



The Cambridge Security Initiative

IRAN VIEWS ABRAHAM ACCORD AS A STRATEGIC THREAT, OPTS FOR RESTRAINT IN LIGHT OF U.S. ELECTIONS

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Iran is under severe pressure from crippling U.S. sanctions, a rapidly deteriorating economy, and now the Abraham Accords signed between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain in September, which Tehran sees as not only undermining its regional ambitions but also allowing Israel – a potential threat to the homeland – a foothold in the Gulf. Mossad Director Yossi [Cohen](#) visited both the UAE and Bahrain shortly after the announced normalization of ties; Tehran almost certainly perceived these visits as evidence that intelligence cooperation will be a priority. The accord also may lead to the UAE’s acquisition of US F-35 fifth-generation fighter aircraft along with other advanced U.S. weapons — potentially a significant upgrade to its military capabilities. Tehran has [warned](#) the UAE and Bahrain they would bear the responsibility of any harm to Iran’s national interests due to this agreement.

Nevertheless, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei appears to have opted for a policy of restraint, probably at least until the U.S. election, and may be signalling a willingness to negotiate with Washington. Significantly, he has invoked the name of Imam Hassan, who is known for making a peace deal with his enemies. The Supreme Leader also referenced Hassan in a September 2013 speech when he outlined the idea of “heroic flexibility,” a justification for negotiations with the U.S. on the nuclear deal.

In addition, during a late September speech commemorating the Iran–Iraq war, Khamenei cited Ayatollah Khomeini’s decision to the end the war as a “rational move” and a “wise course of action.” Khomeini described this decision at the time as akin to “drinking the chalice of poison,” a reflection of his deep angst in making this decision but a recognition that the survival of the revolution was at stake. Khamenei’s comments suggest he sees today’s situation as analogous.

Meanwhile, Khamenei reportedly [rebuffed](#) Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps requests to retaliate against the U.S. and Israel, despite the fact that Iranian officials [believe](#) both countries are conducting operations against the regime following the myriad of explosions and fires at key national security and critical infrastructure facilities, including the enrichment facility at Natanz on 2 July and most recently at the Parchin military facility near Tehran in September. The Supreme Leader apparently concluded restraint is the best way to prevent President Trump’s re-election; the IRGC only received permission for [cyberattacks](#). Iran-backed proxies in Iraq continue their stepped up attacks, but these are focused on ousting U.S. forces from the country

and undermining Prime Minister Kadhimi, whom they perceived as a U.S. stooge. Tehran apparently still calculates proxy attacks against U.S. forces in Iraq remain under the threshold for a U.S. military response.

OUTLOOK

Tehran is concerned the Abraham Accords herald a regional strategic realignment that will undermine its strategic ambitions and further isolate the country, a direct challenge to its regional hegemonic ambitions. If other Arab Gulf states eventually follow the UAE and Bahrain's lead, it will reinforce Iran's perception of an expanding anti-Iran alliance in the Gulf that now includes Israel.

Tehran will seek ways to demonstrate the Accords will not bring stability to the Gulf region. Both [Saudi Arabia](#) and [Bahrain](#) reported in September that they thwarted Iranian-backed terrorist attacks, although these were probably planned prior to the Abraham Accords. Iran probably will limit its response to rhetoric and small scale, deniable attacks. These might include additional cyberattacks, terrorism and/or sabotage against multiple Gulf targets including tankers.

Regardless, Iran almost certainly wants to avoid a major conflict and probably calculates an overt escalation in response to the accord would be met by a forceful military response by the U.S. and at the same time bolster President Trump's chances of re-election. Survival of the system – the Velayat-e Faqih (Rule of the Supreme Jurist) – remains the regime's top priority. Tehran has adopted a policy of restraint, probably at least until the U.S. presidential election in November, and Khamenei's unusual references to Imam Hassan along with his comments about the end of the Iran-Iraq war suggest the Supreme Leader may again opt for negotiations if he perceives the survival of the Islamic Republic is threatened.