

# Reports from Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Capitol Hill

## Middle East Policy Forecast for 2019

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Brief Analysis

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## Three Institute scholars report on recent regional visits and U.S. legislative developments, looking ahead to the most critical policy questions in the coming year.

*On January 31, Barbara Leaf, Dana Stroul, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Leaf, a senior fellow at the Institute and former U.S. ambassador to the United Arab Emirates, recently returned from a ten-day trip throughout Saudi Arabia. Stroul is a senior fellow at the Institute and former senior professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Ross, the Institute's William Davidson Distinguished Fellow and a veteran of four U.S. administrations, recently returned from a month-long visit to Israel and the Gulf. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks, along with an introduction by Institute executive director*

## **ROBERT SATLOFF**

**A**s 2019 begins, three points bear mentioning about the current state of U.S. Middle East policy. First, America is now two years into an experiment in which both of its main political parties are arguing for a diminished role in the region, an unprecedented situation in the post-World War II era. Second, the country is now ten years into an experiment in which successive presidents from these parties have argued for that approach. Third, Donald Trump is entering the third year of his presidency, but he has yet to face a Middle East crisis—something U.S. presidents almost inevitably have to face.

## **BARBARA LEAF**

**O**ne thing that strikes the repeat visitor to Saudi Arabia is the pace and depth of social changes under way. Women are visible in public spaces and the workplace in a way unimaginable only two or three years ago, often sitting in mixed groups with men while leaving their faces uncovered. Yet these changes are having a profound psychological effect on Saudis—even those who support them find them disorienting.

Many Saudis in cities such as Dhahran, Riyadh, and Jeddah associate these changes with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (aka MbS) and are convinced that they are irreversible. Those who support social and economic reform argue that demographics are on their side, and that the people who resist it are older and increasingly marginal. Some of them also characterize MbS as the first person to confront things head-on in Saudi society, arguing that he is willing to rock the boat and take responsibility for the outcome rather than sugar-coat the need for change.

At the same time, many Saudis are acutely aware of the international opprobrium that has come the kingdom's way due to Jamal Khashoggi's murder and the host of jarring domestic and international moves by MbS. They tend to feel unsettled and anxious about this criticism.

More broadly, U.S. partners in the wider region expressed deepening concern, even anxiety, about America's commitment to the Middle East. Israel senses that it is alone in countering Iran and the regime's project to build a permanent defense and intelligence platform in Syria. In some cases, partners are even taking up policies and relationships that are clearly at odds with U.S. regional interests, such as Gulf states reestablishing diplomatic relations with Bashar al-Assad sans conditions.

In Yemen, the situation is likely to unravel this year unless the Trump administration becomes directly involved. The UN cannot do this alone, notwithstanding a good start to a UN-led peace process.

In Iraq, political dynamics may work against U.S. troops remaining there given President Trump's abrupt decision to withdraw forces from Syria. If so, Iraqis may see a repeat of the 2010-2011 scenario.

Meanwhile, the numerous empty positions in American embassies and the constant turnover in the cabinet and national security agencies is contributing to a paucity of high-level, two-way engagement with friends and partners. The relationship with Saudi Arabia is headed into a deep freeze in 2019 due in part to structural problems with Washington's approach. Allies have also been left baffled as to who speaks for the administration. This came to a head in the past two months, when different U.S. officials sent wholly contradictory messages on when and under what conditions troops would be withdrawn from Syria.

## **DANA STROUL**

**D**emocratic control of the House and Republican control of the Senate will make it difficult for legislators to fundamentally alter any Trump administration policies toward the region. Sen. Jim Risch (R-ID) is the new chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, while Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-OK) is the new chairman of the Armed

Services Committee. The former committee has the potential to be active, but this depends on how Chairman Risch decides to lead it. A committee is only as good as its hearings and its members' willingness to advance together on meaningful legislation. Senator Risch has indicated that he has no intention of holding hearings related to Middle East issues, and that any disagreements he has with President Trump will be discussed in private.

Passing meaningful foreign policy legislation on the Middle East requires bipartisanship, which will be difficult to conjure if the current hyper-partisan mood continues. In that scenario, most of the real legislating action will occur not in the foreign affairs committees, but in the armed services and appropriations committees responsible for moving "must pass" items such as the National Defense Authorization Act. One telling example is the most recent agreement on State Department appropriations. Although it has not yet become law, this compromise bill withholds military training assistance from Saudi Arabia and continues the pattern of conditioning certain assistance to Egypt.

If Congress cannot come together on legislation beyond the "must pass" variety, individual members may assert themselves in other ways, such as passing resolutions of disapproval on weapon sales, imposing conditionality on assistance during the appropriations process, or using the nomination process as a lever to conduct oversight. In the Senate, Democrats may pursue alternative means if blocked from working through the regular committee process, such as issuing reports and holding shadow hearings.

