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THE TENTH MANAMA DIALOGUE AND REGIONAL CHALLENGES

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High level delegates from about twenty countries will meet in the Bahraini capital Manama on December 5-7. They will convene to debate regional realities of defense and security. Among the unwelcome developments since last year's gathering have been Israel's heightened provocation, oppression, dis-possession, and ongoing denial of the rights of Palestinian Arab Christians and Muslims among its citizens and those under its continuing illegal occupation. The participants are also faced with the further rise and sweep of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); the Houthi advances in Yemen to the capital in Sanaa and beyond to the Red Sea and Hudeidah, the country's second largest port; and the problematic and yet-again-extended negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

The Islamic State

Few intelligence analysts and political and security watchers predicted that an extremist Islamist faction in Syria's civil war would sweep with such force through northern Iraq, threaten Baghdad, and inch its way through the country's western Anbar Province to within range of Saudi Arabia's borders. Indeed, the confused and confusing battlefield in Syria has again proven that it can spawn the kinds of circumstances, events, and players that at once threaten to destabilize the Levant and pose what, a year ago, were then unforeseen challenges to the Arabian Peninsula and Gulf regions. Just as dangerous in the rise and advance of ISIS has become the lure, to many recruits to its ranks, of its millennial ideology and its promise to establish an unsullied Islamic Caliphate that would redress Muslim grievances.



*F-16 Desert Falcons from the UAE Air Force lined up during joint training with the U.S. in 2011.
Photo: U.S. Air Force.*

One of the most difficult issues confronting the Manama Dialogue participants is how to address the multifaceted causative underpinnings of the threat that ISIS poses to regional stability and peace. Having the necessary military means to protect against real and imagined threats is one thing. Being able to mobilize, deploy, and effectively implement such means is another. Of the two, the latter is vexing as it is pinned to the hope of containing and countering, if not delivering a mighty body blow, to regional radicalism and violent extremism that would discredit and severely weaken the appeal of such phenomena for far into the future. That a small militant faction like ISIS, which was originally armed with only the most rudimentary weapons it had collected on the Syrian battlefield, was able to roll over a well-armed Iraqi army proved two interrelated facts that contained important lessons.

First, the sectarian politicization of the Iraqi army emptied vast portions of what countries traditionally regard as the bedrock for a successful military, namely a genuinely strong and vibrant national ethos. Second, ISIS was able to exploit Iraqi Sunni grievances of poverty, political disenfranchisement by the Shia-led government, and neglect on the economic, employment, and social services fronts to project itself as a savior of Sunni Muslims everywhere. Thus, the Manama Dialogue needs to combine a multifaceted ‘macro-strategy’ of alliance coordination with addressing the core issues noted, together with enhancing national identity, participation, equal opportunity, and non-discrimination. Fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria will succeed only when their respective peoples feel that their basic needs and inalienable rights are secured and protected.

The Houthi Advance in Yemen

At the time of last year’s Dialogue, Yemen was implementing important decisions and resolutions that had been reached through the earlier GCC Initiative and the country’s National Dialogue Conference that addressed the demands of the Yemeni uprising. Yemeni President Abd-Rabbo Mansour Hadi had begun to re-organize the military and security sectors, delegates to a new constitutional convention had started writing a new national charter for a federated state, and additional efforts had been launched against Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula. Despite continued political uncertainties, it had seemed possible that Yemen might be able to re-establish state

control, if only in incremental stages. However, little could be achieved absent the necessary heightened security, peace, and stability to enable the implementation of project-related expenditures facilitated by the generous help promised by Gulf Cooperation Council countries and numerous other Friends of Yemen donors.

What has arguably most aided the Houthis’ gradual ascendance has been the general weakness of Yemen’s state institutions.

