

Trends Impacting the Gulf: Observations from a Departing Ambassador

James B. Smith

United States Ambassador to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2009-2013

For over four years, my wife and I had what can only be described as a rich, fulfilling and intense experience in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. We were caught in the middle of the so-called Arab Spring. We watched the significant role social media played in protests, as a generation of well-educated young people demanded more from their government. It was remarkable to witness this moment in history, as forces of change and globalization tugged at the soul of this most conservative society. However, unless you experienced it first hand, it can be difficult to track the changes in Saudi Arabia.

Saudi Arabia remains a mystery to most Americans. There is very little tourism to Saudi Arabia, and while US business is growing and there are thousands of Saudi students in the United States, Americans are still not sure what is the real Saudi Arabia. We find ourselves dealing with two competing views. On the one hand, Saudis are known for their generosity, warmth and grand hospitality. However, there hangs the specter of 9/11, in which 15 of the 19 attackers were Saudi. Which is the real Saudi Arabia? It is an issue that not only confounds Americans, but, I would argue, Saudis as well.

The months since our departure from Riyadh have allowed us the benefit of perspective, and with that emerge some observations. I say observations because each needs to undergo the rigor of more research. Nonetheless, these are trends that I believe will continue to shape events in the region in the years to come.

The six trends are: an Islamic awakening, an Arab awakening, the Arab Spring, the move from control to influence, a shift in the centers of power, and changing alliances. Each one influences and is influenced by the others and cannot be seen in isolation.

Islamic Awakening

This is not a theological discussion. In using the term, “Islamic Awakening,” I refer to a political movement, although there are certainly implications for individual Muslims who have become more conservative, who tend more toward strict observance and modesty, and who as a product of faith, want their lives to reflect the values expressed by the Prophet Mohammed, whose followers always add, Peace Be Upon Him.

What I am addressing is a concerted effort by different political entities to embrace Islam to gain some sort of a political advantage or to embrace an identity to ward off outside influences deemed threatening.

The beginnings of the Islamic Awakening go back to the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood in Cairo in 1928. The goal of the Muslim Brotherhood, as described on its website, is to establish Islamic Shar'ia as "the basis for controlling the affairs of state and society," and to work "to unify Islamic countries and states, mainly among the Arab states and liberating them from foreign imperialism."

As the Muslim Brotherhood grew in strength (the organization had upwards of two million followers by 1950), it faced a counter from Gamal Abdel Nasser and his Pan-Arabism movement, which aimed at unifying the Arab world in the form of the United Arab Republic. The Muslim Brotherhood's doctrine was further developed by Sayyid Qutb and his widely circulated book, *Milestones*. Qutb set forth a philosophy stating that anything un-Islamic was evil and corrupt, and that Western values were immoral and forbidden. His ideas were embraced by future generations of extremists because he redefined *jihad* from a personal struggle to an active campaign that legitimized the use of force. For this position he was executed by Nasser. However, his brother, Mohammed, was released from prison and went to Saudi Arabia. He became an influential Islamic Studies professor at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah. One of his disciples was Osama bin Laden.

Nasser's goal of pan-Arabism included a more secular approach to government, a strong military, a more open society with Western style dress and even women's rights. Nasser's vision also included close ties with the Soviet Union and a socialist style economic system. His project, even as he made inroads into Syria and Yemen, was blocked by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states. Their political counter to Arab nationalism was a refocus on Islamic identity, away from foreign doctrines of either Karl Marx or Adam Smith.

Nasser began to force the Muslim Brotherhood out of Egypt. King Faisal welcomed them to Saudi Arabia and offered them Islamic refuge. They firmly ensconced themselves into the religious and educational communities. From the late sixties to late seventies, Saudi Arabia absorbed and embraced a refocus on Islamic practice.

This embrace brought dramatic consequences. A political, theological, and geo-strategic earthquake hit the region in 1979. While we in the United States remember that year as the rise of the ayatollahs in Iran and the taking of our diplomats as hostages, it was also the year when a charismatic Islamic fundamentalist group led by Juhayman invaded and took over the Holy Mosque in Mecca and accused the Saudi government of un-Islamic behavior.

