America's Anxious Allies: Trip Report from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel

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Brief Analysis

A bipartisan team of distinguished former officials share their insights from a recent tour of key regional capitals.

On September 26, The Washington Institute held a Policy Forum with Meghan O'Sullivan, Philip Gordon, Dennis Ross, and James Jeffrey, who recently returned from a bipartisan tour of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel. O'Sullivan

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MEGHAN O'SULLIVAN

When talking about Saudi Arabia today, most observers fall into one of two general categories. The first are people who have not been there in a while -- they tend to focus on the kingdom's enormous demographic and economic challenges, along with the issue of transferring power to the next generation. In contrast, people who have been there recently tend to walk away impressed and surprised by the energy, sense of purpose, and sense of possibility the kingdom exudes -- a change witnessed in just the past couple years.

This is an important economic moment because Saudi leaders are well aware that ongoing structural changes in the oil market could prevent new price spikes, which means they need to transform to survive. Prince Muhammad bin Salman's consolidation of power is impressive, as is the team of people he has galvanized to work on these challenges. Almost every conversation during the latest visit began with talk of the internal transformation plan called "Vision 2030." It is a highly ambitious plan, but the Saudis appreciate the dire moment and the need to tackle tough issues.

That includes transforming social and political life along with the economy. As one of our interlocutors said, "This is revolution disguised as economic reform." Such acknowledgements are very encouraging, though internal debate continues over the speed of those changes and the possibility of altering the social contract. In general, officials are interested in moving away from oil but realistic about the kingdom's medium-term dependency.

Changes in the role of religion seem to be happening as well. Saudi leaders want to move the state project from ideological to national development, though they have not offered much specificity on steps beyond neutering the religious police over the past six months.

Elsewhere, Turkey is prioritizing efforts to preserve a unified, centralized Syria, despite the consensus that this goal will be difficult to achieve. Turkish officials also see the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds quite differently. And while the next U.S. president may wish to push back on Turkey's ongoing post-coup purges, Washington will not be heard on that issue unless it is sympathetic to Ankara's concerns about Fethullah Gulen and his opposition movement.

PHILIP GORDON

Saudi Arabia has a clear sense of purpose. Although it has tried economic reform before, it now has a group of young, dynamic former private-sector workers with a vision and determination to genuinely transform the country. There is a defined path forward, which gives reason for optimism.

At the same time, Saudi leaders will encounter resistance as their people begin to work, pay taxes, and live without subsidies for the first time. Succession issues could also arise within the royal family. The United States has an interest in their success and should support them; Washington cannot get overly cynical, complaining about the lack of change but not backing it when the Saudis actually try it.

Riyadh's foreign policy inspires less optimism. The Saudis are convinced that they are in a sectarian geopolitical struggle with Iran and are committed to pursuing it. This means they will continue funding the wars in Syria and Yemen despite the negative consequences at home and abroad.

In Turkey, Americans underestimate how traumatic and significant this summer's attempted coup was. The

parliament was bombed and Gulenists infiltrated the system, leaving conservatives and secularists/liberals alike in fear of the dangers posed by that movement. Yet the United States still tends to downplay the coup, leaving many Turks feeling betrayed. At the same time, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is clearly overreaching in his domestic response to the coup. Going forward, Washington needs to address the impression that it does not care about the Gulen extradition request. It should also communicate with Ankara on how to deal with the Islamic State cooperatively while minimizing reliance on the Syrian Kurds

The tour stop in Israel revealed disparate views on many key issues. The Iran deal has faded as a central topic of conversation. And while recent developments in relations with Arab states are significant, they may mean less in diplomatic terms than Israelis hope (i.e., as far as recognizing Israel's existence and making progress on the Palestinian issue). Israelis are also torn on Syria. In their view, both of the most likely scenarios -- post-Assad chaos or continued control by Assad and his Hezbollah partner -- seem equally threatening.

More broadly, when partners and friends talk about the need for U.S. leadership, they are really talking about what they want the United States to do. At the moment, they have high expectations that the next administration will act in ways more favorable to them. Yet the next president may have trouble meeting that expectation, since the Obama administration has already tried to offer reassurance through major arms and technology transfers.

DENNIS ROSS

Dispatching a bipartisan team to the Middle East sent a good message to key allies: namely, that U.S. experts and former officials on both sides of the aisle can travel as a group and broadly agree that American leadership and engagement in the region are important. Some of the participants might play roles in the next administration, so their presence and their willingness to talk to regional leaders about local priorities and ideas signaled that America values these bilateral relationships.

Saudi Arabia was especially exciting because it shows signs of trying to become a successful model of modern Arab economic state development. The way the Saudis do business -- in terms of candor, punctuality, and hours worked -- is better than it has been in the past. They are also taking extremism seriously and want to educate their population in order to discredit the Islamic State and other radical actors.

In Turkey, the preoccupation with Gulen remains potent. For most Turks, an outright American refusal to turn him over would be akin to Ankara having custody of Osama bin Laden after 9 /11 and refusing to hand him over to Washington. U.S. officials need to understand that psychology if they hope to deal with the problem.

In Israel, leaders made clear that they do not want to become a binational state. How they plan to avoid that scenario is less certain, but they believe a regional framework is possible -- one that takes advantage of improved Arab-Israeli relations in such a way that Arab states give diplomatic cover to Palestinians and rewards to Israel. Yet Arab governments may not have enough interest or bandwidth to facilitate such progress, and even if they do, it won't happen on the cheap -- Israel would still need to make major concessions. Accordingly, the United States should focus on restoring a sense of possibility for a two-state solution.

To address allies' broader concerns, the next administration could implement policies that seek to contain Iran's militia and destabilization activities, developing contingency plans with allied governments to better deal with that challenge. This would also give Washington more leverage to ask things of them. In addition, U.S. officials can help the Saudis with issues related to their reforms, such as technical assistance on initial public offerings. Finally, the next administration should invite the Israeli prime minister to Camp David for a strategic dialogue early on.

JAMES JEFFREY

At each stop on the tour, interlocutors said that the Middle East is at a new level of chaos and uncertainty. They

were particularly concerned about Iran and Russia. At the same time, Saudi, Turkish, and Israeli officials all expressed a certain optimism that they were in good shape despite the regional problems -- an encouraging sign. All three are projecting military force in their neighborhoods in an unprecedented way in terms of intelligence sharing and other activities. This may be burden sharing, but America is used to gathering everyone under its banner, and these partners are willing and ready to work with Washington.

For Turks, the Gulenist coup attempt was like their 9/11 -- a real shock. They witnessed the military take up arms against itself and fire heavy weapons against its own people. The good news is that they uniformly view the coup's failure as a fortunate result. Another consequence is that President Erdogan has emerged from the incident even more powerful, though the population is still split between supporting and opposing him, which could be a problem depending on how he wants to use his current popularity. Whatever the case, the Gulen extradition request could be a long-term bilateral issue.

This summary was prepared by Mitchel Hochberg. ❖

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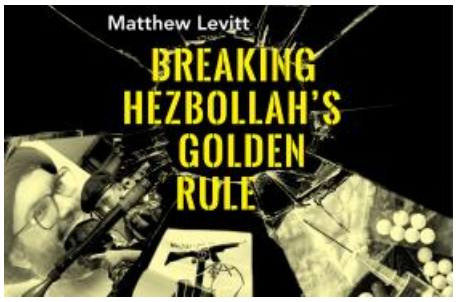

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