

The Manama Dialogue: Searching for Unity in the Face of Chaos

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Brief Analysis

The solidarity expressed at the latest regional gathering of senior U.S., European, and Middle Eastern defense officials, diplomats, journalists, and analysts was encouraging, though some aspects of Washington's policies in Syria and elsewhere still need clarification.

From October 30 to November 1, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) convened its annual Manama Dialogue, the flagship forum for Middle Eastern defense and security officials and their foreign partners. This year's dialogue sought to inventory the multiple crises shaking the region and demonstrate unity amid threats from seemingly all directions. One result was a sense of solidarity, at least among government officials, as well as a new reluctance to criticize the United States or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries for the unhappy state of affairs. The main takeaway message was clear: "Things are so serious that we all have to hang together."

Indeed, the 2015 dialogue took place in the most dramatic regional security environment since the conferences began over a decade ago. While last year's gathering focused on the critical ISIS threat, this year's discussions were held in the shadow of many other stunning developments -- the Iran nuclear deal, Russia's military engagement in Syria and de facto alliance with Iran, the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, political crisis in Turkey, potential conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, and continued fears of American withdrawal from the region or security rapprochement with Tehran. In various ways, the conference demonstrated a new sense of unity and purpose among the United States, its European allies, and the GCC states, four of whose six leaders had voted with their feet by avoiding the Obama administration's Camp David summit mere months ago in protest of the pending Iran deal.

HIGH ATTENDANCE

The attention that conferences like this generate beyond military officers, defense firm representatives, and GCC officials typically signals the level of concern among the states involved and the international media. This year's unusually high attendance by senior officials and journalists suggests deep concern. Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi opened the proceedings with a keynote speech. Although his remarks were routine -- and perhaps more in line with the worldview of his GCC financiers than with his actual policies back home -- his presence alone demonstrated the appeal of this year's conference.

The United States also sent a strong delegation led by CENTCOM head Gen. Lloyd Austin and Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, while the European officials in attendance included Germany's impressive defense minister Ursula von der Leyen and British foreign secretary Philip Hammond. Among the usual gaggle of Middle Eastern officials was Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir, who came directly from the Syria talks in Vienna and was easily the most dynamic presence at the event.

SYRIA, NOT ISIS, IS THE MOST PRESSING PROBLEM

The Syrian crisis was the dialogue's most salient theme, with a prominent role given to Khaled Khoja, president of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces. On that note, Jubeir provided a detailed description of the Vienna talks. Although he was upbeat, he made clear that the talks had not achieved any breakthrough, and that Saudi officials still believe the solution boils down to two ultimatums: "When does Bashar al-Assad go?" and "When do the 'occupying forces' (his definition: Iran and Russia) leave?" On other Syria issues, he indicated room for compromise. But he insisted on a clear timeline -- up to six months for a new government without Assad to be formed, and eighteen to twenty-four months for that new government to produce a new constitution and hold elections. He characterized the Iranian and Russian position at Vienna as follows: Assad will only go if he is voted out in those elections, an argument that Jubeir roundly rejected.

Blinken was also strong on the "Assad must go" theme but remained general on the details. He presented the standard Obama administration line that the Russians were not succeeding in Syria and would soon find themselves bogged down in high costs and fading rapport with the Arab world. Many in the audience challenged him here -- when he was accused of "subcontracting" the Syria job to the Russians (i.e., in the belief that combat fatigue would eventually compel them to compromise on Assad's fate), he cited the supposedly potent indirect effect that new U.S.-trained anti-ISIS fighters would have on the Assad regime. When pressed, however, he failed to clarify what exactly Washington's policy would be if such fighters were to fight Assad's forces directly. He and Jubeir both suggested that the Saudi and U.S. positions on major issues at Vienna were very close, though other views sourced to Turkish officials suggested that there is more divergence, with Washington taking a softer line on when Assad should go.

