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US-Gulf States Relations: Mutual Sobering?

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Examination of several issues on the agenda between the United States and the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, indicates that both sides have found it difficult to live up to the high expectations regarding their relations created by the election of Donald Trump. A mutual sobering in this context requires them to reassess their ability to shape a policy that promotes their aims. For the US administration, this is particularly true with regard to its hope to rely more on the Gulf states to promote its aims vis-à-vis Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian political process. These gaps have direct implications for Israel, and accentuate where respective Israeli and Gulf interests do not converge, and highlight the limited room that the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have to maneuver, in order to translate shared interests into concrete action.

Relations in the Trump era between the United States and Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states are proclaimed by both sides as close ties that contribute directly to the promotion of shared interests. The Saudis have even characterized Trump's May 2017 visit to Riyadh as "a historic turning point in the relations between the countries." Both sides continue to emphasize their desire to improve their partnership, and reports have emerged regarding personal relations between a number of White House officials and a number of Gulf leaders.

However, an examination of the issues currently on the agenda between the United States and the Gulf states, and particularly between the United States and Saudi Arabia, indicates that the various parties have found it difficult to live up to the high expectations created by the election of Donald Trump regarding their relations. Public testimony to the discontent that exists among America's traditional allies in the Gulf region was articulated by the United Arab Emirates Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, who stated (London, July 2018) that they were finding it difficult to rely on American and British aid, in implied reference in part to the war in Yemen.

Differing expectations have emerged between the parties on several issues, including:

a. The Iranian challenge: The resolute position that the Trump administration adopted vis-à-vis Iran was welcomed by the Arab Gulf states and caused a number of leaders to intensify their rhetoric against Tehran. While they had publicly supported the JCPOA, the

Arab Gulf states objected to much of the agreement. In May 2018, Saudi Arabia and the UAE joined Israel in expressing support for the United States decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, believing that the agreement had increased Iran's regional aggression without putting an end to its long term aspirations in the nuclear realm. Currently, they seek to show that they are cooperating with the US administration's campaign to pressure Iran, as reflected, inter alia, in their agreement to increase the rate of oil production following the decision by "OPEC + 1" and President Trump's request on this issue. Nonetheless, as in the past, each side wants the other to demonstrate willingness to invest resources, and military resources in particular, to limit Iran's activity in the region. President Trump has reiterated that he expects Saudi Arabia to increase its financial contribution to these efforts. However, Saudi Arabia is dismayed by America's lack of willingness to invest what Riyadh regards as sufficient resources in the Middle East. Discontent also stems from what is perceived as American willingness to placate Iran, based on the President's declaration that he was willing to talk to the Iranians with no preconditions, and reports regarding the exchange of messages between the United States and Iran through the mediation of Oman.

b. The Israeli-Palestinian political process: The Trump administration seeks to devise a formula that will facilitate a breakthrough on the Israeli-Palestinian track and further its "peace plan." However, it has received a cold shoulder from the Gulf states with regard to the principles of the plan; in practice, it appears that Saudi Arabia has not deviated from the traditional positions at the heart of the Arab consensus. Evidence of this was already visible at the most recent Arab League summit, in Saudi Arabia in April 2018, which was referred to as the "Jerusalem Summit," in light of the Palestinian and Arab criticism voiced against concessions that Saudi officials were apparently willing to accept, and in light of the move of the United States embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

c. The rehabilitation of Syria: The United States is interested in seeing greater involvement in Syria by the Gulf states, including a military presence, which would be able to replace the American troops that are stationed there. In this context, reports have emerged regarding the administration's desire to establish an "Arab NATO" of sorts – a military expeditionary force to fight terrorism and Iran's consolidation. Although in the past Riyadh has proclaimed its willingness to send forces to Syria, it appears to have never intended on making good on this commitment, if only due to its need to meet more urgent security commitments on its southern border, in Yemen. It also appears that the chances of establishing a joint Arab military force in the spirit of President Trump's expectations are doomed to failure, in light of the intense disagreements that exist between the Arab states and their limited military capabilities.

d. Political reforms: As the Trump administration gives precedence to regime stability in the Gulf over promotion of democracy and freedom of expression, there has been no apparent American pressure on these absolutist monarchies to implement political

reforms, and no significant criticism has thus far been voiced regarding their systematic violation of human rights. This prioritization has been welcomed by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. In the background, the “top down” Saudi revolution has gained momentum. This revolution has been characterized by two primary prongs: on the one hand, the advancement of necessary economic reforms, and on the other hand, intensification of Bin Salman’s autocratic government, which differs fundamentally in character from the previous rule by all branches of the royal house. At the same time, as Bin Salman’s oppressive power intensifies, the US Congress is more likely to pressure the administration to take a more resolute stand on the civil liberties issue.

e. The GCC Crisis: A united bloc of Gulf countries continues to be a US interest, as it strives to establish a united front against Iran. In practice, the crisis between the “Arab Quartet” (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) and Qatar, which the American government has tried, thus far unsuccessfully, to resolve, has moved Qatar closer to Iran and Turkey in the military, economic, and diplomatic realms. These closer relations are of concern to Qatar’s neighbors, who have imposed an embargo on the country for the past year. Reports have also emerged that these four countries sought to invade Qatar and remove current Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani from power. At this stage, the US administration is attempting to convene a summit in the autumn to discuss the crisis, in another attempt to resolve it.

f. Arms deals: President Trump’s May 2017 visit to Riyadh, and his meeting with Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman at the White House in March 2018, dealt with major arms deals that the administration is trying to advance in an effort to reduce the military burden on the United States, create jobs in the United States, and help Saudi Arabia contend with the threats it faces and demonstrate American commitment to Saudi security. Thus far it is unclear to what extent these commitments have been translated into actual deals, although the administration still appears excited by the positive impact these deals will have on the US economy.

g. The war in Yemen: After more than three years of fighting that has cost an estimated \$200 billion, Saudi Arabia is unable to point to any significant military achievements. This is likely to have an impact on Bin Salman’s status at home and abroad. Against this background, Riyadh has earned an image of a party that could draw the United States into a war not its own and of limited military value. Moreover, understanding has emerged within the US administration - particularly in Congress - and the international arena that at least some responsibility for the severe humanitarian situation in Yemen and the systematic harm to civilians attributed to Saudi Arabia belongs to the administration. Despite its authorization of the sale of arms to Saudi Arabia, which the Obama administration had limited, the administration is still careful to avoid being drawn into direct military involvement in the war and seeks to solve the crisis primarily through diplomatic means, in an effort to deflect Houthi successes to the greatest extent possible.

In conclusion, the United States and the Gulf states will continue to regard closer relations between them as a strategic aim, based on their clear understanding of the lack of an alternative to this relationship in the current Middle Eastern environment. Still, the mutual sobering from the exaggerated expectations that were embraced by both sides immediately following the establishment of the Trump administration obligates both sides to reassess their ability to translate these relations into an effective policy consistent with their interests. The possible frustration of the US administration regarding hopes to rely more on the Gulf states in order to further its goals vis-à-vis Iran and the Palestinian issue has direct implications for Israel. It accentuates where respective Israeli and Gulf interests do not converge, and highlights the limited room that the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have to maneuver, in order to translate shared interests into concrete action.