



Middle East Studies

at the Marine Corps University

MES Insights • Volume 7, Issue 5

September 2016

El Camino and the Way Ahead in the Persian Gulf

by Mark A. Caudill

Cognitive dissonance characterizes US foreign policy in the Middle East. In the Persian Gulf, for example, we have pursued a limited rapprochement with Iran while at the same time reassuring Saudi Arabia and its neighbors that we remain committed to their defense in the face of potential Iranian aggression. Pressed by each side to take a less equivocal stance, we have doubled down on trying to have it both ways.

Our aversion to unambiguous commitments is understandable: we've been burned before (Iran '79, Lebanon '83, Iraq '03). Absent a clear and compelling reason to go all-in on behalf of US strategic interests, Washington seeks to preserve sufficient room to lean one way or another as the tactical situation warrants. This approach brings to mind the El Camino, a half-car, half-truck vehicle last sold by Chevrolet in 1987 (See Figure 1).

Like the foreign policy it symbolizes, the El Camino at first blush appeared moderate and flexible. In some ways it was. Straddling the middle ground between moving people and hauling stuff, it could accomplish a bit of each. But the compromises inherent in the vehicle's design meant arriving at one's destination without everyone, or everything, that one needed or desired. Ultimately, consumers became dissatisfied, which explains why the El Camino has been out of production for 29 years.

With respect to Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the Gulf and beyond, both sides view the United States as part of the problem and part of the solution. Washington's 2015 nuclear accord with Tehran has opened the door to Iran's readmission into the community of nations, prompting the Arab sheikhs to fret that the United States will abandon them and their rentier states in favor of potential opportunities in the Iranians' larger, more diversified economy. Meanwhile, US policymakers have furnished the Saudis with intelligence, munitions, and logistical support in the latter's 18-month quest to vanquish Yemen's Houthi rebels, whom Riyadh (with only partial accuracy) regards as Iranian proxies.¹

MES Notes

AY17 MES Lecture Series

During the Marine Corps University Academic Year 2017 (AY17), Middle East Studies (MES) will host a series of lectures under the overarching title "Great Power Competition in the MENA Today." On 20 October 2016 MES will host Dr. Christopher Yung for a lecture entitled "China in the Middle East: A 'New Great Game' or 'Strategic Necessity'?". A backgrounder on the AY17 Series is included herein on page 3.

Further information about the MES Lecture Series, including speaker announcements, is available at the MES website at: www.usmcm.edu/MES, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcm.edu.

MES at MCU Disclaimer

The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual author and do not necessarily represent the views of either the Marine Corps University or any other governmental agency. Any references to this newsletter should include the foregoing statement.

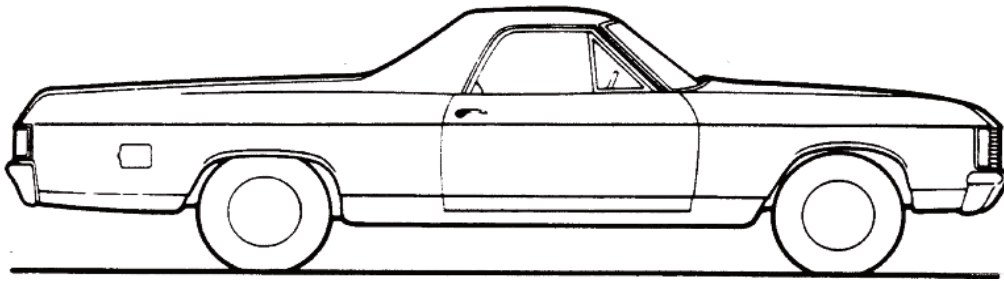


Figure 1. Chevrolet El Camino

Driven by doubts about Washington's long-term reliability, the Saudis and Iranians have hedged their bets. Recognizing the need to reduce the Kingdom's reliance on oil, the sale of which accounts for at least 80 percent of government revenues, Saudi Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman in April announced a major economic restructuring aimed at boosting income from industries outside the petroleum sector and establishing its own defense industry.² For its part, Tehran—in a bid to reduce its dependence on the US dollar—informed trading partners in February that it henceforth would bill them in euros, not dollars, for new and outstanding oil sales. Possessing the world's fourth-largest proven oil reserves, Iran for years has pushed for the euro to replace the dollar as the international oil trade currency of choice.³

Car or truck? That's the question the El Camino elicited from motorists, a question that Chevrolet tried—and failed—to answer with a resounding “yes.” Washington seems similarly incapable of recognizing that US policy in the Middle East must be clearly defined if it is to be enduringly effective. It is not that our allies and adversaries—be they the Saudis, the Iranians, or anyone else in the region—deserve to understand our intent. Rather, it is that the American people need to know US foreign policy practitioners and executioners can distinguish between passengers and cargo.

