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Resolving tension in the Persian Gulf won't resolve the causes

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Attached please find the 35th issue of *Persian Gulf Observer*, titled "Resolving tension in the Persian Gulf won't resolve the causes" by The Ezri Center's research fellow, Dr. Glen Segell.

The Persian Gulf Observer: Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf is published periodically by The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa, expressing the views and analysis of the Ezri center's researchers on various issues concerning the Persian Gulf region and the countries which lay by its shores.

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להלן הגיליון ה-35 של *Persian Gulf Observer* ובו מאמר שכותרתו "פתרון המתח במפרץ הפרסי לא יפתור את הגורמים לו" מאת ד"ר גלן סגל, עמית מחקר במרכז עזרי.

The Persian Gulf Observer: Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf מתפרסם בתדירות תקופתית ע"י מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי באוניברסיטת חיפה, ובו מוצגים מאמרי דעה, פרי-עטם של חוקרי המרכז על מגוון נושאים מאזור המפרץ הפרסי והמדינות השוכנות לחופיו.

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Resolving tension in the Persian Gulf won't resolve the causes

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A change of leaders in the Persian Gulf, for example in Iran, is not going to resolve the causes of disputes within Islam or the causes of inter-state Persian Gulf disputes. The Persian Gulf, in both modern and ancient times, has never been stable. War and violence have played a huge part in determining relations. This will not change should leadership change because the causes cannot be easily resolved. At best any new leader can seek to mitigate the symptoms. Historically this has been by authoritarian rule, by decree to suppress, or by seeking a scapegoat, to change the direction of the anger, but thereby creating a new dispute.

The regions corrosion, fragmentation, polarization, and vulnerabilities are not just because of ideological convictions, whether they are tied to religion or not, be they Islamism and its Jihadi variants, secular nationalism, or populism. Although all of these have played a role in shaping relations between leaders, states and communities' tensions have also increased because of the role of external powers, for example the Cold War and because of oil in the global economy. Top of the list of causes, however, are the refusal to forgive and forget and indeed to be tolerant and accept others.

Should leadership change then reduction in tensions might be apparent in inter-state relations, for example Iran and the USA. But this would be cosmetic change. The cause of the dispute shouldn't be confused with the symptoms. Here the symptoms of the current dispute are well versed in the media as Iran's missile and nuclear programs and support of non-state proxies such as Hezbollah with intervention in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq.

The causes of the tensions will remain even if the Ayatollah are weakened or deposed. Identifying one of the causes is not hard. At the fore is Islam. Within society Sunni or Shia don't coexist peacefully. Even less peaceful is when there are two neighboring states, Iran and Saudi Arabia, each with a predominate population majority of one variant. The maritime region of the Persian Gulf will remain volatile and dangerous for navigation, for example by oil tankers, so long as there is a Sunni state on one side and a Shia state on the other side.

To be effective a change would need to be more than just leadership but also the entire political system of governance. This is easier said than done. Almost without exception, historically, the type of political system in the Persian Gulf has been governance by authoritarian rule, be it monarchical, secular dictatorial or religious clergy. There is no successful example in the Persian Gulf of a political system modeled on a Western liberal democracy with associated institutions and society imbued with laws and practices of equality and equity and indeed typified by tolerance.

Even attempt at reforms, within the current political system, have not succeeded by existing leadership. For example the Islamic Republic of Iran born out of the 1979 Revolution has a politicized religion that plays a crucial part in shaping the state and state-society relations. Since the birth of the 'Second Republic' in Iran in 1989, following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and constitutional reforms to create an executive presidency, Iran has had three attempts at 'reforming' its way out of the political and economic structural problems it faces. Every time it has failed to do so because of the power of the extra-judicial forces in the country who have inhibited forward

motion. Even divided elite are caught in a permanent cycle of factional denial. The Supreme Leader, moreover, perpetuates the cyclical motion of the Republic by blocking meaningful change, as was the case in 2009.

As the legitimacy of all political stakeholders depends on their acceptance of the given rules of the game, none can dare visualize a polity beyond the straight jacket of the Vali-e Faqih system. They are all prisoners of their own legitimacy dilemma and so long as they remain prisoners of the system (Nezam) they will be unable to address the country's multitude of governance, economic, social, environmental, and of course political problems, both domestically and internationally. The Nezam's sacred cows are not challenged and innovative ideas about how to move the system forward and out of its impasse are dismissed as treasonous whispers. As the boundaries of the transitional condition are controlled by the regime, elites and society bounce from one side to the other, without achieving anything. This is exactly the condition of President Rouhani's presidency.

Externally too, revolutionary absolutism has trumped pragmatism and prevented Tehran from making compromises. Posturing as a policy is negative diplomacy. No one within Iran dares challenge, or could challenge, the red lines drawn to protect and project Shia Islam. This leaves economic sanctions that are devastating the country's economy, and everyday life. The problem of shortages is being compounded by hoarders, many of whom have strong ties to the regime. So the backbone of the country, its largely non-radical society, is under siege and losing social and monetary ground.

Ultimately, sanctions will weaken the Iranian economy and may topple the leadership. But this doesn't mean that it will bring about a system change that can deal with core structural problems and the causes of Persian Gulf tensions. What is certain is that there will be a shift in the country's geopolitical focus before and after any leadership change. Looking forward, Iran will have little choice but to deepen its eastward drift towards China in particular, but also Russia looms large as a pseudo-strategic partner. Iran even without the Ayatollah is likely to turn its back on the West, and draw closer to Asian countries, many of whose authoritarian regimes will reinforce the same currents in Iran.

The bottom line is that even with leadership changes Iran, like other Persian Gulf States and indeed typical of states with predominate Islamic societies, will be stuck in the mud of authoritarian rule. History has shown that such face radicalized relations internally and war and violence with and between others. There is no indication of the extinction of Islamic society, as we know it, in the Persian Gulf. Neither are there indications of resolving the causes of tensions between Sunni and Shia Islam or other centuries old territorial disputes and blood feuds.

More likely than not therefore is for the Persian Gulf to continue to experience corrosion, fragmentation, polarization, vulnerabilities and war and violence. The focus therefore should be on arms control to contain any conflict locally and prevent an escalation from the local to the regional or to global. When causes cannot be resolved then the symptoms and tensions can only isolated temporarily by restricting the means. However the West, and others, are selling more advanced weapons and in doing so both creating and sealing their own fate in rising tensions, instability and the likelihood of war.