

SECRET SCHMOOZING

Given the discussions about the NIE we've had recently, I wanted to point out Marc Lynch's observation that the Saudis and the Iranians have been flirting lately—under the radar of the US press.

Very few media outlets in the US seem to have noticed, but Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmednejad and Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah were back together again the other day on the occasion of the Hajj. Ahmednejad's surprising appearance at the Gulf Cooperation Council summit in early December had set off something of a frenzy of media discussion about whether it meant a possible reconciliation between Iran and its Arab Gulf neighbors. A range of commentators (both officials and pundits) had rushed to pour cold water on those hopes/fears, emphasizing lack of agreement on issues over the sheer fact of the public engagement. Shortly after the Iranian President's visit to Doha, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates led a significant American delegation to an Arab security meeting in Bahrain to rally the Gulf Arabs against the Iranian threat and to re-energize a collective strategy of containment. This second public meeting – reportedly at the Saudi King's initiative – suggests that the Gulf Arab approach to Iran really is shifting despite these American efforts. Whatever the private fears of Iran by Gulf leaders and elites (which by all accounts, including my own conversations, are quite real), this very recent Gulf Arab trend from containment towards engagement of Iran seems real.

What is Dick Cheney going to say when he discovers his BFF King Abdullah is schmoozing

the Iranians behind his back—during the Hajj no less? Particularly as the Israelis (and a number of Republican Congressmen) insist they can disprove the NIE simply by attacking it often enough. What does it mean that the men controlling a huge chunk of the world's oil are getting rather cozy?