

Gulf Challenges US on Iran, Israel

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MANAMA, Bahrain — Gulf Arab countries challenged Defense Secretary Robert Gates on American policies toward Iran and Israel Saturday, after he urged them to force Tehran to stop uranium enrichment.

Several delegates at the regional security conference in Bahrain said US was hypocritical for supporting Israeli nuclear weapons, and questioned Washington's refusal to meet with Iran to discuss the Islamic state's nuclear activities.

"Not considering Israel a threat to security in the region is considered a biased policy that is based on a double standard," said Abdul-Rahman al-Attiah, the secretary general of the six-nation Gulf Cooperation Council.

Experts have long maintained Israel has nuclear weapons, although the Jewish state refuses to confirm or deny it.

The dissent from Gulf Arab delegates highlights fissures between the United States and its Sunni Muslim allies, despite their wariness of Shiite Iran's growing influence.

Iran decided at the last minute to skip Saturday's meeting, the second day of the conference.

US sees no threat in Israel's nuclear arms

During his speech, Gates stressed the danger of Iran's nuclear program, despite a new US intelligence report earlier this week that said Tehran halted atomic weapons development in 2003 and hasn't resumed it since.

The report was a dramatic reversal from a previous report claiming Iran restarted the program in 2005.

Soon after Gates' speech, the defense secretary was challenged by Bahraini Minister of Labor Majeed al-Alawi, who wanted to know whether Gates thought "the Zionist [Israeli] nuclear weapon is a threat to the region."

Gates paused, and answered tersely: "No, I do not."

Asked if US acceptance of that was a double standard in light of Washington's pressure on Iran, Gates again said "no," and described the government in Jerusalem as more responsible than the one in Tehran.

"I think Israel is not training terrorists to subvert its neighbors. It has not shipped weapons into a place like Iraq to kill thousands of innocent civilians covertly," said Gates. "So I think that there are significant differences in terms of both the history and the

behavior of the Iranian and Israeli governments."

The US and many of its allies have passed two rounds of UN sanctions on Tehran over concerns Iran could use uranium enrichment to secretly develop nuclear arms. Iran has spurned the international community, saying its program is only peaceful.

Israeli aggression cited

Qatari Prime Minister Sheik Hamad bin Jassem Al Thani countered Gates' comparison of Iran and Israel.

"We can't really compare Iran with Israel. Iran is our neighbor, and we shouldn't really look at it as an enemy," said Sheik Hamad. "I think Israel through 50 years has taken land, kicking out the Palestinians, and interferes under the excuse of security, blaming the other party."

US support for Israel is very unpopular in the Middle East, even among closely allied Gulf states, and Washington's unconditional support for Israeli nuclear development has complicated its push against Iran.

Sheik Hamad also called on the US to hold direct talks with Iran over its nuclear activities. After major Arab countries recently attended the Israeli-Palestinian peace conference in Annapolis, the US should show the same initiative with Iran, he said.

"As an Arab [country], we went to the United States ... to make a dialogue with the Israelis, so why doesn't the United States do a dialogue with Iran?" said Sheik Hamad. "I think that is the only way ... they can understand each other in the matter."

US refuses talks with Iranians

The US has refused to hold direct talks with the Iranians until they suspend uranium enrichment, a process that can produce fuel for a nuclear reactor or fissile material for a bomb.

Iranian Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki was originally scheduled to attend the conference in Manama, which was organized by the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, but Tehran canceled at the last minute.

Maamoun Fandy, senior fellow for Gulf security at IISS, said many Gulf countries are wary of high-level direct talks between the US and Iran because of fears that a deal between the two could go against their interests.

Qatar's position, he said, suggests there is "a rift within the GCC over both Iran and their relationship with America."

Fandy said the recent US intelligence report further complicated the issue, leaving many in the region wondering where the US conflict with Iran is heading.

"The release of the National Intelligence Estimate seemed to have undermined the previous hawkish position, so people there don't know what the Americans are up to," said Fandy.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/08/AR2007120801042.html>