



purposes. And, if Iran snubs American outreach, it would give the US added credibility, as it would, undoubtedly, be more difficult to rebuff Obama – a president of partly Muslim descent reaching out to the Islamic world – than his predecessor. Indeed, rejecting Obama’s overtures could be costly for Tehran.

Some in the United Arab Emirates will say – at least privately – that its view of Iran is not entirely dissimilar to Israel’s view of Iran, “which is very extraordinary when you hear it, but it can be heard,” Henderson says.

The Israelis, in turn, have “convinced themselves that Gulf Arabs’ fear of Iran trumps their loathing of Israel,” says



**Simon Henderson, director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Programme, Washington Institute for Near East Policy**

**‘The GCC is very worried about Iran, and vocal about saying it’**

Thomas Lippman, a fellow at Washington’s Middle East Institute. But whether this common concern towards Iran will lead to progress on the issue remains to be seen.

The combination of a more favourable Iranian diplomatic position combined with mastery of its nuclear cycle has implications for prospective nuclear proliferation within the GCC, either as a consortium or by the Saudis themselves, says Christopher Preble, director of foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington. Because of this dynamic, the US should explore seriously what it would take for the Iranians to reduce their fuel cycle, he says. “I’m quite confident that if we [the US] were to lead with an offer to normalise diplomatic ties and economic relations, many other countries would follow. And I think the GCC should be supportive of that approach because



## Some, however, see a certain logic in US engagement with Iran, pointing to the fact that non-engagement has failed

► it's the best chance they have to prevent Iran from weaponising," he says. "But I understand why GCC countries might not be satisfied with that and might develop weapons themselves as a hedge."

The US military, Preble believes, should generally play less of a role as a guarantor of regional stability in the Gulf. "I don't agree that it's necessary for our economic security. Among economists, it's widely understood that once a commodity makes it to the global marketplace, it doesn't matter where it came from," he says. "The US has many sources of energy, but Gulf states don't have many sources of revenue."

Preble would like to see a modest conventional military buildup in the Gulf, through a consortium. "But there is not a lot of pressure – let alone incentives – to build that, provided the US is supplying it for you," he says. "Realistically, I don't see that changing."

Additionally, there is considerable pressure within the US government, Preble says, to shift resources from the Navy and Air Force to the Army and Marine Corps – a change that will make it harder for the US to sustain the kind of presence it has previously maintained in the Gulf.

Secretary of defence Robert Gates' stated goals for the defence department have signalled away from "offshore balancing" to a more proactive role on the ground – meaning more troops for Afghanistan and sub-Saharan Africa. This would mean fewer port visits, less air cover and a diminished air presence in the Gulf.

Shipbuilding budgets are expected to decrease; the same, Preble says, is happening in the US Air Force. "Maintenance costs are rising so fast that it's just a death spiral. Even under the most optimistic scenario, the total number of ships built will continue to decline," he says. "It won't happen overnight, but that's clearly the trend."

The US mission in Afghanistan, in contrast, is growing, and most expect that it will continue to grow. "The folks [joining



Escalating US military involvement in Afghanistan without any goals in sight has echoes of Vietnam

the military] now know what they're getting into – they're going to Afghanistan, because we're not leaving there anytime soon," Preble says. President Obama – who has ordered an increase of 21,000 troops, bringing the American total to 68,000 – has described Afghanistan not as a war of choice, but as "a war of necessity".

But Obama, cognisant of the way a war abroad can derail a domestic agenda, also recognises the potential for quagmire; he has reportedly expressed concern that

Afghanistan could hijack his presidency, essentially becoming "his Vietnam".

Other primary concerns for the US include Pakistan, on which Washington considers Saudi Arabia to be an especially important influence because of Riyadh's



■ Robert Gates:  
US defence  
secretary