

Cautionary Notes to the GCC about Trump's Visit

Imad K. Harb

May 15, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

President Donald Trump announced that he will visit Saudi Arabia later this month on his first foreign trip, one that will also take him to Israel/Palestine, the Vatican, and other places in Europe. During his visit to the kingdom, President Trump will have a busy schedule. He is slated to meet with the Saudi monarch, King Salman bin Abdulaziz, to cement bilateral relations, attend a meeting with leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and hold a broader conference with leaders of other Arab and Muslim states. In addition to renewing relationships and affirming common objectives, such as fighting the so-called Islamic State, facing up to Iran, and attempting to broker Israeli-Palestinian peace, President Trump will be busy improving his administration's image in the Muslim world after his campaign's Islamophobic rhetoric and his proposed ban on travel to the United States from six Muslim-majority countries.

The president's trip to the Gulf is intended to dissipate the trepidation felt by GCC leaders regarding relations with the United States. In fact, developments point to a positive mood in the Arabian Peninsula. Not much was known about candidate Trump except for his flamboyance and supposed business acumen. Indeed, there was a clear preference for his opponent in the presidential election, Hillary Clinton, who was thought by Gulf leaders to have enough knowledge and depth to be a necessary interlocutor, preserver, and guarantor of the strategic relationship. But once Trump was elected, GCC leaders quickly began to see an opportunity to renew relations with

the United States – after the pangs of doubt they had about America's commitment to them – and to look for fruitful avenues for cooperation and common ventures. The choice of Saudi Arabia as Trump's first stop on his first foreign trip has assured the kingdom and the other GCC members that post-election hopes have so far been well-founded.

The visit by Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman to the White House in March offered a hopeful first glimpse of things to come in Saudi-American relations in the age of Trump. His meeting with the American president was declared a "historic turning point" and seemed to restore confidence and trust. The prince did not perceive the president's executive order imposing the still-unimplemented travel ban as directed against Muslims, a clear message that the kingdom saw no benefit from criticizing the action. Another visit by the powerful Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, on May 15 is likely also designed to encourage the administration to show that it is ready for the rough-and-tumble of the Middle East and to offer an introduction into what the future of the US-GCC relationship should look like.

A Complicated Landscape

Despite his obvious lack of knowledge of Gulf and other Middle Eastern issues, President Trump naturally understands that he is stepping into a very complicated landscape and probably making some lasting commitments on his visit. From their side, and owing to the

strength of their states and economies, Saudi Arabian and GCC leaders see themselves as guardians of their countries' interests. They also consider their decisions as pivotal in terms of impact on the Arab world at large. Indeed, they take their responsibilities seriously – given the myriad challenges posed by domestic unrest and outside interference in this part of the world – and expect frank discussions, concrete proposals, and plans of action. It is thus incumbent upon the president to be prepared to both discuss and weigh in on at least the following issues with their different dynamic environments. The following should serve as an outline of the issues GCC leaders consider worrisome and for which they are likely to want a presidential commitment.

Iran: Never have GCC relations with Iran been as troublesome as they are today. They are marked by mutual criticisms, recriminations, and threats endangering peace and stability in one of the most strategic areas of the world. Much ink has been spilled – justifiably – over the importance of sectarianism to the schism between the two sides of the Arabian Gulf; arguably, however, the real problem is a clash over strategic interests. While the GCC countries have attempted to preserve a status quo in the Arabian Peninsula based on the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, the Islamic Republic of Iran has tried to impose an ideological foreign policy that serves the interests of the ruling theocratic elite. Both strategies aim to preserve the ruling regimes, but what matters are the means to achieve these goals.

The seriousness of this clash of strategic means is not to be taken lightly because it may lead to unwarranted consequences, as was evident in the latest exchange between Mohammad bin Salman and Iranian Defense Minister Hussein Dehghan. In a sense, the proverbial ball is in the Iranian court and the hand of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ali Khamenei. As reformists and moderates in the Iranian political system, led today by President Hassan Rouhani, attempt to steer Iranian foreign policy toward apparent accommodation with the region and the wider world, the hardline Khomeini-led Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) carves more space for itself in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. In divergent fashions and to differing degrees, GCC states consider these countries as vital to their strategic wellbeing as well as to that of the Arab world.

Another point of contention has to do with the Islamic Republic's professed emphasis on constant revolution, purportedly for the betterment of the Muslim community and the improvement of people's lives. This provides for continued upheaval that threatens peace, security, and prosperity, three ingrained objectives of the global environment since the end of the Second World War. Ironically, this clamor for constant revolution has ended inside the Islamic Republic as the clerical elite and its political, economic, social, and military supporters have succeeded in occupying the different echelons of power and imposed their own status quo, one that rejects any new

agitation for change, as evident in the suppression of the Green Movement revolution of 2009.

It is also imperative for President Trump to recognize that GCC states may be concerned about Iran's aggressiveness and interference; at the same time, they also are reticent to challenge the Islamic Republic militarily. Indeed, GCC states are unlikely to encourage any face-off that the US president may think is possible or desirable. Besides the human toll that they might incur from any military confrontation, their economic well-being is likely to suffer unfathomable injury as their oil platforms and exporting installations would be the first to get punishing strikes. Dehghan's warning is a case in point.

