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Bush in Arabia: Work in Progress or Waste of Time?

By [Simon Henderson](#)

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Most of President Bush's eight-day trip to the Middle East was spent in the Persian Gulf, visiting Kuwait, Bahrain, the two leading sheikhdoms of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Abu Dhabi and Dubai, and Saudi Arabia. As long-term allies of the United States, these Gulf Arab states still look to Washington as their ultimate security guarantor in what remains a dangerous region. In return for security, the United States asks for a reasonable world price for oil, support for its efforts to secure peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and cooperation in countering the threat of a potentially nuclear-armed Iran. The success of the trip may be judged by future progress on these policies.

Theme of Freedom

In his January 13 keynote address in Abu Dhabi -- his only formal speech during the trip -- the president discussed the importance of freedom in the Middle East. He argued that the advance of freedom was also the advance of justice, and, in a free and just society, leaders are accountable to those they govern. Apparently deemphasizing the word "democracy," which appeared only later in the speech, the president said that in such a society, individuals are treated with respect and dignity and can rise as far as their talents and hard work will take them.

Such language becomes somewhat ironic when one considers that Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE are all hereditary kingdoms or sheikhdoms (as are Qatar and Oman, the two members of the Gulf Cooperation Council Bush did not visit). Accountability of leaders is at best weak in Western terms. Talented and hard-working individuals can rise but will never reach the top -- a place dominated by arguably less talented and hard-working members of the royal or ruling families.

President Bush's real targets were Iran and al-Qaeda. Speaking of extremists who foment instability and threaten the people's aspirations, he pinpointed "the regime that sits in Tehran" as being "the world's leading sponsor of terrorism, . . . defy[ing] the UN and destabilizing the region by refusing to be open and transparent about its nuclear programs and ambitions." He also warned of the "dark rule across the Middle East" that al-Qaeda seeks to impose.

The reported public reaction to his speech indicates that both the leaders and the people of the Gulf states were less than persuaded. Although the president received warm and polite welcomes (as Gulf Arab culture demands), the last several years of criticism aimed at the United States in general, and President Bush in particular, have clearly taken their toll. The Gulf states are reportedly concerned about the chaos in Iraq, what they see as a continuing U.S. bias in favor of Israel, and whether isolation is the best way to deal with Iran. They also view Bush, with just a year to go in the White House, as a lame duck president.

Touring the Issues

Apart from Saudi Arabia, all of the countries President Bush visited in the Gulf, as well as Qatar and Oman, generously allow the United States to use their military bases for operations. The provision of base facilities is

partly a self-interested warning signal to Iran, but the United States also uses them for critical air operations over Iraq and Afghanistan.

Kuwait is still thankful for the U.S.-led expulsion of Iraqi invaders in 1991 and plays host to a large rotating American force that transits in and out of Iraq. But there are limits to this gratitude: Kuwait declined an invitation to attend the December 2007 Annapolis summit on Israeli-Palestinian peace. The Kuwaiti media reported that Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah was worried about the potential U.S. use of force against Iran -- the emirate is only about ten miles from Iranian territory.

Bahrain welcomed President Bush with an announcement that its airline, Gulf Air, was buying \$6 billion worth of commercial U.S. aircraft. The island is the headquarters for the U.S. Fifth Fleet, the ships that safeguard the entire region's oil and gas exports. Coincidentally, the significance of this role was emphasized by the tense January 6 encounter in the Strait of Hormuz between three U.S. Navy ships and Iranian speedboats. But King Hamad is a Sunni ruling over a 65 percent Shiite population, co-religionists of Iran, which once had a territorial claim to the island. And just days before Bush's arrival, there were Shiite riots protesting the death of an antigovernment demonstrator.

The UAE has a simmering territorial dispute with Iran, which refuses to give up three islands it seized in the 1970s. Like the other countries Bush visited, the UAE is perplexed about the recent U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which asserted that Tehran's work on developing nuclear weapons had stopped. Bush's speech in Abu Dhabi received polite but brief applause. The lead emirate, with 8 percent of global oil reserves (and the world's most expensive hotel, where the president stayed), Abu Dhabi discreetly provides an airbase used by U.S. reconnaissance and tanker aircraft. Yet, two days after Bush's visit, during a visit by French president Nicolas Sarkozy, the emirate openly announced an arrangement to host a French military base. The neighboring emirate of Dubai allows American warships to visit but owes much of its prosperity to commercial links with Iran, which is just a short trip across the Gulf.

Saudi Arabia was probably the country most anxious for President Bush to become involved in encouraging an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty. It regards the current lack of progress on the issue as a threat to its leadership of the Arab and Muslim worlds. But the kingdom is refusing any direct gesture toward Israel until it withdraws from all territories occupied in 1967, and a Saudi delegation attended the Annapolis summit only after being given diplomatic cover by an Arab League resolution.

On Iran, the kingdom is choosing to engage rather than isolate. Last month, King Abdullah welcomed President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad on a pilgrimage to Mecca. And this month, Saudi foreign minister Prince Saud al-Faisal told his French counterpart that Washington's confrontational behavior toward Iran was not the answer; if the Gulf Arabs have a problem with Iran, he argued, they should talk to Tehran, as neighbors should. Indeed, when Sarkozy departed only hours before Bush arrived, the flag poles on the drive from the airport were flying both the French and U.S. flags -- an apparent diplomatic signal that the United States is not the kingdom's only ally.

A more obvious rebuff to the United States was the quick Saudi response to President Bush's request for a boost in oil production. Saudi oil minister Ali al-Naimi quickly announced the kingdom would raise production only when the market justified it. The days when the kingdom would describe its oil policy as "reliable supplies at reasonable prices" seem to be over.

Judging the Trip

The tourist aspects of President Bush's journey -- sword dances, displays by thoroughbred horses, and hooded hunting falcons -- sit oddly beside the weighty concerns of Israeli-Palestinian peace and the threat of a nuclear Iran (unless the moments of relaxed informality reflect a personal engagement that can be turned to later diplomatic advantage). Once recovered from the long flight home, President Bush and his advisors must decide how to reduce any impact of the reported adverse comments and gestures coming from Gulf Arabs

regarding his policy toward Iran. The promise of \$20 billion worth of new arms, announced this week, may not produce much leverage.

The president has said he will push forward with the peace process, and that he will return to Israel this summer for its sixtieth anniversary celebration. The latter move will likely reinforce Gulf Arab perceptions of bias, potentially jeopardizing his efforts to obtain their diplomatic and financial help in backing Palestinian prime minister Mahmoud Abbas and isolating Hamas.

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