

# Rohani's GCC visit barely makes waves

Mohammed Alkhereiji

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Iranian President Hassan Rohani's visits to Kuwait and Oman to improve relations with neighbouring Gulf Arab countries were met with a muted response by the rest of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) at a time when tensions between Tehran and Riyadh show no signs of easing.

The first stop of Rohani's tour began February 15th in Muscat, where he met with Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said. Oman, which has had cordial relations with Iran, was instrumental in facilitating the talks leading to the Obama administration's rapprochement with the Islamic Republic that resulted in the 2015 nuclear agreement.

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Rohani then travelled to Kuwait City where he and Kuwaiti Emir Sheikh Sabah Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah discussed boosting relations and the “latest regional and international developments”, the Kuwait news agency reported.

The traditionally pro-government Gulf media gave Rohani's visit to the two GCC member countries little play.

Although silent on Rohani visit, Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir was vocal about the state of affairs with the Islamic Republic when speaking at a news conference with French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault in Riyadh towards the end of January.

Jubeir said US President Donald Trump's assessment “about containing Iran and its ability to cause



Iran's President Hassan Rohani (L) stands next to Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah during a welcoming ceremony in Kuwait City, on February 15th. (Reuters)

mischief, and making sure that Iran abides by the agreement that was signed” was “exactly our position”.

Rohani's outreach comes at a time when the United States has imposed new sanctions on Tehran over ballistic missile tests and Trump's words regarding the direction he might take US policy reverberate and raise concerns around the Middle East.

Thus, Rohani's effort is not a coincidence, analyst Soran Khedri, an expert on Iranian geopolitics, said. “Iran is trying to alleviate some of the US pressure in light of the Trump administration, by reaching out to the Gulf Arab states and making concessions, as a means to escape forward,” he said.

“Iran's readiness to make concessions to Gulf Arab countries stems

from the concern of US sanctions, or even the possibility of a US-GCC alliance against Iranian influence, that is why Tehran did this primitive strike of a visit in order to prevent the emergence of such a coalition that could threaten its external influence.”

Saudi Arabia cut ties with the Islamic Republic in January 2016 after mobs attacked its diplomatic

missions in Iran over the execution of a radical Shia cleric.

Iran retaliated by banning its citizens from attending last year's haj. An Iranian delegation is to visit the kingdom by the end of February to discuss preparations for the upcoming haj season.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

## Saudi Arabia's transformation depends on public participation

### Viewpoint



Fahad Nazer

For many years, outside observers lamented Saudi Arabia's glacial pace of change. Some nicknamed it the “kingdom where nothing ever happens”.

Those days and impressions are a thing of the past. Three notable Americans – journalist Thomas Friedman and former senior US diplomats Dennis Ross and Zalmay Khalilzad – visited Saudi Arabia in recent months and wrote about what they observed. There was a common theme among them: The kingdom is undergoing significant changes for the better.

Many of the political, economic and social reforms unfolded over decades. The Saudi government implemented development plans to transform the country from a largely underdeveloped and sparsely populated desert into a modern state in which an estimated 22 million citizens and 9 million expatriates live.

As oil revenues increased significantly in 1970s, Riyadh spent billions of dollars on modern transportation systems, communication networks, health care facilities and educational institutions.

The kingdom sent thousands

of Saudi students to study in the United States, Britain and other countries to learn best practices and to return to the kingdom with that knowledge. The hope was that the returning students, now more worldly, would accelerate the country's development.

Many changes did indeed take place gradually. The Saudi leadership was keenly aware of the potential disruptions to traditional way of life and institutions that invariably happen whenever modernity supplants them. That, to a large extent, explains the slow and incremental pace the state adopted when implementing social, political or economic changes.

2015 marked a turning point in Saudi Arabia's history. After King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ascended to the throne, some Saudis began referring to this new era as the “fourth Saudi state”, drawing a sharp distinction with the third Saudi state, which marked the founding of modern Saudi Arabia in 1932. The characterisation was not an empty slogan.

In 2016, the Saudi leadership unveiled an ambitious package of economic and social reforms known as Vision 2030. The programme aims to change the kingdom's economy by reducing its dependence on oil revenues and government spending. Under this vision, the private sector would become the engine of the economy, with the government creating the conditions and incentives for it and foreign investors to thrive and to create thousands of

new jobs. The mining, tourism, education, housing and entrainment sectors would be developed while the government steered private and foreign capital towards them.

The person most commonly mentioned as the architect behind this vision is Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz. In his 30s and known for his willingness to work long hours, Prince Mohammed has shifted the paradigm on government performance. Gone is the slow, ultra-conservative, piecemeal approach.

In media interviews, Prince Mohammed speaks with refreshing candour about the problems that hindered the development of the Saudi economy in the past as well as about shortcomings of today's institutions. His less-formal style, his willingness to elevate Saudis who have distinguished themselves and hold to account those who have underperformed have created a sense of excitement among a large segment of Saudi society, especially young people.

The National Transformation Programme (NTP) sets out benchmarks, goals and timeframes for assessing the progress of the various initiatives in Vision 2030. Central themes that figure prominently in both documents include performance, efficiency, transparency and accountability.

Vision 2030 makes clear that, for its goals to be reached, there must be a collective effort. Each individual Saudi has to play a part. While its wording and Prince Mo-

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ammed stress the need to improve the quality of life for Saudis by making available more entertainment options, the broader vision is a reminder to Saudi citizens that they must think of themselves as stockholders in a collective endeavour. They cannot simply be passive observers.

Prince Mohammed has spoken frankly about the challenges ahead and the mistakes that will invariably be made along the way but the NTP is very much contingent on a process of constant assessment and evaluation.

In his 1961 inaugural address, US president John F. Kennedy famously enjoined his fellow Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country”. Vision 2030 aims to transform the Saudis' economy and lives for the better. However, it also implies that the social contract between the state and the citizenry is based on a principle of reciprocity: The state has responsibilities but citizens also have obligations.

The unveiling of elements of Vision 2030 has been accompanied by public debate in traditional and social media and in events featuring Saudis officials in charge of implementation. That, too, is a departure from the past.

Saudi Arabia is indeed changing and for the better. Stay tuned.

Fahad Nazer is an international affairs fellow with the National Council on US-Arab Relations and an adviser to Gulf State Analytic.

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