The Question of Palestine: Despite the formidable challenges posed by Iran's incursions into the Arab world and the attempts to address them, resolving the dilemma of Palestine remains pivotal for the legitimacy of GCC leaders and those of other Arab and Islamic states. Since the 1980s, GCC states have led Arab efforts toward a just solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the latest of which was the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002; it was originally proposed by Saudi Arabia at the 14th Arab League summit in Beirut and endorsed by every summit thereafter. This initiative contains the necessary elements for a just peace: an independent Palestinian state on the Palestinian land occupied by Israel in the June 1967 war, with East Jerusalem as its capital; an acceptable solution to the question of Palestinian refugees according to the principles

of United Nations Resolution 194; and an end to the state of war between the Arab world and Israel. Subsequent summits, the latest of which was in Jordan in March 2017, reportedly accepted the principle of territorial swaps of land to help accommodate Israeli settlements in the occupied territories.

Subsequently, it would very likely be a waste of time for the president to suggest a watered-down approach to Palestinian-Israeli peace which endorses what Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu dubs the "outside in" approach. This strategy seeks to circumvent the Palestinians' freedom to decide their own affairs by bolstering Israeli relations with the Arab world; the Israelis hope that this would result in Arab pressure on the Palestinians to accept less than what they desire in an independent state.

The president would also do well to remember the utmost necessity of a two-state solution, the illegality of the Israeli occupation and settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories, and the danger of postponing a just resolution of the question of Palestine. Affirming these principles is what GCC states, and the Arab world at large, consider essential to preserving Palestinian national rights. Moreover, if the United States wants to put a nail in the coffin of violent jihadism—and the GCC countries are the most useful partners in that endeavor—it must declare Israel's occupation of the Palestinian territories and subjugation of the Palestinian people as illegal and to be terminated.

The Festering Carnage of Syria and Yemen: As manifestations of an overstretched Iranian militant foreign policy, Syria and Yemen represent two bleeding wounds in the very backyard of the GCC countries. While confronting the Islamic State occupies American military efforts in northern Syria and Iraq, the GCC states would very likely look to President Trump for a commitment to the political future of Syria without President Bashar al-Asad. In this, however, they might be stymied, first, by the confusing statements by administration officials, including Mr. Trump himself, about where they stand on Asad's future, and second, by the difficulties they know the American position has given Russia's overlordship in the country. Nevertheless, GCC leaders would indeed like for the president to have a steady hand on Syria that could help to ameliorate the Syrian people's suffering and challenge Iran's interference in that Arab country.

As for Yemen, the president may have already allayed the Gulf allies' doubts about the United States' steadfast support for defending their southern flank. He has committed the American military to an aerial campaign against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, agreed to sell weapons and materiel to Saudi Arabian and other GCC militaries, and continued to assist logistically in the war against the Houthis insurgents allied with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Yet, GCC states are still interested in more American assistance in improving the legitimate Yemeni Army's

battlefield position in central Yemen and along the Red Sea coast, where it seeks to occupy the Hodeida seaport that the Houthis use to smuggle arms and equipment for their continued war effort.

Cautionary Notes for the GCC

There is no doubt that beginning President Trump's first trip overseas with a visit to Saudi Arabia is a positive step as the kingdom undergoes internal economic restructuring and addresses external challenges. But as the president studies the landscape he is about to visit, his hosts also must be cognizant of constraints and less-than-optimal conditions for his jaunt to the kingdom.

First, the president lacks the knowledge of Middle East issues and the depth necessary to be able to dialectically maneuver between competing agendas while satisfying multiple audiences, both in the region and in the United States. More importantly, the president's less than clear strategic vision and his penchant for undiplomatic pronouncements, such as his previous statements castigating Saudi Arabia and its policies, call for caution.

Second, the Trump Administration is institutionally challenged in foreign policy. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is a former oil executive without knowledge of strategic issues; he also has not staffed his agency with the necessary knowledge and expertise to effect any policy proposals or new thinking. In essence, American foreign policy in the Middle East relies on ad hoc statements and

pronouncements made haphazardly by the White House without the requisite vetting based on solid study.

Third, despite the importance of slightly breaking away from his "America First" slogan, President Trump may not easily find the popular support necessary for an activist agenda in the Middle East, even if it were fully in America's national interest. It follows that GCC states would be wise to lessen their reliance on promised commitments that could be difficult for the president to maintain.

Fourth, the four months since the president's inauguration on January 20 have witnessed what can clearly be called dysfunctional politics

in the American capital. In fact, erratic behavior by the White House has called into question the political system's ability to function in an organized fashion that could assuage allies' fears and assure them of the continuity of commitments. While not many observers and politicians have spoken openly of the possibility of impeaching the president for violations of conflict of interest laws, nepotism, or erraticism, the widening investigations of his campaign and some advisors and surrogates about Russian interference in the last American election is a warning signal of potential developments in the future. If the shaky political ground on which the president stands buckles, whatever commitments he makes on his Middle East trip could be for naught.

For more analysis visit arabcenterdc.org