For now, the Senate is debating the "Strengthening America's Security in the Middle East Act." In the House, Foreign Affairs chairman Eliot Engel (D-NY) has announced that his committee's first hearing will focus on U.S. policy in the Arabian Peninsula.

Certain issues bear close watching. Regarding Israel, various aspects of the relationship have been particularly divisive in the Democratic caucus. On Iran, strengthening punitive measures against the regime has historically been a bipartisan issue, but the center dissipated in the aftermath of Washington's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal. Members of Congress may attempt to restore bipartisan consensus based on Tehran's terrorism sponsorship, ballistic missile program, and human rights record, but even this will be very difficult given the stark difference in views on the nuclear file. On Syria, the right and left sides of the foreign policy establishment have been largely unified in opposing the administration's military withdrawal announcement.

Over the past four years, Congress has voted on issues related to Saudi Arabia and Yemen more than any other Middle East foreign policy issue. The administration's handling of the Qatar dispute in 2017 and Khashoggi's murder last year led members on both sides of the aisle to take aggressive stances as a way of expressing their concern.

Finally, when Congress passed the "Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act" in 2017, it laid out clear, mandatory sanctions for regional governments that purchase weapons or sign commercial or intelligence agreements with Russia. As America takes apparent steps toward reducing its role in the region, many countries are looking to Moscow to fill the void. The Trump administration may have to decide whether or not to impose sanctions on these countries—some of them U.S. partners—if they pursue deeper agreements with Russia.

## **DENNIS ROSS**

**T**o boost his legitimacy, MbS is trying to replace Wahhabism with nationalism. In light of this shift, it is no shock that the kingdom has greeted international condemnation of the Khashoggi incident with nationalist backlash. Recent meetings with Saudis revealed a strong sense that their country is being singled out unfairly given the human rights abuses seen in other regional states, including Iran.

Although Saudi opinion on the crown prince's handling of the Khashoggi situation vary, he is almost universally perceived to be the center of change in the kingdom. Many Saudi officials and citizens believe that without him, "dark forces" would try to reverse recent reforms and trigger great turmoil.

In another sign of change, the standing committee to overhaul the educational system includes Muslim World League secretary-general Mohammad Al-Issa, who is breaking new ground on dealing with other faiths. Moreover, Saudi “guardian rules” are being eased, with women no longer needing male approval to apply for jobs or loans.

The Trump administration should take several steps to put the relationship with Riyadh on better footing, especially given the angry mood on Capitol Hill. It should push for transparency in the Khashoggi trials, suggesting that MbS assume responsibility for a policy that went wrong and show how he is changing the government’s approach toward dissidents. U.S. officials should also encourage him to return to his former path as a reformer, though this will be a difficult sell at a time when women activists are still being jailed.

Regarding the humanitarian disaster in Yemen, Riyadh needs to change the narrative. MbS has been demonized for that situation, but the reality is that the Houthi rebels continue to play a major role in perpetuating it. The Saudis should offer a time-limited, unilateral ceasefire—one that can be extended indefinitely if the Houthis respond while putting the onus on them if they do not. Although the Houthis have repeatedly violated the limited ceasefire in Hodeida, a Saudi offer to widen it could still have the benefit of affecting perceptions and reality in Yemen.

In Israel, security officials have felt largely on their own for some time when dealing with the Iranian threat in Syria, and President Trump’s withdrawal announcement only deepened this sense. Israel and Iran now appear to be feeling each other out regarding what the ground rules will be in Syria after U.S. withdrawal. For months, the Israeli Defense Forces had limited their operations in the country due to Russian pressure, but they carried out two strikes after Trump’s declaration. In response, Iran launched a heavy-payload missile from a Syrian base that was intercepted by Israel’s Iron Dome defense system. The potential for escalation is therefore quite high—Tehran seems determined to create a precision missile presence in Syria and Lebanon, while Jerusalem is equally determined to prevent it. If a new conflict results in tens of thousands of rockets and missiles launched at Israel, the IDF would feel obligated to attack Iran. To convince Russia that it needs to do more to limit Iran’s deployment of precision weapons, Washington should signal Moscow that U.S. forces could be drawn back into Syria if such a conflict erupts.

*This summary was prepared by Jo-Ann Estes.*

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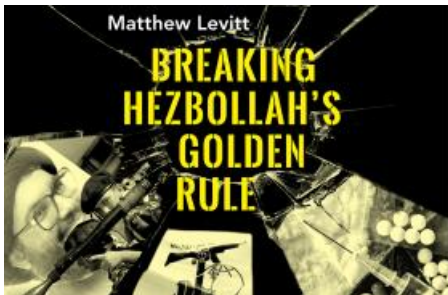
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