This was a double threat to the Saudi government. First, the Iranian model had religious leaders running the government—not an attractive choice for the House of Saud. In their own way, the Saudis have a separation of mosque and state with mutually supportive, but distinctive roles. We must keep this in mind when we hear of Saudi concerns about Iran; it is not simply a Shi'a-Sunni disagreement, but a deeper question about political theory and governance. This governance divide defines the rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Second, the violent takeover of the Holy Mosque by Juhayman and his followers was justified by the small charismatic group as a means to purify corruption and the lax observance in the country. To meet this charge, even after the Mosque was retaken and the group mostly executed, Saudi society was turned inward with newly imposed conservative observance. New prohibitions on music and art appeared, as did restrictions on women and thought.

The United States was an important, if inadvertent, contributor to the movement. Our Cold War concerns with Soviet expansion led us to sympathize with Nasser's opponents. These concerns also colored our later support for Islamic fighters in Afghanistan in the waning days of the Cold War struggle against the Soviet Union. We, along with the Saudi government, financed the campaign against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and when it was over, the jihadists returned to Saudi Arabia to find an incubator of the global jihadist movement championed by Osama bin Laden. Factions of true believers, determined to purify practice and politics, first attacked the West and then carried out attacks in the Kingdom itself.

So in this broad and brief sweep of history, we can see the roots of current tensions in the region, the action and reaction to events. Saudis deemed the attacks in Riyadh and across the Kingdom as the acts of deviants and misguided youth, and worked to undermine support for extremism in the Kingdom. Today, throughout the region, we see an effort to decrease the Muslim Brotherhood's influence, especially in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the UAE. We also see a competition for Salafist leadership between the Kingdom and Qatar, and an ongoing debate of the role of Islam in governance.

Arab Awakening

Like many of you, I watched with fascination the crowds in Tahrir Square in January 2011, absorbing the pictures, hearing the pleas for dignity, and trying to understand what it was all about. I was taken by the fact that in those heady days of mass gatherings, there were no American flags being burned, no British flags, no Israeli flags. It was not about us, the West; it was about them. After some thought, I realized that for the first time in about 700 years, the conversation was about them, and not about someone else.

Baghdad in the 13th century was a center of knowledge. Its library, known as the Bayt al-Hikma (House of Wisdom), was a hub of the Golden Age of Islam. The Mongols destroyed it in 1258. The Mongols were followed by the Ottoman Empire, and then at the end of World War I, Britain and France were the key powers, drawing boundary lines that we live with today.

At the end of World War II, individual countries in the region had the option of siding either with the United States or the Soviet Union. At the fall of the Berlin Wall, only the United States was left standing in the position of global power. In the Middle East, the United States and the rest of the West have been viewed in the context of regional politics. For the 20 odd years I traveled in the region, I never quite understood why every

conversation ended up focused on US foreign policy. But in January 2011, the conversation was no longer about us; it was about them.

So what do the people want? First, they no longer see themselves as subjects; they see themselves as citizens. They want their governments to be responsive and transparent. They have a voice and a vehicle—the iPhone, Blackberry, Internet and Twitter—to express their wants and desires. The Arab Awakening is about the people of the Middle East focusing on themselves, and their futures, and demanding accountability.

Arab Spring

This takes us to the Arab Spring, which I define much more narrowly than most. To be precise, I define the Arab Spring as the consequence of a government's response to the Arab Awakening. Arguably, the monarchies of the Gulf have shown great agility in dealing with the problems of their populations. They have been responsive, and in a mostly positive way. They are listening and they are responding, and they have the resources to do so.

In Saudi Arabia we began watching this development in November and December of 2009 after floods devastated the Saudi city of Jeddah. There was an outcry from the local population: where did the money go? Instead of clamping down on this conversation, the government allowed for public disagreement with the actions of local government. At the same time, we saw individuals and groups responding to flood victims by gathering food and blankets, providing shelter and, in some cases, saving lives. If you see yourself as a subject, you don't do that—you wait for the government to do it. If you see yourself as a citizen, you do it automatically, and that is what we saw five years ago.

As chaos surrounded Saudi Arabia and other countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in the Winter and Spring of 2011, there was an active public debate. Indeed, there was an Arab Awakening like we saw in the rest of the region. The issues were related to housing, jobs, civil society concerns, corruption, the security apparatus, etc. On each of these, the Saudi government was publicly responsive. A situation that could have resulted in calamity was diffused by a responsive government.

