



PERSPECTIVES

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US Troop Withdrawal from Syria Could Fuel Gulf Assertiveness

by Dr. James M. Dorsey

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Donald Trump, in shrugging off allegations that Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman may have been responsible for the killing of Jamal Khashoggi, described the world as a dangerous place. Gulf leaders are likely to share that perception in response to the president's seeming unwillingness to fully take their interests into account, particularly in the wake of his announced US troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan. The vacuum created by Trump risks fueling greater Gulf assertiveness, with potentially messy consequences.

As far as Gulf leaders are concerned, President Donald J. Trump demonstrated with his [announced US troop withdrawals from Syria and Afghanistan](#) that his insistence that the "world is a dangerous place" has never been truer.

The troop withdrawals, coupled with Trump's praising of Saudi Arabia's alleged willingness to foot the reconstruction bill in Syria – moves that emphasize his lack of geopolitical interest in the Middle East – leave only Iran and a shaky Afghan peace process primarily standing as the common interests between the US, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

US president Barack Obama's seeming unwillingness to wholeheartedly support embattled Arab leaders during the 2011 Arab popular revolts that toppled the heads of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen was at the root of the sometimes reckless greater assertiveness displayed since then by the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Trump's moves threaten to leave both those countries hanging in the air.

A similar conclusion can be drawn for Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu, who appears to have successfully persuaded Trump to postpone publication of his Israeli-Palestinian peace plan until after Israel's April 9 early elections because it [is expected to be less favorable towards Israel than expected](#).

Despite Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the plan reportedly sees the [city as the capital of both the Jewish and a Palestinian state](#).

The troop withdrawals and the peace plan confirm the worst fears of Middle Eastern leaders (particularly those in the Gulf): they are left without a reliable ally to unconditionally protect their interests, and they have no one to turn to who can fully replace the US as their unquestioned protector.

The [resignation of US Defense Secretary James Mattis deepens the crisis](#) for Gulf leaders. "Mattis's departure means the loss of a key interlocutor at the Department of Defense, the Cabinet-level agency with which the Gulf countries deal most. It also means losing a senior figure who views Middle Eastern strategic realities in terms very similar to their own. The fact that Mattis resigned over policy disagreements with the president does not bode well for future trends in Washington from a Gulf Arab perspective," said Middle East scholar Hussein Ibish.

Trump has proven to be unreliable. His [granting of waivers to Iran's major oil buyers](#), as well as for Indian investment in the Iranian port of Chabahar, viewed by Saudi Arabia and the UAE as a threat to their geopolitical and economic interests, was the writing on the wall despite the harsh sanctions imposed on Iran by the president. Syria and Afghanistan cement the fact that Trump is both unpredictable and unreliable.

The world's other three major powers, Europe, Russia, and China, have some of what the US has to offer but lack the ability and/or interest to fully replace it as the Gulf leaders' protector in the way that Trump seemed to model at the beginning of his presidency.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE already have fundamental differences over Iran with the three powers, which oppose US sanctions and want to salvage the 2015 international agreement that curbed the Islamic Republic's nuclear program. Similarly, the three world powers have refused to back the 18-month-old Saudi-UAE-led economic and diplomatic boycott of Qatar and call for a speedy resolution of the crisis.

Russia is keen to sell weaponry to the Gulf states, who are among the world's biggest buyers; to exploit vacuums created by US policy; and to capitalize as a non-OPEC producer in enabling Gulf efforts to manipulate production and

world oil prices, but it is not eager to inherit the US defense umbrella for the region.

Said Russia and energy expert Li-Chen Sim: “The Gulf is not a key focus of Russian foreign policy... I don’t see the Russians taking any advantage of the problems between the Saudis and the Americans to play a larger security role.” Ms. Sim was referring to US Congressional blaming of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman for the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and condemnation of Saudi conduct of the war in Yemen.

For its part, China has neither the ability nor the appetite to replace the US in the Gulf. On the contrary: China has preferred to benefit from US regional protection, prompting US accusations that the Chinese are free-riders. As is evident across Eurasia in projects related to China’s infrastructure and energy-driven Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese support does not come without strings. The same is true for Europe.

Moreover, China’s brutal crackdown on Turkic Muslims, which is expanding to other Muslim groups in the country, represents a potential black swan in China-Gulf relations.

Saudi and UAE uncertainty, now that there is no one world power available to cater to all their needs, is reflected in their apparent efforts to rebuild bridges with Syrian president Bashar Assad, whose ouster they sought for much of the Syrian civil war.

A recent visit to Damascus by embattled Sudanese president Omar Bashir, [the first by an Arab leader since the civil war erupted in 2011](#), was widely seen as the beginning of a thaw in Syrian-Arab relations.

Ali Mamlouk, the head of Syrian air force intelligence and a close associate of Assad, [met in Cairo days later with Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel](#).

The UAE is, according to unconfirmed reports, [refurbishing its embassy in Damascus](#), which has been empty since Gulf states broke off relations with Syria early on in the civil war.

Adding to Gulf leaders’ uncertainty, President Trump left many guessing when he recently [thanked Saudi Arabia on Twitter for agreeing to “to spend the necessary money](#) needed to help rebuild Syria, instead of the United States.”

With Saudi Arabia refraining from comment, it was not clear what Trump was referring to. In October, in the immediate wake of the killing of Khashoggi,

Saudi Arabia [transferred US\\$100 million to the US](#) to help stabilize parts of Syria.

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A close associate of Tunisian president Beji Caid Essebsi asserted earlier this year that the UAE had offered Tunisia financial assistance [if Essebsi followed the example of Abdel Fattah Sisi](#), who imposed a brutal autocracy after staging a military coup in 2013 to topple Muhammad Morsi, Egypt's only democratically elected president.

[Saudi Arabia this month pledged US\\$830 million in aid for Tunisia](#) following Prince Muhammad's controversial visit last month as part of a tour designed to demonstrate that his position remained strong despite Khashoggi's killing.

Trump, in shrugging off allegations that Prince Muhammad may have been responsible for the killing of Khashoggi, described the world as a dangerous place. Gulf leaders are likely to share that perception in response to the president's seeming unwillingness to fully take their interests into account.

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