

## MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

## The Beginning of the End?

by Jon B. Alterman

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Last month, the U.S. intelligence community published an assessment of what the world might look like in the year 2025. Americans treated the report as an interesting exercise, if a somewhat esoteric one. For many leaders in the Middle East, however, and especially in the Gulf, the report was not esoteric at all. It was a glimpse at their personal futures.

A good number of leaders in the Gulf are likely to still be in power in 17 years. Much of the leadership of the UAE is only in its 40's, for example. The country's founder, Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, ruled into his nineties. Sheikh Hamad, the ruler of Qatar, is only 56 now, and will be only 73 in 2025. Up and down the Gulf, royals serving as government officials measure their tenure not in years, but in decades, and 2025 is just around the corner for them. By contrast, few senior American officials will be serving in government in seventeen years. Today's senior officials are tomorrow's retirees, and cabinet officials under 50 or over 70 are a rare breed. In simple terms, 2025 will not be their problem.

But for those for whom 2025 is their problem, the report suggests it will be a very big problem indeed. Among the assessments in the 2025 report, three directly affect strategic calculus of the Middle East:

- While the United States is likely to remain the world's strongest power, it will have less overwhelming power than its foes.
- Iran will grow in power as a regional actor.
- The world will begin to transition away from oil and gas as fuel sources.

Any one of these predictions would be enough to keep Gulf leaders awake at night; taken together, they are catastrophic. These assessments, together with a steady drumbeat of promises by U.S. politicians to wean the country from a dependence on foreign oil, suggest a new security environment in the region. A relatively weaker United States seems less likely to spend its blood and treasure

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## Taming Traffic, Nominally

"Hold your calls. Save your life," pleaded a public service announcement in Kuwait earlier this year. Authorities were preparing residents for a new ban on cell phone use while driving that went into effect on May 1. Egypt followed suit that same month, with a cell phone ban being one of ten new driving laws that carry harsh penalties.

Death rates due to traffic accidents are high throughout the Middle East. In the GCC last year, there were twenty deaths for every 100,000 people. That's more than double the rate of fatalities in California, which also has a car-centered culture. In the past two years, all of the GCC states have instituted a ban on cell phone use while driving. Kuwaiti officials issued 200 tickets in the first day, charging 15 dinars—or about \$55—for each infraction. The fine is roughly the same in Egypt, a far poorer country where \$55 likely exceeds a taxi driver's daily wage. Egyptian law also insists that every car is also required to carry a \$17 first aid kit, although critics maintain that the requirement is mostly a way to enrich government cronies selling the kits.

The crackdown in the first month made some drivers nervous, and scared others in Egypt off of the road entirely. However, enforcement is more lax of late, limiting any real change in behavior. The fine is relatively low for most Kuwaitis, and speed is a much larger factor in traffic fatalities than cell phones in any event. In Egypt, many complain the new laws have only upped the bottom line for bribes. ■ LS

## Reaching Muslim Audiences

Farah Pandith, Senior Advisor to the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, and Genieve Abdo, author, analyst and fellow at the Century Foundation, presented their ideas and recommendations for the future of public diplomacy and engagement with Muslims around the world at CSIS on Monday, November 24th. Pandith asserted that public diplomacy efforts need to be much more aggressive and better targeted at individual audiences, while Abdo argued that Americans in the Middle East are "preaching to the converted." Abdo argued that the real way to change public opinion in the Arab world is through a shift in U.S. policies and constructive work on political reform. To view the summary, click [HERE](#). ■

on the Gulf, especially as it and the world are weaning themselves off oil and gas. A relatively stronger Iran would likely be an even more powerful regional force in the Gulf, especially if it were to fill the vacuum left by the diminishing U.S. presence. Overall, the report must imply to Gulf Arab leaders that the United States sees their region becoming far less central to global security than it is now. This indicates a far weaker U.S. security commitment to the Gulf come 2025. Put bluntly, the report suggests that, over the next two decades, the U.S. security commitment to the Gulf will shift from being a constant to a variable.

That is not good news for the region's leaders. Each of these governments has put a huge bet on external powers to secure their realm. The United Kingdom protected the small emirates on the southern Gulf from the Ottomans and later the Saudis in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The United States has been the protecting power for the last 35 years and repelled Saddam Hussein from Kuwait.

The only possible response for the Gulf's leaders is to do even more intensely what they are doing already: diversifying strategic relationships and building a community of nations who believe they have a keen interest in Gulf stability.

Interestingly, France is among the countries most aggressively pursuing ties, and it is being rewarded. France is opening a Qatari branch of Saint-Cyr, its military academy, and is building a permanent military base in Abu Dhabi for more than 500 soldiers. Along the way, it has signed an agreement to build two nuclear plants in the UAE, opened a branch of the Sorbonne in Abu Dhabi, and made plans to open a branch of the Louvre there as well. For the Gulf Arab states, France is a useful supplement to the U.S. presence in the region, a permanent member of the UN Security Council that can help box in Iran, and one whose increased footprint in the Gulf is unlikely to arouse alarm in Washington.

While France is paving the way, Chinese and Russian ties seem destined to increase over time as well. In particular, Chinese economic growth is one of the few reliable drivers of global energy demand, and many Middle Eastern governments welcome China's pointed indifference to the domestic politics of its partners. China has also been careful to avoid challenging the United States in the Gulf, content to reap the benefits of U.S.-provided regional security. No country seeks to use a Chinese relationship to supplant its relations with the United States, but virtually every country is seeking to supplement the U.S. relationship with the Chinese one.

India is also a likely growing power in the region. Its energy consumption is expanding with its economy, it has millions of citizens working in the Gulf, and it is nearby. (Indeed, the distance between Muscat and Mumbai is scarcely more than that between Muscat and Kuwait.) If India becomes a global power, the Gulf is likely the first place it will seek to exercise that power.

Most dramatically for American interests, the Gulf countries are likely to seek some accommodation with Iran, even as they seek the support of outside forces to contain the country. Persian power has been a reality in the Gulf for centuries, and it will be a reality when the last barrel of oil is pumped from the sands. Relative power between the northern and southern shores of the Gulf will shape that accommodation, but it seems likely to come nevertheless.

U.S. policymakers will take a tough line, insisting that, in the near term, nothing has changed. Gulf Arab policymakers will look ahead and are likely to conclude that, even by the United States' own lights, everything will change. The upshot is likely to be a more diverse set of relationships for the Gulf countries and the end of the era of American exclusivity in the Gulf. ■ 12/10/08

## Links of Interest

Jon Alterman was quoted by the Associated Press in "[Moment of Truth for Shiite Party Over Pact.](#)"

Haim Malka was quoted by the *Washington Times* in "[White House Sees Peace Talks' Value.](#)"

The Middle East Program hosted a [Congressional Forum on Islam event](#) with Tom Dine, Chairman of the Board of Freedom House.

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