The governments that defaulted to age old traditions of cracking down on their populations have found themselves in turmoil.

Move from Control to Influence

This brings us to the next trend, which is at the core of the awakenings. Traditionally, governments in the region have focused on control as the operative word in dealing with the populations they govern. They control the message, control movement, control what can and should be debated in public. But given the ubiquitous nature of information today, you can no longer control, you can only influence. And while many would like to put that genie back in the bottle, the reality is that Saudi Arabia has the highest Twitter usage rates in the world relative to online population, and I do not see this trend abating.

Arguably, the same holds true for US foreign policy as well. During the entire Cold War era, we deployed forces to control events locally in order to prevent the spread of global Communism. We did this in Korea, Vietnam, in various other expeditions, and I would argue, the last deployment of the Cold War era was the First Gulf War. Twenty years later, no one suggested that we could send the 82nd Airborne into Cairo—the idea never crossed anyone’s mind. The seminal invasion of Iraq marked the mid-point between these two events. We deployed forces in exactly the same mindset as we had done for the last 60 years and in the kinetic operations they performed magnificently. But the problem was that we could no longer control the message. Therefore, we could not control the outcome.

An important question for today is: Do we and the governments of the Middle East have the tools and resources at hand to be successful in an era of influence? Are the tools of control still viable?

Shift in the Centers of Power

Looking around the region, one sees shifting centers of power. The Northern capitals of Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo have historically been the centers of history, commerce and academia in the Arab and Islamic world. These centers of influence are shifting to the Gulf. Already, the economic and financial centers of power are firmly ensconced in Riyadh, Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha.

I believe the intellectual centers are shifting as well, for they will follow the investment in education. In Saudi Arabia, 25 percent of the national budget has been dedicated to education for most of the last decade. The Saudis have made a huge investment in developing their own university system, including the investment in young people studying abroad, nearly 80,000 in the United States. As the northern capitals continue to atrophy as a byproduct of endless strife and conflict, the southern capitals will fill that void as the intellectual centers of the Arab world.

Changing Alliances

With all this dynamic activity in the region, there is every reason to believe that there will be shifts in relationships and changing alliances.

Let’s start with the Gulf Cooperation Council. Under the leadership of Abdullatif al Zayani, the GCC Secretariat has become an active participant in regional affairs, as evidenced by the successful transition in Yemen. There was a move toward GCC expansion with Morocco and Jordan, but that as yet has not played out. The Saudis are pushing a move toward a GCC Union, and many describe this as an evolution toward an EU-like body for the GCC. Time will tell, but there is much effort aimed at growing the multilateral organization.

Historically, the GCC has been an organization comprised of one big brother (Saudi Arabia) and five little brothers (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, UAE, and Oman), though

many bristle at that analogy. That dynamic has changed the GCC as each country has strengthened its own foreign policy. Indeed modern communication has created constituent expectations within each country, and simply following the Saudi lead is no longer the approved solution.

But long standing relationships are changing. Egypt has always been Saudi Arabia's strategic bulwark to the West; similarly, Saudi Arabia has served the same strategic purpose for Egypt to the East. Many believe Egypt will be out of the geostrategic game for at least a generation as it deals with domestic challenges, leading the GCC to look for other sources of stability.

Negotiations over Iran's nuclear program have also impacted relationships in the region. The negotiations have caused a lot of angst with the Saudis and Emiratis in particular. Their concern is that a "grand bargain," wherein the United States government reaches an agreement regarding Iran's nuclear portfolio, will result in America's disengagement in the region and leave a void (as in Iraq) to be filled by Iran. In my mind, this comes from a fear of the unknown—there is no question that an enforceable nuclear deal is in all our best interests. The real issue is what follows, and that conversation must include all of our Allies in the region.

Conclusion

In the end, all of these issues are about them. The real debate is not between the Islamic world and the West; the real debate is inside the Islamic world. Nonetheless, we should never underestimate the importance of our involvement in the region. For many reasons, stability in the region is key, and maintaining strong ties with our historic friends in the region makes sense. Stability, however, will no longer be the byproduct of stagnation. The people in the region have a voice, and they are demanding effective governance. The form of government is an open question, but responsiveness of government will continue to be an absolute necessity. Therefore, there is every reason to believe that we will continue to live in one of the most dynamic times in the region's history.