EMPHASIZING IRAN'S AGGRESSION, NOT THE NUCLEAR DEAL

Despite the specific focus on Syria, the real worry for most attendees was the threat emanating from Iran's aggressiveness in the wake of the nuclear deal (or, as Jubeir described it, Tehran's "thirty-year record of aggression"). Russia's intervention garnered heavy criticism in large part because many saw it as a deliberate empowerment of Iran's regional designs. Blinken confirmed that the United States was ready to counter destabilizing Iranian activity throughout the Middle East, citing numerous examples of cooperation with regional partners on military, intelligence, and diplomatic matters, including Yemen.

The nuclear deal itself received little attention. Jubeir put the issue at least temporarily to rest by claiming that the agreement had dealt with the Iranian nuclear threat "for the moment." For his part, Blinken asserted that America's

role in placing nuclear restraints on Iran was further proof of its engagement on regional security. He also asserted that the agreement was solely transactional and would not engender U.S. reluctance to confront Iran.

AMERICA IS BACK -- MAYBE

While skepticism about U.S. intentions and staying power ran through the audience, Blinken worked hard to emphasize Washington's engagement. His message was blurred somewhat when he twice invoked the administration shibboleth that those who call for a more active American military role in the region are essentially longing for a new Iraq quagmire (i.e., when he spoke of "large-scale, open-ended interventions" and "vast unintended consequences"). Nevertheless, he and General Austin wasted no opportunity to reinforce America's commitment and presence.

Here again it was Jubeir who most effectively argued the "America is still with us" theme. He rejected arguments that the temporary withdrawal of the last U.S. aircraft carrier in the region signaled a wider pull-out, and spent considerable time echoing Blinken's praise for the U.S.-GCC military and intelligence cooperation that has flowed from the Camp David summit (which King Salman pointedly did not attend). He even asserted that bilateral cooperation against Iran had reached unprecedented levels. Recent U.S. military moves -- retaking Kunduz, keeping forces in Afghanistan, having Special Forces participate in a raid in northern Iraq, and the decision to deploy Special Forces on the ground in Syria -- undoubtedly played a role in shaping this mood of solidarity.

ISIS NOT FORGOTTEN

The dialogue devoted considerable time and speaker power to ISIS and the violent Islamic extremism that feeds it. Foreign Secretary Hammond was particularly effective on this theme, and Minister von der Leyen, who has made a crusade out of pushing her country to provide military assistance against the group, made an exceptionally positive impression. Most of the formal and informal military briefings led by General Austin also focused on defeating ISIS. Iraq's struggle against the group was recognized in various ways as well -- the country's foreign and defense ministers were invited to speak (though the former had to cancel), and many attendees praised Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's internal reforms and efforts against ISIS, with Jubeir promising to dispatch the kingdom's long-withheld ambassador to Baghdad "within days." Even Afghanistan, often an afterthought at Arab-centric gatherings, was well represented when its foreign minister joined a panel on combating extremism.

POTENTIAL DISCORD ON ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ISSUES

Policymakers will have to keep an eye on one problem that surfaced at Manama -- despite the plethora of more urgent items on the agenda, many of the Arab defense representatives placed undue emphasis on the disturbing but relatively limited violence between Israelis and Palestinians, and unfortunately they were echoed by some of the European attendees. Although Blinken affirmed U.S. readiness to reengage if the parties are serious about peace, he effectively countered the widespread assertions that "everything is Israel's fault." Still, the concerns expressed in Manama underlined the reality that America's vital cooperation with its regional partners against unprecedented chaos can be affected by what happens in Israel and the West Bank.

James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute and former U.S. ambassador to Iraq and Turkey. ❖

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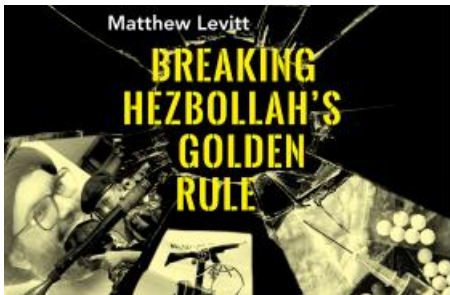
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