



SMA Reach-back Report

Opportunities & Threats Arising from POTUS Visit

Question (R5.1): *What opportunities and threats should United States Central Command (USCENTCOM) be postured for as the result of a President of the United States (POTUS) visit to the Area of Responsibility (AOR)? What is the impact on stakeholders' willingness to counter Iran along with the likelihood of partnering with the United States/coalition?*

Contributors

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Executive Summary

Patricia DeGennaro, TRADOC G27

Analysts agree the most serious threat during POTUS's trip to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) was, in the words of Daniel Server, "the risk of doing anything that split the GCC and weakened its will to counter Iran." In fact, he and our other analysts believe his rhetoric triggered KSA's regional campaign against Qatar and thereby destroyed GCC solidarity against Iran. Further, the campaign, which included the United Arab Emirates,¹ Egypt, and Bahrain actually pushed Qatar, Turkey, and other stakeholders closer to Iran countering the effort.

In his subsequent visit to Israel, POTUS intended to bring together a coalition between the United States, Israel, and Sunni Arab leaders, largely arising from their shared view of Iran as a growing national security threat. Though these countries often cooperate in many regional economic endeavors, Serwer reminds us that "rapprochement cannot be complete without progress on an agreement with the Palestinian population," which seems to be shelved by Israel for the foreseeable future. It is also concerning to regional leaders in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria that Israel has chosen to support Kurdish independence further destabilizing the region, moving counter to US and allied statements against independence and providing Iran with yet another narrative of Israel's determination to continue its efforts to keep populations fractured and divided.

¹ In the modern United Arab Emirates, there are seven Emirates, or regions, all with differing rulers and royal families. The seven Emirates within this fascinating country are: Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Sharjah, Ras-al-Khaimah, and Umm Al Quwain. There is talk that not all Emirate Emir's support this rue with Qatar which could cause problems for the UAEs cohesion.

“The Gulf States believe former President Obama held them in contempt and prioritized détente with Iran over their interests, but they never lost faith in the US-Arab partnership as such,” says Faysal Itani, and not “POTUS is simply restoring it, or attempting to.”

Patricia DeGennaro believes that “[a]ll in all, POTUS’s visit caused more harm than good and stakeholders will be less likely to openly try to counter Iran. Especially in cases where Iran is supporting regimes and seen as working toward stability instead of cultivating Al Qaeda and the Islamic States resurgence.”

The experts consulted by the US Army Cultural Knowledge Center believes that any true US influence to calm the region “requires is the Trump Administration’s putting its own house in order and sharpening its diplomatic instruments in what is most assuredly a complicated environment and set of circumstances not to the allies’ liking.”

Our analysts remain assured that the main threat in the CENTCOM region is the violent extremist elements that will continue to encourage mistrust and insecurity of the people in the region until some semblance of security and governance replaces the mayhem ISIS created. Therefore, the primary focus remains a secure and stable Iraq followed by the same goals in Syria. Only then will the US and its allies be able to cooperatively and comprehensively deal with Iran by bringing them into the international fold or allowing some to influence divisiveness between all Arabs – Sunnis, Shi’ites, and Christians alike.

Expert Contributions

Patricia DeGennaro

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Relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are traditionally close. However, since the Obama Administration negotiated a historical nuclear agreement between Iran the US and five other nations² known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), relations have been strained. Despite the fact that the JCPOA gives permissions to the international community to review and monitor Iranian nuclear facilities “to ensure that Iran’s nuclear program will be exclusively peaceful,”³ KSA continues to have reservations. JCPOA also outlines the lifting of sanctions against Iran, which would provide the country with the economic and political power it needs to challenge KSAs influence in the region.

To date, each country postures and competes for influence in the region using diplomacy, economic prowess, proxy manipulation and religious division to its advantage. Since the fall of the Shah of Iran, KSA has been able to keep most Iranian influence at bay. However, KSA’s ability to contain Iran, with US assistance, is waning not only due to the JCPOA, but also due to KSA’s continued unexplained support of extremist Sunni elements that collaborated with Al Qaeda in Yemen and Iraq and Al Nusra Front, or the derivative of, in Syria.

Saudi fears that the US is enabling Iran, either directly or indirectly, are unfounded. Historically, every US Administration has strengthened sanctions against Iran and supported KSA despite its human rights abuses and support for extremist groups. The US has continued to arm KSA without question and the Obama Administration, in particular, helped broker a record-breaking \$60 billion in arms sale with KSA, doubling George W. Bush’s sales, for weapons that are primarily being used today by the Saudis to bomb Yemen, despite bipartisan objections from the US Congress.⁴ The bottom line is that the US kept KSA and its regional allies much safer now that Iran’s option to use nuclear weapons is curtailed, and this should be recognized.

President Trump’s visit ostensibly was to improve the US-KSA relationship due to KSA’s objection to the Iran nuclear deal. Throughout his campaign, President Trump repeatedly stated that the deal with Iran was “a bad one.” Trump made KSA his first presidential overseas trip thereby making a powerful statement that KSA was one of his priorities. The Saudis took it as consent to continue bombing Yemen, isolate Qatar, and continue to support violent extremist groups—all primarily actions to thwart Iranian influence in the region.

