The Middle East through Gulf Eyes: Trip Report from Riyadh, Muscat, and Abu Dhabi

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Brief Analysis

Four scholars share their findings from high-level meetings in Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Read a summary or watch complete video of their conversation.

In early December, a Washington Institute delegation that included four senior fellows and about fifty members of the organization's board of trustees traveled on a Gulf regional study tour to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; Muscat, Oman; and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. The carefully planned itinerary provided a framework to reflect on the direction of reform and change inside each of these countries. The following is a brief summary of a trip report

presented by Institute executive director Robert Satloff and Blumenstein-Katz Fellow Katherine Bauer. For a full version of these presentations, including remarks by Institute experts Michael Singh and Lori Plotkin-Boghardt, watch the above video.

SAUDI ARABIA

In the modern era, Saudi stability has been based on three factors: Family, God, and Oil—not necessarily in that order. Within the ruling family itself, stability has been maintained by a policy of dividing power among several branches, rotating leadership across the family, and spreading wealth among the princes. Today, all that is being called into question: after decades of profligate spending, rising population and failure to diversify the economy, the end of infinite oil wealth is a pressing reality; the Sunni extremism unleashed as a reaction to the 1979 Mecca mosque takeover and Iranian revolution has boomeranged against the Saudi state; and the solutions to these problems now require such wholesale reforms that it is no longer possible to maintain a diffuse leadership among the ruling family, lubricated by oil wealth. As a result, power is now being centralized in a manner hitherto thought impossible for Saudi Arabia; a serious effort is now underway to reform the religious hierarchy and institutions; and the country is undertaking a major economic, social, and cultural reform effort that aims to modernize state and society, stretching some long-accepted norms and defining new ones.

The reforms are certainly a gamble, in multiple respects—success requires the leadership to move fast but not too fast, to anger certain key constituencies but not to the breaking point, to threaten the unity of the family but not its leadership. Importantly, the reforms should not be seen as an embrace of democracy or liberalism—they are a means taken to rescue Saudi Arabia from the reality of its limits as they pertain to ingrown Islamic extremism, reliance on traditional oil-based sources of income that are rapidly waning, and the dispersed power among its leadership. Given that Saudi Arabia is, in many ways, a family business, the best analogy may be to a radical restructuring of a struggling corporation.

Domestically, the government seems to have a fairly clear sense of its goals and a roadmap to achieve them. The crown prince's success in maneuvering other elements of the family to gain control of the coercive power of the state, without any bloodletting, has been impressive; with 8-10 percent of the Saudi budget reportedly siphoned off to corruption, the anti-corruption campaign he has led is quite popular; his endorsement of a greater role in society for merit, talent, and entrepreneurship has tapped into the ambitions of hundreds of thousands of Saudis who have returned from Western (especially American) universities in recent years. At the same time, it would be foolish not to recognize the enormity of the challenges Saudi Arabia faces and the potential for spectacular and dramatic failure. Reform of this magnitude is a tremendous challenge, made even more difficult by the absence of any concomitant political reform.

In terms of foreign policy, Saudi leaders appear to lack the same analytical rigor and clear thinking as they do on domestic issues. While the kingdom is committed to a more vigorous, more offensive strategy against the twin threats of Iranian adventurism and Sunni extremism, it is difficult to argue that Saudi Arabia has so far registered much success—vis-a-vis Qatar, Lebanon, Syria, or Yemen, for example. Riyadh certainly welcomes the shift in U.S. regional priorities from the Obama administration to the Trump administration, especially the latter's critique of the Iran nuclear deal, its willingness to confront Tehran, and its embrace of traditional Middle East allies. On the issue of U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, while the government was not pleased with this declaration, it was far from the top of its foreign policy agenda, and Saudi leaders confirmed their commitment to work with Washington to mitigate any damage that might result from this initiative and to do what they can to build a lasting Israeli-Palestinian peace.

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN

In foreign policy, where you sit often determines where you stand, and that is certainly true of Oman. Oman's geography and history—especially its background as a trading nation with close ties to Iran and India—are an important determinant in a foreign policy that emphasizes engagement over confrontation. As a result, Oman's regional strategy is very different from that of its Saudi neighbor and most other GCC states; it sees itself as a bridge between Arab states and Iran.

THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The UAE has been seen as a model in the region; it has successfully diversified its economy and has a strong commitment to tolerance and moderation. Furthermore, it is an important U.S. ally in the region and a key counterterrorism partner. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are also close partners.

In contrast to Riyadh, Emirati officials were more focused on foreign policy, citing two primary threats: Iran and Islamist extremism. In addressing the Iranian threat, while the more local concerns of Yemen and the Houthis were a central focus, the Emiratis showed clear concern about Iranian proxies more broadly, and the threat of Iranian missile proliferation. Officials left the impression that the UAE's focus in containing Iran was on confronting the regime's influence in Yemen and its attempts to interfere domestically in other Gulf and Sunni Arab states. For example, addressing Tehran's interference in countries such as Iraq requires a focus on countering extremism and promoting economic development and governance.

The second pillar of the UAE's foreign policy outlook was countering Islamist extremism. While there has been a focus in recent years on the UAE's ability to project power militarily, less has been said about their robust soft power strategy, especially as it pertains to countering extremism. The UAE has been positioning itself as a regional leader in that regard. Officials described the importance of anchoring such efforts regionally in Saudi Arabia, as the birthplace of Islam, and in Egypt, home to Al-Azhar, the preeminent school for Sunni religious studies.

Yet this is an uncertain time for some in the UAE. The Qatari crisis has been looming large, presenting challenges to the value proposition that Dubai serves as a platform for businesses operating throughout the Gulf. Interlocutors also voiced concerns about Gulf-origin investments going outside the region because of uncertainty emanating from Saudi Arabia.

All in all, the UAE remains a small, open country that pursues stability in an unstable region. This task will be long and difficult, and the Emiratis are seeking partners to support them in the promotion of these regional goals. ❖

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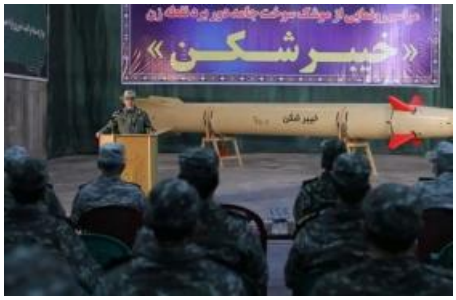

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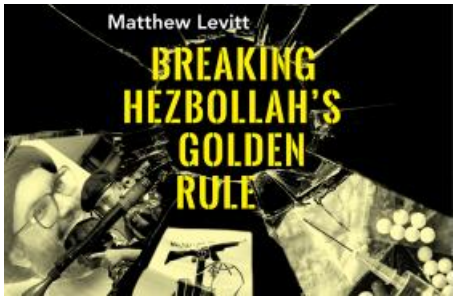

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