# Dateline Middle East: Trip Reports from around the Region

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)** , Andrew J. Tabler **(/experts/andrew-j-tabler)** , Simon Henderson **(/experts/simon-henderson)**

Mar 29, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robert Satloff (/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.

Andrew J. Tabler (/experts/andrew-j-tabler)

Andrew J. Tabler is the Martin J. Gross fellow in the Geduld Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute, where he focuses on Syria and U.S. policy in the Levant.

Simon Henderson (/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.

Brief Analysis

*On March 27, 2012, Robert Satloff, Andrew J. Tabler, and Simon Henderson addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Satloff, the Institute's executive director and Howard P. Berkowitz chair in U.S. Middle East policy, had just returned from Israel and Jordan. Mr. Tabler, the Institute's Next Generation fellow, had recently traveled to Lebanon and Turkey. Mr. Henderson, the Institute's Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program, had just returned from Bahrain. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

## Robert Satloff

For the first time in decades, the compact that has maintained stability in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is coming under intense pressure. On one end of the spectrum, influential elements within the regime's traditional powerbase -- East Bank tribes -- are protesting Amman's perceived inattention to their dire economic straits, its perceived preference for accommodating Palestinian economic interests, and its perceived laxity on corruption. At the other end of the spectrum is a dangerous evolution of the Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood (MB). Traditionally, the group has had an ambivalent relationship with the government. At present, the accommodating East Bank-led generation of MB leaders is in decline, with a more radical, Palestinian "Hamas" wing in ascendance, riding the regional trend. The combination of both developments -- disaffection among the traditional East Bankers and

heightened demands for political representation by a more assertive MB -- poses a serious challenge to the regime, particularly at a time when Jordan's economic prospects do not appear bright.

The East Bank problem is real and severe, but with resources and flexibility, it can be solved. The MB problem, however, may be beyond the regime's ability to control because it is fed by regional events, such as the Brotherhood's demonstrated success in Egypt and the potential Islamization of the political opposition to Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria. Currently, the government's strategy is to incorporate the MB's political arm -- the Islamic Action Front -- into the political system as soon as possible, and to hold elections under a modified election law within months. Yet the MB could decide to slow this process, sensing that the winds blowing from Syria may give them more leverage over time. In this case, the group could find itself in a stronger position to pressure the regime, demand greater representation, and even gain dominance in parliament.

Jordan also faces the difficult question of whether to play an active role as a platform for supporting the Syrian opposition. Although King Abdullah courageously spoke out against Assad early in the crisis, Jordan is not eager to earn Assad's wrath by directly inserting itself into the battle against him, especially since it fears that an Islamist successor regime in Damascus would heighten the pressure on Amman. Lucrative foreign inducements, however, could persuade Jordan otherwise, especially considering its dismal economic situation.

In Israel, one cannot help but be impressed by the professionalism and sobriety of the debate at high political levels regarding the wisdom of preventive military action against Iran's nuclear program. This discussion is not just about capabilities; it centers on the connection between possible military action and the ultimate strategic objective of convincing Iran that the cost of persisting in its nuclear efforts is too high to bear. In this regard, there is broad recognition that whatever Israel decides on its own to do, the strategic objective will not be achieved without the cooperation and partnership of other countries, especially the United States. At the same time, there is considerable angst and anger at leaks from Washington following Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's visit that seemed to contradict President Obama's messaging and that, to Israelis, seem designed to restrict their freedom of action.

More generally, a visit to the region underscores the importance of the pace of change in Syria, not just the fact of eventual change. A slow, grinding process makes more likely the emergence of a Salafi-tinged opposition in a Syria that would be deeply scarred by sectarian divisions -- one in which those military actors who are currently maintaining control over the regime's stocks of chemical weapons are less likely to be in a position to do so. This outcome is anathema to the interests of the United States and its moderate regional allies. To trigger a speedy change, Washington must work more actively to deepen the fissures between the Assad family, clan, army, and regime supporters and sow dissension among them. The potential for information warfare toward this objective has not yet been fully exploited.

## Andrew J. Tabler

In some respects, U.S. policy remains at odds with the situation on the ground in Syria. First, there is enormous tension between the internal opposition and the Turkey-based Syrian National Council (SNC), and Washington's policy of solely engaging the latter ignores the opposition as a whole. Opposition figures inside Syria do not believe the SNC represents their interests, and even certain SNC members complain about the organization's allegedly secretive nature. Washington, to its credit, is now exploring its options with the entire opposition.

