Iran Attack Plan,” *Wall Street Journal* (September 25, 2009): “Any Israeli attack on an Iranian nuclear target would be a very complex operation in which a relatively large number of attack aircraft and support aircraft would participate. The conclusion is that Israel could attack only a few Iranian targets—not as part of a sustainable operation over time, but as a one-time surprise operation.” See: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204518504574418813806271306.html>.

new Iraq makes, the more damage an Israeli strike (and the concomitant Iranian retaliation) can inflict on US interests. In 2009, Zbigniew Brzezinski stated controversially: “If they fly over, you go up and confront them.”<sup>3</sup> In context, he seemed to suggest that American forces should shoot down Israeli planes. From a technical perspective, however, Israeli F-15s and F-16s need only be forced to take evasive maneuvers in order to abort the mission.

But there may be another way.

\* \* \*

As a variety of defense policy experts have observed, the Gulf Arab states are as fearful of the Persian bomb as are the Western powers—if not more so. The consequences of a regional nuclear arms race, after all, could be hugely destabilizing and potentially catastrophic. Yousef Al Otaiba, the ambassador from the United Arab Emirates to the United States, stated at the Aspen Ideas Festival recently:

[O]f every country in the region, UAE is most vulnerable to Iran. Our military, who has existed for the past 40 years, wake up, dream, breathe, eat, sleep the Iranian threat. It’s the only conventional military threat our military plans for, trains for, equips for. That’s it—there is no other threat. There is no country in the region that parlays the threat to the UAE, it’s only Iran. And so, yes, it is very much in our interest that Iran does not gain nuclear technology.<sup>4</sup>

When asked if this meant that the UAE would back an Israeli strike, he solicited laughter by carefully saying: “A military attack on Iran by whomever would be a disaster. But Iran with a nuclear weapon would be a bigger disaster.” These statements were widely covered in the Western press and led to speculation that he had implicitly endorsed an Israeli air strike. *Der Spiegel*, for example, headlined: “A Quiet Axis Forms Against Iran in the Middle East.”<sup>5</sup> This came on the heels of speculation the previous June that Saudi Arabia had granted a “green light” for the Israelis to use a narrow corridor of its air space for such a raid.<sup>6</sup> This story may have been more convincing had not the same paper run virtually the same story one year earlier.<sup>7</sup>

Curiously, Ambassador Al Otaiba’s strategic rationale received less coverage, even though it is arguably more interesting:

---

<sup>3</sup> “Brzezinski: U.S. should forcibly stop IAF flying over Iraq to reach Iran,” *Haaretz* (September 21, 2009). See: <http://www.haaretz.com/news/brzezinski-u-s-should-forcibly-stop-iaf-flying-over-iraq-to-reach-iran-1.7531>.

<sup>4</sup> Aspen Ideas Festival (July 6, 2010). Transcript available here: [http://www.aifestival.org/audio-video-library.php?menu=3&title=582&action=full\\_info](http://www.aifestival.org/audio-video-library.php?menu=3&title=582&action=full_info).

<sup>5</sup> Alexander Smoltczyk and Bernhard Zand, “Persian Isolation: A Quiet Axis Forms Against Iran in the Middle East,” *Der Spiegel* (July 15, 2010). See: <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,706445,00.html>.

<sup>6</sup> “Saudi Arabia gives Israel clear skies to attack Iranian nuclear sites,” *The Times* (June 12, 2010). See: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article7148555.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article7148555.ece).

<sup>7</sup> “Saudis give nod to Israeli raid on Iran,” *The Times* (July 5, 2009). See: [http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle\\_east/article6638568.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6638568.ece).

I can only speak for the UAE But talk of containment and deterrence really concerns me and makes me very nervous. Why should I be led to believe that deterrence or containment will work? Iran doesn't have a nuclear power now, but we're unable to contain them and their behavior in the region. What makes me think that once they have a nuclear program we're going to be more successful in containing?

Given the strategic rationale laid out by Ambassador Al Otaiba, it seems clear it is in the interest of the Gulf Arab states that the Iranian nuclear program be neutralized. If Washington doesn't lead, the typical argument runs, then capitals like Riyadh will be forced to cooperate with Israel. The obvious question, though, is why can't the Arabs do it themselves?

\* \* \*

The states comprising the Gulf Cooperation Council—Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—invest untold billions of dollars in their defense programs each year. The latter two lead the pack.<sup>8</sup> This spending includes massive Foreign Military Sales by the US and other powers. While such purchases are generally viewed in defensive terms, many of these systems—jets, munitions, and so on—can also be used for offensive purposes. Western-equipped and, in many cases, Western-trained air forces are at the disposal of the Gulf states. These forces include scores of Saudi F-15s, Emirati and Bahraini F-16s, and Kuwaiti F-18s. Together, the GCC states could muster more aircraft than could the Israelis—well over one hundred—and would only have to fly a fraction of the distance. The equation becomes even more lopsided when one considers potential Jordanian and Egyptian involvement.

The scenario is fairly straight-forward. The Persian Gulf contains a number of tiny islands. Three of these—Greater Tunb, Lesser Tunb, and Abu Musa—are occupied by Iran but claimed by the UAE. Neighboring Arab capitals have historically stood with the UAE on this matter. Writing last April, Sultan Al Qassemi of the Dubai School of Government calls for a nonviolent solution, stating:

Abu Musa is our Jerusalem, and without a resolution, relations between the Iranian government and the UAE will always be strained.<sup>9</sup>

As a matter of fact, all three islands taken together could fit inside the lagoon of Diego Garcia, but the principle of territorial sovereignty is rarely shrugged away and the Emirates have a legitimate case. Taking a page from Gaza activists, the Gulf states could organize and launch a Freedom Flotilla towards the Tunbs. From the outset, the stated purpose of this fleet would be to reassert Arab claims to these islands. The flotilla would be peaceful and would not comprise any warships. As an assertion of sovereignty, tremendous flag-waving would be broadcast over the

---

<sup>8</sup> Joby Warrick, "U.S. steps up arms sales to Persian Gulf allies," *Washington Post* (January 31, 2010). See: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/01/30/AR2010013001477.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Sultan Al Qassemi, "A concern for all Emiratis: Abu Musa's occupation," *The National* (April 24, 2010). See: <http://www.thenational.ae/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20100425/OPINION/704249932/1080>.

