

Going Nuclear

When US President George W. Bush branded Iran “the world’s leading state sponsor of terror” during this week’s tour of the Middle East, few of his hosts seemed to agree with either the tone or the depiction. A year ago, Gulf Arabs used to warn of the dangers of Iran’s nuclear program and urge compliance with UN requirements; these days, they talk of Tehran as a friend and neighbor.

Reasons include a shift toward pragmatism and the US intelligence rethink on Tehran’s nuclear weapons program — but also a new strategic approach in the region that aims to match Iran’s atomic ambitions, at least in part.

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members — Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain and Oman — agreed in late 2006 to consider a joint civil program to use nuclear energy for power generation and water desalination, and have since been working closely with the UN’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to define a framework. However, the UAE’s signing of a nuclear cooperation deal with France this week marks the most advanced move by a Gulf Arab state into the sector.

At this stage, the deal — which UAE officials said complements rather than clashes with the GCC plan — is a cooperation agreement. It has the potential to firm into a contract with a French consortium led by oil major Total to build two 1,600 megawatt nuclear reactors in Abu Dhabi at a cost of around €6 billion (\$8.8 billion). French President Nicolas Sarkozy — whose parallel Mideast tour secured a military base in Abu Dhabi, France’s first in the Gulf — also offered French nuclear assistance to Saudi Arabia and Qatar, building on earlier overtures to Egypt and Jordan and the signing last year of civilian nuclear deals with Algeria and Libya.

France has a long history in the region: It launched Israel’s nuclear program 50 years ago and later helped build Iraq’s Osirak nuclear reactor, bombed and destroyed in an Israeli air strike in 1981.

There is economic logic behind the Arab states’ push, as nuclear power would free up oil for export and support water supply. However, strategic considerations are also at play, namely a desire to balance Iran’s aggressive pursuit of uranium enrichment.

Most military and political analysts warn that the proliferation of nuclear technology would stoke tensions in the volatile region and could lead to an arms race with Iran. Once countries have obtained the know-how and material, programs can easily flip from civil to military use, some argue.

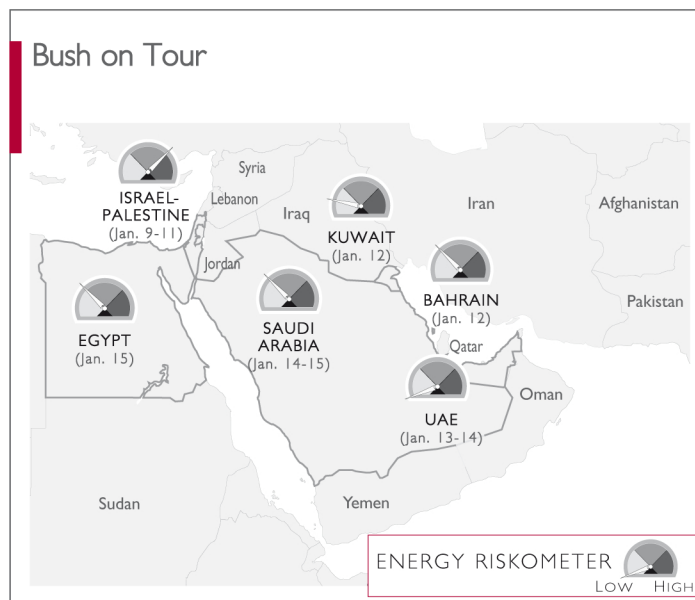
Israeli warplanes in September hit a site in Syria that press reports suggested was a nuclear facility being built with North Korean help, although this has been denied by both Damascus and Pyongyang. Israel itself has never admitted to possessing nuclear weapons but has about 200 warheads, according to experts, and is the only Mideast country that refused to sign the UN’s nuclear nonproliferation treaty.

Some analysts argue that a balance of capabilities would help prevent a nuclear confrontation among regional powers, citing the experience of India and Pakistan. Others remain leery, however: “Ten years are not enough to judge whether the India-Pakistan example is working,” says Paris-based analyst Antoine Basbous. “The danger is if those weapons fall into the hands of extremist groups.”

Still, the Arab Gulf states are being backed by international powers. Both the US and UK expressed support for the GCC plan, while Russia offered to help with the program. Sarkozy went furthest, declaring that “the Muslim world does not have less rights than the rest of the world to use civilian nuclear power to meet its energy needs in full conformity with the obligations that derive from international

law.” Ironically, even Iran offered to help the Gulf states with the transfer of nuclear technology. ■

Ruba Husari, Dubai



Compass Points

- **SIGNIFICANCE:** The Arab world is pushing for nuclear power — officially for economic reasons, but with strategic considerations clearly at play. Currently, no Arab country features on the IAEA list of 31 states with nuclear capability, which together have 435 power stations in operation and 29 under construction.
- **CONNECTION:** Whatever the arguments for and against, nuclear power would add a new dimension to Mideast dynamics, while nuclear weapons would fundamentally change them. One scenario: A technical incident sends a radioactive cloud across the Gulf’s oil waterways and production centers.
- **NEXT:** Arab Gulf states will continue to pump petrodollars into arms purchases, bolstering Western security guarantees against regional threats. The US will remain top dog, but France will nip at its heels, exploiting the region’s nuclear hunger and disillusionment with American policy.