During the President’s visit, he also addressed more than 50 Arab leaders about the necessity to root out terrorism. The visit also spurred an agreement for an additional \$110 billion in weapons sales to

² China, France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States

³ <https://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>

⁴ Ahmad Jadallah, *Newsweek*, “What Is Saudi Arabia Going to Do With Its Arms Buildup?.” March 17, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/what-saudi-arabia-going-do-its-arms-buildup-569277>,

KSA, although that deal is still awaiting approval. Overall, his long winded speech in reference to terrorism and the Gulf States' responsibility to quell it caused more animosity between the US and created additional fissures within the Gulf States, weakening an already fragile Gulf Cooperation Council, giving another opening to Iran.

Iran is conducting its fair share of influence operations in the region; however, the majority of their actions are transparent. It is no secret that the Iranians are working to ensure the survival of the Syrian regime by providing military training and support to the Syrian Army. The US is also well aware that Hezbollah is resourced in many ways by Iran and that the Iraqi military benefits from Iranian assistance by sending soldiers and resources. It is difficult for the US to push back on these efforts for many reasons. Iran is actually contributing to the successes the Iraqi military is having against ISIL in both Iraq and Syria. Further, for the US to criticize Hezbollah is a double edged sword since Hezbollah is actually a legitimate part of the Lebanese government and is spearheading much of its fight with ISIL as well. In Yemen, there is little evidence that Iran is controlling or urging the Yemeni Houthis to continue its fight. In fact, although arms are flowing from Iran and other countries in the region, the Houthi fight is first and foremost being ignited by the former Prime Minister of Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh, who has allied with the Houthis.

More concerning is KSA's support to Al Qaeda affiliates, its desire to marginalize Qatar's regional policies and gas sales, and its effort to reinstate the former Yemeni leader, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, all of which are exacerbating the situation in the region.

Therefore, the result of the Trump visit in the region has contributed to its instability. In essence, Trump's message to KSA and other allies in the region that it was up to them to defeat terrorism and address the regional problems. Thus, we see many of our regional allies acting more freely, openly, and violently as they compete for influence.

Stakeholders' Willingness to Counter Iran or Partner with the United States/Coalition

The coalition members as of 3 December 2014 numbered 59 nations.⁵ There are only two regional members of this coalition: Turkey and Jordan.⁶ Although countries like Saudi Arabia and Israel are not official members or partners of the US coalition in Iraq, neither are they fans of Iran. Despite this, they and others are trying to counter Iranian influence in the region although it seems that they are exacerbating it.

The bottom line is that President Trump's visit in the Gulf and KSA's actions afterward pushed Iranian relations in a the region to be closer. Since Qatar, Abu Dhabi in the UAE, Yemen, and others have created stronger relationship with Iranian. The US should consider warming relations with Iran as well.

⁵ Joint Statement Issued by Partners at the Counter-ISIL Coalition Ministerial Meeting'. United States Department of State, 3 December 2014. Retrieved 16 June 2015.

⁶ The Kurds are considered Iraqi forces, Iraq being the lead in Iraq against ISIL.

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Excerpt from an anonymous GCKN expert:

The United States and Saudi Arabia can cooperate in the task of reconstructing areas liberated from ISIL. American involvement in coordinating such efforts is pivotal for this goal. Political realities hindering GCC-Iraq relations may be overcome if the Trump Administration were able to convince the Iraqi government to allow for Arab participation in their fight against ISIL. Similarly, a potential participation by Saudi troops in the battle in Syria can serve the common objective of liberating it and the dual purpose of defeating ISIL and preventing the city's occupation by militias allied with the Syrian regime and Iran, such as Hezbollah. However, what all of this requires is the Trump Administration's putting its own house in order and sharpening its diplomatic instruments in what is most assuredly a complicated environment and set of circumstances not to the allies' liking.

Faysal Itani

Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

A primary intent and impact of POTUS' visit was to affirm the US commitment to regional allies, and identify areas of common interest and cooperation with Sunni Arab states, including on Iran and counterterrorism. I do not believe the visit changes the fundamental threat environment for CENTCOM. I do believe it could facilitate cooperation between the United States and Arab allies including in containing and in some cases pushing back on Iran. The Gulf States believe former President Obama held them in contempt and prioritized détente with Iran over their interests, but they never lost faith in the US-Arab partnership as such. POTUS is simply restoring it, or attempting to. To the extent that he has succeeded is or succeeding, the Gulf states will likely have a greater appetite for risk in escalating their war in Yemen for example, or cracking down on Iranian-aligned groups in Bahrain. These are all conflicts of choice for Iran, and I do not anticipate a high degree of counter-escalation. This is partly because I do not believe this visit has generated greater intent for a more aggressive anti-Iranian posture in the 'core' states such Iraq and Syria, where Iran would meet any challenges aggressively.

Daniel Serwer PhD.

Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies

It's strange to be asked this question in retrospect, but it still deserves an answer. The most serious threat during this trip was the risk of doing anything that split the GCC and weakened its will to counter Iran. POTUS did it: he triggered the Saudi/Emirate campaign against Qatar and thereby destroyed GCC solidarity against Iran.

The most important opportunity was to help bridge the gap between Saudi Arabia and Israel. POTUS seems to have been partly successful at that, or at least did no damage. But the rapprochement cannot be complete without progress on the Palestinian question, which seems staled, likely long-term.

Biographies

Patricia DeGennaro



Patricia (Tricia) DeGennaro is a Senior Geopolitical Risk Analyst for Threat Tec., LLC. She currently supports the US Army TRADOC G2/G27 as an analyst on ACE Futures and the Network Engagement Team. DeGennaro has lectured at West Point and New York University on International Security Policy and Civilian and Military Affairs. She was selected as a Subject Matter Expert (SME) on the Middle East, Iraq, and Afghanistan for various projects under the TRADOC G2, the commander of the Multi-National Forces in Iraq, commander of the Special Operations Command Central, and the US Department of Defense Strategic Multilayer Assessment program. In 2013, she was accepted into the US Department of State Franklin Fellows program where she served in USAID's Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance - Office of Civilian and Military Cooperation (DCHA/CMC) as a Senior Policy Advisor to support the Office and an Agency-wide Civilian-Military Cooperation Steering Committee in an extensive revision to the Agency's Civilian-Military Cooperation Policy. DeGennaro capitalizes on over twenty years of experience as an academic, author and consultant in international security. Much of her work focuses on stabilization in the Middle East and surrounding region, countering violent extremism, and transitioning nations from war.

During her tenure, she has also consulted with the Asia Foundation, Director of National Intelligence Office, Department of Homeland Security, The Conference Board, World Bank, Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee chaired by Senator Edward M. Kennedy, and several organizations that support the Middle East Peace Process. She also spent four years in Albania as a Small and Medium Enterprise volunteer with the Peace Corps and, later, as a contractor with US Agency for International Development. Regionally, DeGennaro continues to focus on the Balkans, the Middle East and South Asia where she travels often.

DeGennaro has published several articles on US foreign policy and national security topics. Her focus is to encourage an integrated international policy that looks beyond war and the use of force. She is often an expert commentator for CNN, MSNBC, Al Jazeera, Fox News, BBC and various nationally and internationally syndicated radio programs.

DeGennaro holds an MBA in International Trade and Finance from George Washington University and an MPA in International Security and Conflict Resolution from Harvard University. She speaks fluent Albanian and has a basic knowledge of Italian, Arabic and Dari.

Global Cultural Knowledge Network, TRADOC G2



The Global Cultural Knowledge Network (GCKN) is a part of the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G2. Our mission is to enable a holistic understanding of potential future operational environments (OE) through the collection of expertise and information and the development of products/services to enhance OE understanding at the operational level. GCKN combines the intellectual capacity of military, academic, and industry experts and brings it to the Army's next mission.

Faysal Itani



Faysal Itani is a resident senior fellow with the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, where he focuses primarily on the Syrian conflict and its regional impact.

Itani was born and grew up in Beirut, Lebanon and has lived and worked in several Arab countries. Before joining the Atlantic Council, he was a risk analyst advising governments, corporations, and international organizations on political, economic, and security issues in the Middle East. Itani has repeatedly briefed the United States government and its allies on the conflict in Syria and its effects on their interests. He has been widely published and quoted in prominent media including *The New York Times*, *TIME*, *Politico*, *The*

Washington Post, *CNN*, *US News*, *Huffington Post*, and *The Wall Street Journal*.

Itani holds an MA in strategic studies and international economics from the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies, a certificate in public policy from Georgetown University, and a BA in business from the American University of Beirut.

Daniel Serwer



Also a scholar at the Middle East Institute, Daniel Serwer is the author of *Righting the Balance* (Potomac Books, November 2013), editor (with David Smock) of *Facilitating Dialogue* (USIP, 2012) and supervised preparation of *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* (USIP, 2009). *Righting the Balance* focuses on how to strengthen the civilian instruments of American foreign policy to match its strong military arm. *Facilitating Dialogue* analyzes specific cases and best practices in getting people to talk to each other in conflict zones. *Guiding Principles* is the leading compilation of best practices for civilians and military in post-war state-building.

As vice president of the Centers of Innovation at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Serwer led teams working on rule of law, peacebuilding, religion, economics, media,

technology, security sector governance and gender. He was also vice president for peace and stability operations at USIP, overseeing its peacebuilding work in Afghanistan, the Balkans, Iraq and Sudan and serving as executive director of the Hamilton/Baker Iraq Study Group.

As a minister-counselor at the U.S. Department of State, Serwer directed the European office of intelligence and research and served as U.S. special envoy and coordinator for the Bosnian Federation, mediating between Croats and Muslims and negotiating the first agreement reached at the Dayton Peace Talks; from 1990 to 1993, he was deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, leading a major diplomatic mission through the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War.

Serwer is a graduate of Haverford College and earned masters degrees at the University of Chicago and Princeton, where he also did his PhD in history.