



# U.S.-GULF RELATIONS IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

## THE END OF THE TRUST DEFICIT?

### SUMMARY

Cordial interactions between President Donald Trump and several G.C.C. leaders suggest a warming in U.S.-G.C.C. relations after years of friction with the Obama administration. Trump's declared position to not advocate human rights and political reforms abroad, and his tough stance on Iran will be music to the ears of Gulf leaders. Nevertheless, room still remains for disagreement over a number of issues, including Syria, Israel-Palestine, JASTA and energy policy. Greater consultation in policy formulation between the United States and its Gulf partners is needed to prevent misunderstandings from arising.

### KEY POINTS

- ◆ For the Saudis, Yemen will serve as the litmus test for a more determined U.S. response to Iranian expansionism
- ◆ Saudi Arabia does not support abrogating the Iran nuclear deal, fearing a hot war between the United States and Iran will threaten its security
- ◆ Trump's abandonment of Obama-era policies supporting civil liberties, human rights and democratic reform in the Arab world will be welcomed in the Gulf
- ◆ Trump's expectations that the G.C.C. formalize relations with Israel before a peace deal with the Palestinians are inflated
- ◆ Disagreements over Syria are likely to persist if Trump seeks closer coordination with Moscow, strengthening the roles of Russia and Iran in the region



## INTRODUCTION

Gulf leaders continue to express optimism about the future of U.S.-Gulf relations weeks into the new Trump administration. Positive engagements with King Salman, U.A.E. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, and Qatar's Emir Tamim have reassured the G.C.C. leadership that President Donald Trump is moving forward on an agenda that is consistent with their priorities and perspectives on regional security. Signs that the administration supports moving ahead on major weapons purchases that had been delayed or conditioned by the Obama administration—precision guided munitions for Saudi Arabia and F-16 fighters for Bahrain—will further please the G.C.C. states.

Satisfaction with the approach the new administration is taking contrasts starkly with the frustration that the G.C.C. leadership felt and increasingly expressed over the policies pursued during the Obama presidency. In particular, the Gulf states were angered by Obama's positions on Iran, Syria, and the Arab Spring. The final blow to Obama's credibility in the G.C.C. was his interview with Jeffrey Goldberg in the April 2016 issue of *The Atlantic* magazine, where Obama displayed an open contempt for Gulf leaders. For a culture that puts a premium on saving face and avoiding confrontation, Obama's criticism of their domestic policies and apparent belief that the G.C.C. states were primarily responsible for tensions with Iran were simply beyond the pale.

## Gerald Feierstein



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Over the course of his career, he served in nine overseas postings including

three tours of duty in Pakistan, as well as tours in Saudi Arabia, Oman, Lebanon, Jerusalem, and Tunisia. In 2010, President Obama appointed Feierstein U.S. Ambassador to Yemen, where he served until 2013. From 2013 until his retirement, Feierstein was Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near East Affairs.

## THE DAWN OF A NEW DAY

So the warm welcome that Trump was accorded was as much a reflection of the relief that Gulf leaders felt that Barack Obama was no longer president as it was based on their confidence that the new administration will pursue policies that contradict those taken during Obama's tenure. The G.C.C. states are particularly reassured by evidence that the Trump administration will be proactive in addressing the challenges in the region. As Adel al-Jubeir, Saudi's foreign minister, put it at the Munich Security Conference on February 19: "We see a president who's pragmatic and practical, a businessman, problem-solver, a man who's not an ideologue. He wants America to play a role in the world. Our view is that when America disengages, it creates tremendous danger in the world, because it leaves vacuums, and into those vacuums evil



## James Mattis and Rex Tillerson inspire confidence in the Gulf



their G.D.P. on defense than even the United States). They will almost certainly use their defense allocations to solidify their close ties to the U.S. defense industry and the new

administration, and will also lean forward in support of U.S. defense priorities both in the Gulf and more broadly in the region.