Second, Washington's strict policy against speaking with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has rendered this important group a political enigma. The FSA is composed of deserters from the Syrian military who have either remained in the country or crossed into Turkey, as well as local armed activists defending protestors. Both the civil and armed branches of the opposition want weapons; they believe that international intervention is not coming, and that only the combination of arms and civil resistance can bring down Assad.

Last summer, Turkish officials emphasized the need for a UN Security Council resolution as a prerequisite for intervention. Ankara now requires an international coalition and, most important, "a majority of Syrian people" before it will take action (it is unclear exactly how the latter element would be measured). Turkey fears that a lingering, angry Assad could release Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) members across the border. Plans for potential Turkish action will become clearer after the April 1 "Friends of Syria" meeting in Istanbul.

Details of atrocities in Bab Amr -- as gleaned from civil and armed Syrian opposition figures in Lebanon -- make it clear that Assad will not step down without changes in U.S. policy. Sanctions and diplomacy alone are not working. The best way to pressure Assad is to support both the SNC and the internal opposition.

In doing so, the United States will likely have to back different groups in the theaters of Homs, Deraa, and Idlib. Revolutionary Councils hold power in Homs, while influential families are important in Deraa. Idlib, however, is a poor, conservative area where at least one Salafi sheikh leads a force of about a thousand armed men. Such fundamentalist, Gulf-funded groups do not share long-term U.S. policy goals; Washington should begin to explore other options in that area.

Of course, Syria's regime-friendly neighbors -- Iran and Hizballah in particular -- are likely to manipulate the internal dynamics. Iraq, too, is under increasing Iranian influence, and its unmonitored border with Syria could allow more militant groups to enter the country. Nevertheless, major involvement of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps formations or Hizballah fighters -- other than advisors -- is unlikely before the end game.

Again, the most effective tactic against the Assad regime is combined civil and armed resistance. The nature of Washington's support -- lethal or nonlethal -- depends on both U.S. goals and what is happening on the ground. With Washington's help, the Syrian opposition could force regime members to choose between staying on the Assad train or jumping off. In six months, Syria will be much worse off economically, and the regime will have far less money to fund its armed forces and military intelligence cadres. In any case, accommodation between a minority regime that cannot reform and a young and necessarily "headless" opposition is unlikely.

## Simon Henderson

Since February 2011, Bahrain has been undergoing its version of the Arab Spring. Unlike in other countries, however, the island's troubles have increasingly become a proxy for Saudi-Iranian political rivalry, and perhaps for the centuries-old antagonism between Sunnis and Shiites. By mid-March 2011, the situation had become so chaotic that Saudi forces were deployed to the island. For their part, Bahraini authorities bulldozed the Pearl Monument, where the most significant protests had taken place, and converted the surrounding traffic circle into "al-Farouq Junction," named for a famous Sunni figure.

Bahrain's majority Shiite population has always been at a political and socioeconomic disadvantage. In their view, the Shiite portion of the national cake has diminished over the years while the ruling al-Khalifa family has grown increasingly rich. This is the essence of the continuing political crisis, though other factors have further muddied the situation.

The dilemma for the United States lies in Bahrain's status as an important ally. The headquarters of the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is situated on the outskirts of the capital -- a crucial element in maintaining strategic balance in the Gulf and preventing energy-supply disruptions that could threaten the global economy.

One immediate issue is the upcoming Formula One Grand Prix, canceled last year due to the protests but now scheduled to take place April 20-22. If the race is in fact held, it will be a sign of greater political stability and economic revival. Yet parts of the opposition are determined to stop it. Even worse, internal rivalries among the Khalifas could mean that some members of the royal family might actually want the race canceled so as to embarrass those relations whose prestige is linked to it.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Katie Kiraly.* ❖

## RECOMMENDED


BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

### Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)


ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

## TOPICS

- Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)
- Arab-Israeli Relations (/policy-analysis/arab-israeli-relations)
- Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)
- Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)
- Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)
- Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)
- Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)
- U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

- Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)
- Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)
- Jordan (/policy-analysis/jordan)
- Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)
- Palestinians (/policy-analysis/palestinians)
- Syria (/policy-analysis/syria)
- Turkey (/policy-analysis/turkey)