

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Trump of Arabia

by Jon B. Alterman

Someone, perhaps, is very rich today because he or she placed a \$2 bet on November 9 that President Donald Trump's first overseas trip would be to Saudi Arabia. Less than 18 months ago, Candidate Trump called for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Now, President Trump is rushing to the cradle of Islam. The strange secret is that, despite his campaign rhetoric, he will be welcomed warmly. The important thing is that he not be too comfortable.

President Trump will find the Gulf refreshingly hospitable. His hosts will demonstrate their skill with flattery. The local press will be adulatory and accepting. The settings will be golden and sumptuous. Officials will solemnly promise to work hard on counter-radicalization, they will announce some weapons deals and investment agreements, and the president will be tempted to pocket some easy victories and move on. He should resist the temptation. Rather than bask in adulation, the president must commit to the hard work of leadership in the region.

On a strategic level, Gulf leaders think President Trump has his priorities very much in order: He is hostile to Iran, he is perhaps even more hostile to the Muslim Brotherhood, and he thinks that issues of democratization and governance are purely domestic and shouldn't concern the United States. Compared to the Obama administration, which the Gulf's ruling families saw as taking the opposite approach on each of those issues, President Trump is a huge relief.

The Gulf's leaders want to feel American love. They were stung by what they saw as President Barack Obama's aloof and condescending attitude toward them. The rise of unconventional oil and gas in the United States convinced many in the Middle East and around the world that the United States could afford to pull back from the region's conflicts, and many in the Gulf felt like they were being abandoned to face Iranian aggression alone. President Obama accentuated that fear, suggesting in his well-known *Atlantic* interview in April 2016 that unqualified U.S. support for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states against Iran would merely cause the GCC states to act recklessly and force the United States to intervene on their behalf. Obama wouldn't go down that road.

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China, The United States, and the Struggle for Middle East Security

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted an expert panel on April 24, 2017 to launch Jon Alterman's Brzezinski Institute report "The Other Side of the World." U.S. and Chinese approaches to the Middle East have been distinct, the report argues, and potential shifts would have broad bilateral and geopolitical implications. Moderated by Anne Gearan of the *Washington Post*, CSIS experts assessed that China has capitalized on the U.S.-led order in the Middle East to reap economic benefits without investing in security. Facing looming domestic and international obstacles, however, China will not be able to benefit forever from its business-first model of global influence. You can read key insights from the discussion and watch a video of the event [HERE](#), and you can access the full report [HERE](#). ■

Moonstruck

A few years ago, as Ramadan came to a close, an Iraqi family in Samarra set out for their cousins' home for a much-anticipated Eid al-Fitr feast. Upon arrival, they found only half of their family was celebrating Eid. Half was still fasting, insisting the month of Ramadan still had one day to go. Calculating the dates of Ramadan is an annual debate in the Middle East, and politics, sectarianism, and ethnicity are never far from the equation.

The month of Ramadan, which starts at the end of this week, begins and ends with the appearance of the new moon. Yet, there is no single Islamic authority to proclaim moon sightings. Sightings vary by place, skies can be overcast, and some [argue](#) between the merits of physical observation and astronomical calculation. Saudi Arabia's allies tend to abide by the edicts of the Kingdom's religious authorities, while Iran issues its own proclamations. A [few outliers](#) like Morocco and Oman prize their moonsighting autonomy.

It is not only states that use Ramadan to flex their credentials. From the secular [Syrian opposition council](#) to the jihadi-salafi leadership of the [Islamic State group](#), actors have used fasting schedules as a symbol of authority. In Shi'ite communities, different [independent scholars](#) hold great sway as well.

Even within families, consensus is often elusive. Sometimes some relatives will heed local authorities, while others follow Mecca or one of the Shi'ite seminaries. American Muslims are at the forefront of an effort to embrace scientific calculation. Ramadan is a time of community, but getting everyone around the same table can be more complicated than meets the eye. ■ SA

President Trump is unlikely to show any of President Obama's thunderous indifference. He is likely, even, to strike up friendships with many of the leaders—fellow billionaires with extensive family businesses and an eye on grooming the next generation. But he must understand that what the Gulf needs isn't U.S. love, it's U.S. leadership. That leadership must come on several levels.