A trickier issue for the G.C.C. states will be responding to a Trump initiative to develop an 'outside-in' approach to peacemaking between Israel and the Palestinians. The G.C.C. states will reaffirm their support for an opening to Israel in the context of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement. As Jubeir reiterated during his trip to Rome on February 20: "You have a peace deal that essentially calls for a settlement based on two states living side-by-side in peace and security." In that context, the Gulf states can reaffirm their support for the Arab Peace Initiative originally sponsored by the late King Abdullah in 2002. But they will undoubtedly resist pre-paying Israel without an agreement with the Palestinians. Despite Secretary John Kerry's persistent efforts to pursue such a strategy with primarily Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E. during his tenure, convincing the Gulf states to agree to this approach proved quixotic.

forces flow." The Gulf states are further reassured by the presence in the administration of familiar and trusted faces at the Departments of Defense and State. Both Gen. (ret'd) James Mattis and Rex Tillerson inspire confidence in the Gulf that they have friends in a position to influence Trump's policies.

Beyond their satisfaction with the change in the tenor of U.S. policy in the region, Gulf leaders will be looking for clear signs that the direction of U.S. policy is changing. They are anxious for confirmation that the United States will take a more hands-off approach to issues of domestic politics, civil liberties, and human rights. They will also look for indications that the new administration will place a higher value on loyalty to U.S. friends and partners than they believe was true in the Obama administration.

In return, the Gulf states will likely seek early opportunities to demonstrate to the Trump administration that they will reciprocate the administration's efforts on their behalf. The Gulf leaders will be at pains to push back on the characterization made by both Obama and Trump that the Saudis and the G.C.C. are defense "free riders." (The accusation, in any event, is misguided. Saudi defense expenditures are the third highest in the world, after only the United States and China, and they spend a higher percentage of



## A COORDINATED APPROACH TO THE IRAN CONUNDRUM REMAINS THE KEY

The key to any significant reset of the U.S.-Gulf relationship revolves around an agreement on dealing with the Iran challenge. A joint review of Iran policy has become more urgent as the Iranians seemingly have launched a new “charm offensive” possibly intended to exploit differences within the G.C.C. over Iranian policy or to blunt G.C.C. support for the U.S. focus on confronting Iran. The administration, at the most senior levels, should coordinate with the G.C.C. states on a joint approach to establishing an Iran policy that will include roles and responsibilities for each party. The policy should include both an agreement on the future of the J.C.P.O.A. as well as how to challenge Iran on non-J.C.P.O.A. issues. A more aggressive policy that the U.S. seeks to adopt toward Iran will not succeed without full G.C.C. buy-in.

Despite Trump’s provocative threats to “tear up,” or at least re-negotiate, the J.C.P.O.A. during the campaign, it appears that the administration has retreated from those unlikely scenarios and will now insist on a robust enforcement strategy to ensure Tehran doesn’t violate the princi-

ples of the nuclear deal. Although the G.C.C. states were only reluctant supporters of the Iran nuclear deal, they too are likely to prefer enforcement over abandonment of the agreement at this point. Former Saudi intelligence chief, Prince Turki al-Faisal, was not speaking officially for Riyadh when he publicly declared that the kingdom does not support abrogation of the nuclear deal, but his comments almost certainly channeled the thinking of senior Saudi officials. Indeed, the G.C.C. states would fear that abandoning the deal would trigger a hot war between the United States and Iran that would threaten their security.

But the real failure of the Obama administration in G.C.C. eyes was in the areas of its Iran policy unrelated to the nuclear program. In particular, they saw relief from the sanctions regime as the opening that Iran needed to expand financial support for its aggressive moves in the region. Further, they believed that Obama turned a blind eye to Iran’s hegemonic behavior in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere in order to chase a better relationship with Iran. Thus, the strong assertions by Trump and his inner circle that they



[Gulf states] believed that Obama turned a blind eye to Iran’s hegemonic behavior



will push back against Iranian expansionist efforts are music to the ears of Gulf leaders. The imposition of new sanctions on Iran in response to its ballistic missile tests, discussion of a possible anti-Iran military alliance, as well as a bruited decision to designate the I.R.G.C. as a terrorist organization, are taken as evidence that the Trump administration is committed to challenging Iran from a position of strength. Even if not all of these initiatives bear fruit, they will be seen positively in the region as a statement of administration commitment.