Internet and by Arab language cable channels. In such a scenario, it would not be difficult to goad the Revolutionary Guards into firing the first shot.

Once Iran started the war, the Arab capitals would have a pretense to eliminate its nuclear program. Instead of granting Tel Aviv over-flight rights and putting its own position at risk, Riyadh can rally the Gulf states to its side. The ensuing airstrikes would be undertaken in the name of Arab nationalism or Sunni Islam, rather than Zionism.

There are a number of historical antecedents that could serve as a template for the start of such a war. The sinking of the USS *Maine* in Havana harbor in February 1898 caused the deaths of over two hundred American sailors and precipitated a declaration of war on the Spanish kingdom two months later, but the cause of the explosion itself has remained a matter of dispute ever since.<sup>10</sup> The shelling of Fort Sumpter by the Confederacy in April 1861 inflicted no casualties on either side (until an accidental explosion during the rather formal surrender ceremony), but nonetheless ignited full-fledged Civil War. In July 1754, George Washington led a band of Virginians into frontier territory under dispute by the European powers; a brief clash with French troops precipitated the Seven Years' War. Finally, the Gulf of Tonkin in August 1964 provides the classic example by which actual hostilities have been exaggerated to serve as *casus belli*.<sup>11</sup>

History is also replete with examples of armed conflict between Muslim states. The struggle to unite the Maghreb under the rule of a single dynasty ensured that the region played host to a series of intra-religious wars over the centuries: the Almoravid dynasty, based in North Africa, fell in 1147 to the Almohads, who were in turn displaced by the Marinids in 1269. As for Iran, the Ghilzai Afghans conquered Isfahan in 1722 and ruled until Nadir Khan drove them out in 1730. Nadir then invaded Afghanistan and sacked Delhi, capital of the Mughal empire, in 1739. The 19th century saw the Ottomans capture the Islamic holy sites on the Arabian peninsula through their Egyptian proxies (1811-1818), the Egyptians occupy the Levant and actually fight the Ottomans (1831-33), and the Ottomans reconquer Iraq (1831-38). It is against this background that we should view the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) and the Persian Gulf War (1990-91).

\* \* \*

Both the Saudi and Israeli scenarios remain distinctly unlikely in the current context. Our point, however, is that an Israeli strike is so unlikely that a Saudi-led strike is likelier. As for whether or not the strike is a surprise, there are a number of mine canaries that would sing well ahead of time in either scenario. The US would move its capital ships out of the Persian Gulf and into the

---

<sup>10</sup> Neither the declaration of war on April 25, 1898, nor McKinley's official request for it on the same day mentions the *Maine*. The president makes reference to the attack in a letter to Congress on April 11, citing a naval investigation that concluded the cause was "an exterior explosion, that of a submarine mine." He stated: "It did not assume to place the responsibility. That remains to be fixed. In any event the destruction of the 'Maine,' by whatever exterior cause, is a patent and impressive proof of a state of things in Cuba that is intolerable." Reprinted in *The Annual Cyclopaedia and Register of Important Events of the Year 1898* (D. Appleton and Company, 1899), pp. 155-159; p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> The Tonkin Gulf Resolution alleges that "naval units of the Communist regime in Vietnam...have deliberately and repeatedly attacked United States naval vessels lawfully present in international waters." Later investigation revealed that the second attack on August 4, following an earlier one on August 2, likely never occurred. A National Security Agency historian, who analyzed the signals intelligence from the period, would later write: "If the resolution had been tied to the naval action of the afternoon of 2 August, or to the communist bombing of the officers' quarters in Saigon on Christmas Eve 1964, or even to the VC sapper attack on the air base at Bien Hoa on 1 November 1964, then the administration at least would have had an actual incident upon which to base support for it." See Robert J. Hanyok, "Skunks, Bogies, Silent Hounds, and the Flying Fish: the Gulf of Tonkin Mystery, 2-4 August 1964," *Cryptologic Quarterly* (declassified 2005), available here: <http://www.gwu.edu/%7Eensarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB132/relea00012.pdf>.

Arabian Sea as a force protection move. Another carrier battle group might be dispatched to the region as a precaution against Iranian retaliation. Israel, for its part, would ready missile defenses and beef up deployments in Galilee, and the Arabs would shift oil tankers out of the Gulf.

The calculus is simple. A strike that neutralizes Iran's nuclear program has the highest chance of success if it is orchestrated by the Americans. It has the lowest chance of success if the Israelis launch unilaterally. Washington has never been more reluctant to attack and the Israelis have never been more constrained. The Arabs would find it both simpler and safer not to have the Israelis involved and, apparently, have at least as much to lose as any other actor, and so may decide to act themselves. Either way, the strike—if it comes—won't be a surprise.

*Tristan Abbey is in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University. Scott Palter, a professional wargame designer and publisher, is President of Final Sword Productions, LLC. Both are senior editors at Bellum: A Project of The Stanford Review.*

This is a single article excerpt of material published in Small Wars Journal.  
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our Terms of Use. We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Please consider supporting Small Wars Journal.