The Shia Zaidi Houthi challenge to the country’s central authorities since 2004 has highlighted the importance of supporting state institutions in countries the Dialogue participants consider part of the overall strategic

architecture they seek to strengthen. Since 2011, the Houthis have expanded their areas of control from the northern Saada Province to the capital in Sanaa, exploiting the popular uprising in the wake of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the Yemeni government’s preoccupation with fighting al-Qaeda, while striking deals with former President Ali Abdallah Saleh, who retains many assets in the security sector. But what has arguably most aided the Houthis’ gradual ascendance has been the general weakness of Yemen’s state institutions. Many of these are bereft of the requisite human,

financial, and infrastructure resources to meet their basic responsibilities. Many, too, are crippled by a public image of being riddled with vestiges of cronyism, corruption, and incompetence.

In the Yemeni case, and in other countries outside the Gulf Cooperation Council, the urgent need for a strong and sustainable strategic structure necessitates concerted efforts to help build paramount state institutions. Only thus can governments rightly claim and/or regain control from sub-state actors, impose state authority, and monopolize the means of coercion. Should the summiteers fail to forge strategic oneness in these matters that pertain to the prospects for peace, security, and stability in the region, the Dialogue will arguably be viewed at best as a well-meaning intellectual exercise. The Dialoguers could go a long ways towards avoiding that were they to arrive at more effective ways to arrive at strong state institutions that can lead the processes of sustained domestic political, economic, and social development and national defense. Whether the GCC countries can lead the way in this endeavor remains to be seen.

Deadlocked Negotiations with Iran

The Manama Dialogue of almost exactly a year ago was convened soon after the “P5+1” group of nations had reached an agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran that would freeze country’s nuclear activities in exchange for limited sanctions relief. The meeting came almost six months after the election of reformist President Hassan Rouhani who, many believed, would make a difference in re-directing Iran’s relations with the international community. But in the

negotiations held since November, 2013, tangible results have proven elusive, with no guarantees that further talks will succeed in overcoming the obstacles to an acceptable compromise.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stands with Foreign Minister Javad Zarif of Iran, Baroness Catherine Ashton of the European Union, and Foreign Minister Yusuf bin Alawi of Oman during negotiations about the future of Iran's nuclear program in Muscat, Oman, in November 2014.

Photo: U.S. Department of State.

The extent to which the 10th Manama Dialogue will tackle the thorny issue of the deadlocked nuclear negotiations is unknown. Regardless, it will be hard to isolate the discussions from the potential outcome of Iran’s inability to offer the necessary concessions to allow for a successful compromise. One possible cost is that the Islamic Republic would remain outside any regionally-accepted entente. Another, likely more indirect cost is that Tehran may reason that it has far less incentive to cease providing grounds for spoiling what the Manama participants may think are necessary elements for a stable strategic security architecture. In other words, the Dialogue may find

that its discussions about the prospects for regional security, stability, and prosperity, and whatever conclusions may be drawn from them, are again stymied by errant Iranian behavior meant to subvert such prospects because it failed to obtain what it wanted.

Conclusion

The Manama Dialogue for this year will be held amid the flames arising from the same old fires of

Syria, Iraq, and Palestine as well as the strategic threat posed by the Islamic State, the Houthis' ultimate challenge to state power in Yemen, and the deadlocked nuclear negotiations between the international community and Iran. As the Dialogue's discussions continue to focus on the overall strategic defense and related architecture necessary for the region's stability, the forum's agenda needs further broadening. In no other way can one ensure enlightened discussion and debate about strategies to address the roots of extremist violence.

To this end, there is a need for greater emphasis on matters related to poverty, disenfranchisement, and more inclusive participation in the national development processes of Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere. There is also, and especially, a need to address the causes of the profound disenchantment among many ISIS leaders and their followers with Western double standards. Here the frame of reference has to do with Westerners selectively rather than universally adhering to globally-anchored moral principles and values and to upholding the tenets of international law for everyone, not just some. Importantly, the Dialogue must arrive at strategies for manifesting and applying to friend and foe alike the norms of inter-state behavior regarding such elemental matters of justice pertaining to Palestine, Israel, and the manner in which Westerners view vast swathes of Arabs, Muslims, and people of color.

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