For the Saudis, the litmus test of a more determined U.S. response to Iranian bad behavior will come in Yemen. Fundamentally, Washington and the G.C.C. are in agreement on the four key principles of the Saudi-led coalition's kinetic efforts to stabilize the situation in Yemen:

- ◆ Restoring the Hadi government of Yemen and concluding implementation of the G.C.C. Initiative and the National Dialogue Conference as called for in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2216

- ◆ Preventing the Houthis and their ally, Ali Abdullah Saleh, from overthrowing the Hadi government and imposing their own rule through violence
- ◆ Securing the Saudi-Yemeni border
- ◆ Defeating Iran's efforts to establish a foothold in the Arabian Peninsula, thereby threatening Saudi and G.C.C. security

But the prolonged conflict, Saudi-led coalition errors, and the Obama administration's disinclination to identify Iran as an obstacle to peace in Yemen strained the U.S.-Saudi relationship and distorted the positions of the two countries. Friction between Saudi Arabia and its traditional Western partners offered an unanticipated propaganda windfall to Iran.

Shifts in U.S. policy have already reassured the Saudis and their G.C.C. partners that the new administration has abandoned some of the policies of the Obama team. Moreover, the Trump administration has made clear that it shares the Saudi perspective on the nature of the Yemen conflict as a principal symbol of Iranian-inspired subversion of Sunni Arab governments. A decision in principle to move forward on the

sale of precision guided munitions supports that shift in perspective.

Even with recognition of Iran's obstructive role, however, both the United States and the Saudi-led coalition retain

The litmus test of a more determined U.S. response to Iranian bad behavior [is] Yemen





an interest in promoting U.N. negotiations and restoring peace and stability on Saudi Arabia's southern border. Thus, Tillerson's February 16 meeting with his British, Saudi, Omani, and Emirati counterparts, along with U.N. Special Envoy Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed, re-established the core principles of the Security Council Resolution, reiterated support for the U.N.-led Yemeni peace talks, and called again for urgent measures to address Yemen's looming humanitarian crisis.

“ Outside of Iran policy, human rights ... was the greatest irritant in U.S. relations with the Gulf

## THE GULF WILL WELCOME REDUCED FRICTION OVER CIVIL LIBERTIES

Outside of Iran policy, the Obama administration's press for greater respect for human rights and civil liberties in the Middle East, as seen in particular in its support for the popular protest movements in the Arab Spring, was the greatest irritant in U.S. relations with its Gulf partners. The Gulf leaders objected to Obama's approach to the Arab Spring for what they considered to be two fundamental flaws:

- ◆ A willingness to “abandon” long-time friends and partners, especially Hosni Mubarak, which they believed presaged an unwillingness to defend them should they run into popular opposition to their rule; and

- ◆ Insufficient sensitivity to the role of political Islam in the uprisings, thereby empowering destabilizing forces in the region and directly challenging security in their own countries.

While the Obama administration sought to convince its Gulf partners that loosening restrictions and empowering civil society would strengthen their societies and construct more durable political and social systems, the Gulf leadership's reaction was diametrically opposite. In response to the rising force of political Islam, and to what they saw as meddling by the United States and its Western allies in their internal affairs, the Gulf states cracked down harder on political expression, dissent, and civil society organizations. In turn, their response exacerbated conflicts with the Obama administration.

With the advent of the Trump administration, expectations among Gulf leaders are high that Washington will abandon, or at least minimize, its engagement on issues of civil liberties and human rights. Gulf leaders were heartened by Trump's strong criticism of the Obama administration's ‘abandonment’ of Mubarak and his own declarations of commitment to remain loyal to U.S. friends. They were further encouraged by signals from the



## There are a number of issues that can diminish their warmth for the new administration

support policies that directly or indirectly strengthen the roles of Russia and Iran in the region.

- ◆ Climate change and energy policy: the Gulf states will undoubtedly be relieved over the commitment of

the Trump administration to promote exploitation of fossil fuels and reduce the focus on climate change. But the administration's emphasis on U.S. domestic production will increase downward pressure on global energy prices and complicate the G.C.C.'s ability to stabilize their economies.