So, how to tell? Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf Arab states are known quantities. Are their cultures and ours congruent or even remotely similar? No, though one suspects the lone Bedouin and the Marlboro Man probably would have little difficulty sharing a campfire, if not a smoke. Are the Arabs' political priorities and social values in line with our own? Again, the response—particularly taking into consideration Sunni extremism (including al-Qaeda and Islamic State terrorism) and human rights—must be negative. And what of commercial interests? Certainly, the Gulf Arabs' robust (albeit crony) capitalism for decades has meshed well with our own. They also share our goal of a stable and prosperous Middle East, though their paternalistic, paranoid predilections sometimes put them at odds with the US commitment to democratization and regional peace, including normalized relations with Israel.

Iran represents the unknown. President Hasan Ruhani and Foreign Minister Muhammad Javad Zarif, who spearheaded the nuclear talks with Secretary of State John Kerry, are its moderate face—but not its only face. Conservatives in the political arena, led by newly elected Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, are newly resurgent.⁴ The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps are fighting alongside Assad's forces in Syria. Meanwhile, hardliners within the elderly, avowedly anti-US clerical establishment appear as unwilling as ever to deal away the *velayat-i faqih* (rule of the jurist) card enabling them to direct and dominate Iranian politics.

Confusing the known with the unknown could have dire consequences. As President John F. Kennedy often said, “Domestic policy can only defeat us; foreign policy can kill us.”⁵ Small wonder the El Camino begins to look like a reasonable way to hedge our own bets in the region.

Kennedy also famously remarked that great journeys begin with small steps.⁶ Fortunately, it is not necessary—or even important—to like those with whom we travel. What matters is whether we can trust them to follow through on their commitments. If so, we can accommodate them in our car: They may ride with us to the destination, strapped securely in the seat next to ours, gnawing on the incentivizing carrots we provide. If not, then we should put them in the back of the truck along with a goodly supply of sticks for use in threatening (and, if necessary, whacking) them if their misbehavior forces us to detour or pull over.

The Gulf Arabs are passengers. For all their peculiarities, they have a long track record of keeping their promises. In support of shared foreign policy goals, they have played host to US forces, including the Fifth Fleet (headquartered in Bahrain since 1995) and Central Command (forward headquarters in Qatar since 2002). They have quietly backed the Middle East Peace Process, shared intelligence, and provided other assistance in the war on terror, and—since the 1973 oil embargo—have not brandished petroleum as a weapon.

The Iranians are cargo. Their history of sponsoring terrorism, their attempts to extend their influence by undermining stability in the Middle East, and their inflated self-regard as an exceptional civilization makes them untrustworthy. Did the 2015 nuclear accord affect anything? Yes and no. It certainly put the Persians on the path to possible passenger status someday. However, for the time being—and for as long as it takes for us to become convinced that real change has occurred in Tehran—they must remain consigned to the bed of the truck.

El Camino means “the way” in Spanish. The way ahead in the Gulf requires a hard-headed assessment of the best vehicles for reaching our goals. Car or truck? We should have one of each, and it is incumbent on US foreign policy practitioners and executioners—including diplomats proffering carrots and warfighters wielding sticks—to make this clear to the American people. We’re going to need a bigger garage.

Mark Caudill is a retired US Foreign Service Officer and former Central Intelligence Agency Analyst. He is the author of Twilight in the Kingdom: Understanding the Saudis, published by Praeger Security International in 2006.

Notes:

¹ Mazzetti, Mark and Schmitt, Eric, “Quiet Support for Saudis Entangles U.S. in Yemen,” *New York Times*, March 13, 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/14/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-us.html?_r=0.

² Naylor, Hugh, “With oil prices stubbornly low, Saudi Arabia’s future looks fraught,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/with-oil-prices-stubbornly-low-saudi-arabias-future-looks-fraught/2016/05/19/cb799528-195b-11e6-971a-dadf9ab18869_story.html; Wald, Ellen R, “Saudi Arabia’s Surprising New Military Goals,” *Forbes*, April 27, 2016, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ellenwald/2016/04/27/saudi-arabias-surprising-new-military-goals/#5a12d18f3ac9>.

