

# The Aim for Saudi Arabia and the US Must Be to Find a Common Game Plan

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## On key policy and business issues, Mohammed bin Salman represents a path for modernization in the kingdom.

**M**ohammed bin Salman will make [his first trip to the United States this week](https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/exclusive-saudi-crown-prince-to-meet-pence-and-mcmaster-visit-us-film-industry-1.713882) (<https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/exclusive-saudi-crown-prince-to-meet-pence-and-mcmaster-visit-us-film-industry-1.713882>) as the crown prince and heir apparent of Saudi Arabia. Although he has come to Washington before, this trip will have a very full agenda and is important from several standpoints.

First, the replacement of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state with Mike Pompeo may augur significant changes in the Trump administration approach to the Middle East, and the crown prince should be prepared for discussions on a number of key issues. Consider, for example, that [Mr Pompeo seems more tough-minded on Iran than Mr Tillerson](https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/saudi-arabia-s-crown-prince-will-seek-clarification-from-the-us-over-its-role-in-the-middle-east-1.713866) (<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/saudi-arabia-s-crown-prince-will-seek-clarification-from-the-us-over-its-role-in-the-middle-east-1.713866>)—or, at least, might be much more willing to run risks in following a path separate from our European allies. Could that mean he will be more demanding of what the Europeans must be willing to accept on the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal, if the Trump administration is not to walk away from it in May? That seems likely. Since there are limits on how much the British, French and Germans are willing to address the US concerns, what are the implications of an American walk-away from the deal? What do we expect the other members of the 5+1 to do in response? And what will the Iranians do?

Apart from the nuclear deal and what the US might do, Mr Pompeo appears, on Qatar, to be more sympathetic than Mr Tillerson to the Saudi Arabian and UAE positions. What is that likely to mean in practice—more pressure on Qatar? A more determined effort to resolve the differences and restore GCC unity?

One other significant policy difference may also exist in the approach to Syria. For his part, Mr Pompeo made it clear in a public appearance several months ago that he takes the Iranian/Shia militia presence in Syria to be a serious threat to US national security interests. Rhetorically, that has been the policy of the Trump administration but not in practice. The administration's actions in Syria have looked remarkably similar to the policies of the Obama administration, geared against ISIL and not against the Iranians, Shia militias or the Assad regime. What is possible here? Can Mr Pompeo alter Donald Trump's approach and the instinct to keep the policy towards Syria on ISIL only and not Iran? If so, **[what might Mr Trump ask of the Saudis \(https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/white-house-saudi-crown-prince-to-meet-trump-next-tuesday-1.712631\)](https://www.thenational.ae/world/the-americas/white-house-saudi-crown-prince-to-meet-trump-next-tuesday-1.712631)**? What would Saudi Arabia ask of the US? All these questions should be explored during the visit.

A second larger purpose of the visit ought to be **[to affect the view of Saudi Arabia in the US \(https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/beyond-the-headlines-podcast-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-s-us-visit-and-isil-s-resurgence-1.713101\)](https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/beyond-the-headlines-podcast-saudi-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-s-us-visit-and-isil-s-resurgence-1.713101)**. Saudi Arabia is clearly undergoing a revolution from above, one that is not only seeking to change the character of the Saudi economy but also the social mores of the country and its society. The Saudi National Transformation Plan represents a new model of modernisation. As such, the US has a major stake in its success, particularly because for larger Arab states and their populace, there has never been a successful model of development—a reality that has created a vacuum filled in the past by secular nationalists like Gamal Abdel Nasser and today by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, all claiming that they would deliver economic progress and a just society. None did or could because their ideologies precluded it—Saudi Vision 2030, however, just might fulfil its promise. But the image of Saudi Arabia as offering a genuine path for modernisation in the Middle East has not taken root in the US. Instead, many continue to hold an image of a wahhabi-inspired ideology of intolerance and rejection that fuels extremism. Tackling that in public speeches and interviews is essential for transforming the Saudi image in America.

To be sure, this is not the only public and private message the crown prince should be conveying. But it is important, and I would argue that it is just as important as the message of reassurance that he wants to convey to the leaders of America's private sector—namely, that Saudi Arabia is a good place to invest in and do business. Yes, the anti-corruption campaign could be a selling point, provided the leaders of finance, communication and high-tech here come away from their meetings with the crown prince believing that there is a level playing field for those doing business and that the rules and laws are both clear and applied consistently and transparently.

There are two last policy issues that will surely be part of the crown prince's visit: Yemen and Israeli-Palestinian peace. The former will be discussed because of the humanitarian issues that must be addressed, but also because the US and Saudi Arabia need a common game plan for dealing with a conflict that Iran views as a cheap way to bleed Saudi Arabia. What must be done to stop the provision of Iranian arms, including missiles, to the Houthis? What leverage do we and others have to change the Houthi calculus? Minus a change in the Houthi calculus, it is hard to see how a political settlement becomes possible or how the misery in Yemen can abate.

As for the peace issue, the administration seems poised to present its plan. The aim must be to have a plan that Saudi Arabia and others (UAE, Egypt, Jordan and Morocco) can publicly embrace and declare is a just and fair plan for resolving the conflict and one that fulfils Palestinian national aspirations in a dignified fashion. Without a public embrace, little will be possible and the Palestinians will lack the political cover they need to accept the inevitable compromises that are required of them and of the Israelis. If the Saudis and others feel they cannot embrace it, the crown prince's discussion should focus on deferring the plan and looking at other ways to manage the conflict. The aim of the Trump administration should be to provide a plan or to take steps that improve the situation and the potential for ending the conflict. The aim must not be to make things worse. A plan that is rejected and then followed by a walk-away by the administration won't advance the cause of peace—quite the opposite. Given that, the crown

prince should discuss not just the plan but also the follow-on steps—if it is accepted, if it is not accepted but there is a readiness to discuss it, or if it is rejected.

There is much to do and try to accomplish on this visit. Ultimately, if there is one outcome more important than any other, it is putting in place a common game plan on a range of issues where we have shared concerns. Perhaps Mr Pompeo in his new role can establish an ongoing dialogue to ensure close co-ordination and no surprises as we pursue a shared agenda for the region.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the National website (<https://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/the-aim-for-saudi-arabia-and-the-us-must-be-to-find-a-common-game-plan-1.714070>). ❖*

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