- ◆ Islamophobia: the Gulf states have expressed support for the administration's plans to combat violent extremism including imposing restrictions on visas, immigration, and refugee resettlement. But they will react if the fight against extremism expands into an anti-Muslim crusade. Saudi and Emirati students in the United States have recently been victims of anti-Muslim hate crimes. The Saudis will be particularly concerned about allegations among some in Trump's circle that Saudi-inspired Salafism is a root cause for the rise of jihadi or radical Islamic groups around the world.

- ◆ JASTA: JASTA remains an irritant in U.S.-Saudi relations and the Saudis will be watching to see if the new administration is willing to pressure Congress to

new administration that it views the Muslim Brotherhood with suspicion. In his confirmation hearing, Tillerson noted that the United States must "increase our attention to other agents of radical Islam like al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and certain elements within Iran." Given the apparent congruity of views between Washington and the region, it is less likely that domestic political issues will be a significant irritant in relations between the Gulf and the Trump administration.

## BUT BEHIND EVERY SILVER LINING, THERE'S A CLOUD

Despite the optimism in the Gulf that the United States is about to open a new chapter in its relations with the region, there are a number of issues that remain unresolved and can diminish their warmth for the new administration:

- ◆ Syria: earlier enthusiasm within the new administration to shift focus toward U.S.-Russia coordination on a counter-ISIS initiative, which would strengthen the regime in Damascus, has faded somewhat. Nevertheless, concerns remain among the Gulf states that the White House will



eliminate or substantially modify the legislation. A failure to address Saudi (and Emirati) concerns over JASTA may affect prospects for significant expansion of U.S. private sector engagement in regional economic diversification plans.

Beyond the specific issues, there is broader concern that the two sides may simply fall victim to over-expectations of what the other side is willing or capable of doing. The Trump administration's expectations that the Gulf states may formalize relations with Israel in the absence of, or as a prelude to, an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians are inflated. Shared concerns over the threat posed by a hegemonic Iran do not alter the unwillingness of the Gulf states to normalize their contacts with Israel without an acceptable agreement for the Palestinians. Jubeir's recent comments to his Italian counterpart reinforced the G.C.C. position.

Similarly, Trump's assertions that the Gulf would pay for safe zones for Syrian refugees in northern Syria is likely exaggerated. Should such an initiative be implemented, the G.C.C. would almost certainly contribute. But given their perspective that the refugee crisis is an international problem, they would also want to be part of a larger, international effort to address the problem.

Conversely, the Gulf states may anticipate that the advent of the Trump adminis-

tration will erase the complications in their relationships with the United States that they experienced under Obama. But the administration is only one pillar of U.S. policy formulation and other power centers including Congress, civil society, and the press will maintain influence over the direction of U.S. policy. Thus, longstanding concerns over the conflict in Yemen, human rights and civil liberties in the region, and support for Islamic extremism are unlikely to disappear from the U.S. lexicon despite Trump administration views and may continue to complicate U.S. relations with the region.

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## CONCLUSION

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Overall, the Gulf states are optimistic about the direction of U.S.-Gulf relations. Some have even expressed a hope that Trump will resurrect the golden age of U.S.-Gulf relations from the Reagan/Bush era and consign the problems of the Obama era to history. But much has changed in the intervening 30 years. Societies in the Gulf have become more complex and the challenges of leadership in the region are greater. Fiscal con-

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straints are more urgent. And a new generation of leaders has come to power that is more confident and comfortable than their fathers and grandfathers in advancing their own interests and concerns independent of U.S. policy.

Among the principal failures of the Obama administration in the Middle East were its unwillingness to acknowledge these changes and to recognize the Gulf states as true partners, and failure to bring them in at early stages of policy formulation to consult and take into account Gulf priorities and concerns. While the new administration has adopted policies and advocated positions that Gulf leaders find more consistent with their own views, a repeat of the failure to consult will leave the United States and its Gulf partners once more vulnerable to misunderstanding, miscommunications and, ultimately, to shared disappointment.



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## ENDNOTES

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