³ Verma, Nidhi, “Exclusive: Iran wants euro payment for new and outstanding oil sales – source,” *Reuters*, February 8, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-oil-iran-exclusive-idUSKCN0VE21S>.

⁴ Bengali, Shashank and Mostaghim, Ramin, “Did Iran’s reformists celebrate too soon? Hard-liners rebound after election,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.latimes.com/world/la-fg-iran-hardliners-20160601-snap-story.html>.

⁵ “John F. Kennedy – Foreign Affairs,” Profiles of U.S. Presidents, <http://www.presidentprofiles.com/Kennedy-Bush/John-F-Kennedy-Foreign-affairs.html>.

⁶ Ibid.

AY17 MES Lecture Series: “Great Power Competition in the MENA Today”

The varied responses by members of the international community to Iran’s nuclear activities, the 2011 Arab uprisings, the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), the flow of refugees into Europe, and regional geopolitical competition underscore the competing interests of global powers, including the United States, engaged militarily, economically, and politically in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. A combination of deteriorating domestic situations in the MENA

region and the expanding role of external players has increased the potential for both large-scale state conflicts as well as hybrid and non-state conflicts. Short of a grand bargain involving local, regional, and international actors, many of the ongoing conflicts in the region, both local and regional, are likely to continue, with serious consequences for the global economy and international security. A better understanding of the motivations and interests helping to shape the policies of international actors operating in the MENA region and their potential impact on local dynamics, domestic politics, and regional geopolitics may contribute to more informed decision making, especially at critical policy junctions.

A number of commentators and scholars have described the Syrian conflict as a flash point in an emerging cold war between the US and Russia, and others have referred to such renewed geopolitical competition as part of a new great game taking shape in the MENA region. At the same time, international cooperation and coordination (including between the US and Russia) were essential in bringing unprecedented international sanctions against Iran's nuclear program, which is widely credited with bringing Iran to the negotiating table. While significant attention has been given to US and Russian involvement in the Syrian Civil War, international efforts to combat ISIL, and Iran's nuclear program, shifting dynamics of international involvement (including the EU, India, China and Japan) in the broader MENA region have been largely overlooked. With growing energy demands, countries such as China and India are becoming more active in the MENA region and will have an increasing effect on regional geopolitics.

For AY17, Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University will host a series of lectures designed to provide a better understanding of the interests driving the involvement of various international actors in the MENA region, underscoring potential areas of cooperation and competition among international players, as well as the geopolitical challenges that policymakers and military planners alike may be confronted with in advancing US national security and economic interests abroad. The series will examine questions such as: What impact has the nuclear deal had on the policies of the US, EU, Russia, and China? What has been the impact of geopolitical competition between India and China on regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran, and what impact may continuing competition have on the regional balance of power? How has the refugee crisis, the rise of ISIL, and continued instability in Libya impacted the foreign policies of EU countries vis-à-vis the MENA region? Given Turkey's strategic location as a physical bridge between Europe and Asia, how have recent events, such as the failed coup attempt and its fall out, terrorist attacks, the rise of ISIL, the civil war in Syria, and the nuclear deal with Iran, impacted its foreign policy and relations with regional and extra-regional actors? How much of a role do hydrocarbons play in shaping regional perceptions of international involvement in the region, and how much do such considerations actually shape the policies of the US, EU, Russia, China, India, and Japan? With increased interest in hydrocarbon extraction in the Eastern Mediterranean by Cyprus, Egypt, Israel and Turkey, what are the prospects of a geopolitical realignment in this pivotal region, and what impact may such developments have on regional and international security? What are Russia's interests in the ongoing Syrian civil war, and what impact is Russian involvement in the conflict having on the regional geopolitical landscape?

As the US continues to seek ways to advance its strategic interests and partnerships in MENA region, it is imperative for the US to deepen its understanding of the motivations and perceptions of the other actors involved in the regional and geopolitical competition taking place there.

Middle East Studies at Marine Corps University

Dr. Amin Tarzi • Director, MES • amin.tarzi@usmcu.edu

Mr. Adam C. Seitz • Senior Research Associate, MES • adam.seitz@usmcu.edu