Virginia Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine, who recently visited the UAE as part of a congressional delegation, exhibited the politesse currently required as the Obama administration tries to balance its human rights concerns with vital U.S. interests in the Gulf. Speaking to reporters on a conference call earlier this month, Kaine termed the crackdown on Islamists in the country a "fact" with no further comment. Then, he praised the UAE as a crucial U.S. ally in the effort to contain Iran, as a moderating influence in Middle East politics and for its stability.

"I doubt there's any place in that region where there isn't some potential for unrest, but relative to the standard of the region, the UAE's general level of civil peace is remarkable," said Kaine, who serves on both the Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees.

Jane Kinninmont, a Persian Gulf specialist at Chatham House, a London-based research organization, says the United States is "caught between a rock and a hard place because the opposition groups see the U.S. firmly siding with the Gulf governments, while the governments are very sensitive to U.S. rhetoric about democracy promotion."

As Kinninmont puts it, "The language of democracy makes the regime nervous while the opposition movements think that it's just a fig leaf. The U.S. can't really win."

**Questionable Commitment**

Gulf leaders fear the United States has been distracted by the Arab Spring when the real threat, as far as they're concerned, is Iran, which they claim is stirring up Shiite Arabs in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Despite Obama's warnings that he will not allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon, they worry that U.S. policy toward Iran is not tough enough. Earlier this year, Gulf diplomats expressed concern about the U.S. Navy's decision to cut back the number of aircraft carriers in the region from two to one as a result of budget constraints.

Cohen, who travels frequently to the Middle East as head of the Cohen Group, a business consulting company, says that in his conversations with Gulf leaders, they cite Obama's reluctance to get involved in Syria, the diminishing U.S. dependence on Middle East oil, and the president's "pivot" to Asia as further reasons why they question America's commitment.

"They are not convinced that Obama's words of commitment are actually sincere," says Simon Henderson, a Persian Gulf expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. To be sure, he says, "the Gulf states appreciate the American security umbrella, which has been there for many years. But at the moment, they're anxious about American policy, believing that far from confronting Iran, it is regarded by Iran as being weak. And if American policy is weak, the Gulf states fear they will become vulnerable."

Optimally, Gulf leaders would like to see a far more aggressive U.S. policy toward Iran, including limited offensive actions to underscore the seriousness of Obama's threat to use force if needed to stop Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. At the same time, however, these leaders are acutely aware that the United States might not succeed in deterring Tehran's nuclear ambitions, even if war erupts. As a result, all the Gulf states quietly keep open their own lines of communications to Iran.

"They're very conscious that the day after, they will still be living in the neighborhood and will continue to have to deal with Iran," Henderson says.

Indeed, the channels between the Gulf countries and Iran include business ties that some lawmakers suspect of violating U.S. sanctions.

New Jersey Democrat Robert Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has asked the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control to investigate the Kuwait & Gulf Link Transport Company, which has more than $1 billion in logistical contracts with the Pentagon, over questionable business dealings with Iran. The Treasury Department declined to comment on any investigation.

**The Influence of Qatar**

Meanwhile, some Gulf countries are moving to fill what they see as a vacuum created by Obama's trimmed-down approach to the Middle East.

At the forefront is Qatar, which has pursued an unusually activist foreign policy across the region. In some cases, its initiatives have complemented U.S. goals, such as giving a green light for the Taliban to open an office in Doha for peace talks with representatives of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, an initiative that has subsequently stalled. Most important, Qatar also allows the United States to use Al Udeid Air Base, which has become the biggest U.S. Air Force facility and an essential forward operating base in the Gulf.

But in a push to raise its profile, Qatar also has taken steps that go against U.S. interests in the region. It was Qatar, in a bid to help the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates, that financed and armed Ansar al Islam, the group suspected of attacking the U.S. mission in Benghazí, Libya, last September, killing four Americans. Doha also provides millions of dollars in aid to the Palestinian organization...