First, the United States needs to play a more active role resolving the conflicts in the area. It is a truism of diplomacy that conflicts are not always ripe for resolution, but there needs to be a stronger U.S. strategy to move these conflicts toward resolution. In Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere, U.S. partners do not seem to have lashed together their military and diplomatic strategies. The United States itself is leading by poor example, constantly talking up the need to boost the Pentagon's capabilities while contemplating steep cuts in the State Department's staffing and resources. Battlefields rarely deliver lasting victories, and the link between military action and diplomacy is not automatic—it needs to be developed. A skillful administration would be constantly examining conditions for diplomatic opportunities, calibrating its military actions, and persuading allies to do more of the same. Evidence suggests that, so far, that's not being done nearly enough.

Second, the United States needs governments to be serious about cracking down on facilitators of terrorism, and not be swayed by bromides on counter-radicalization. There are at least three reasons for this. In part, religious ideology probably plays a smaller role promoting terrorism than has frequently been described. Many terrorists come from secular (and often criminal) backgrounds, and they are not seeking a religious consensus for validation. Often, a thin, religiously flavored justification is enough. In part, too, a crackdown on extremist voices can be lifted just as quickly as it is imposed. And an effective crackdown assumes agreement on what exactly constitutes "extremism." Such an agreement has been elusive in the Middle East itself, as well as between U.S. and Arab experts. And if that's not enough, Egyptians, Palestinians, Jordanians, and Lebanese (among others) can tell long stories about Gulf agreements for support that were signed with fanfare but never fulfilled. What matters more than words on counterterrorism is sustained law enforcement and intelligence cooperation. Emirati support on smuggling and money laundering in Dubai is an important successful example of this. U.S. leadership here means insisting on even tighter bilateral and multilateral ties and better execution of the law enforcement mission.

Third, the United States needs to find creative ways to foster better governance among partners looking at a future in which oil wealth will diminish. This applies to wealthy oil-exporting countries as well as the poorer labor-exporting countries: A diminishing thirst for oil will affect all of them. The federal government itself is not always the best adviser for countries seeking to shrink the economic role of government or boost governmental efficiency. But a variety of U.S. state and local governments have relevant experience, and there is valuable experience in academia, the private sector, and among the international financial institutions that have worked on related problems for decades. The U.S. government could play a useful role encouraging these groups to work together on Gulf-related issues more than they do, and finding ways to both persuade and support regional partners to do hard but necessary things domestically should be a pillar of U.S. diplomacy in the region.

All of these issues are hard, and they are complicated. They require sustained, detailed work from government experts, and they require sustained follow-up. It is not the sort of activity on which the Trump administration has put a premium up to now. Many of the Gulf governments lack strong institutions. They are better at making announcements than following through. The president should work to raise these partners to the American level. He shouldn't drop to theirs. ■ 5/16/17

In Case You Missed It

The CSIS Middle East Program hosted Saudi Arabia's minister of commerce and investment for a [discussion](#) of Vision 2030 one year in.

Jon Alterman co-authored a piece on Iran's railway revolution in [Nikkei Asian Review](#).

Will Todman published a piece on the Syrian regime's use of siege tactics in the [Syria Studies](#) journal.

In the Media

"It's easy to have a policy; it's hard to have a strategy, and the president hasn't shown a lot of determination to forge strategies." Jon Alterman in [The Wall Street Journal](#) on Trump's first 100 days in office, 4/27/17.

"The problem for the Saudis is that strikes often hurt the Saudi public image without weakening Houthi resolve." Jon Alterman in [The New York Times](#) on Secretary of Defense Mattis' calls for a political solution in Yemen, 4/19/17.

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The CSIS Middle East Program

Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice President, Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program

Haim Malka
Deputy Director and Senior Fellow

Emily Grunewald
Associate Director

Will Todman
Associate Fellow

Margo Balboni
Research Associate

Abigail Kukura
Research Assistant

Sumaya Almajdoub
Timothy Louthan
Research Interns