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ASSESSMENT REPORT

# US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter's Middle East Tour: Motives and Results

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | Aug 2015

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## Introduction

Within a week of the final agreement between the P5+1 group of nations and Iran on the latter country's nuclear program, US Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter began a Middle East tour whose itinerary included meetings with the leaders of Israel, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan and the administration of the Kurdistan Regional Government. In addition to reassuring the US' allies in Riyadh and Tel Aviv about any possible fallout of the Iranian nuclear agreement, Carter's visit also sought to follow up on efforts to combat the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).

## The Tour: Motivations and Significance

Carter's visit came as the United States seeks to reassure both Israel and Saudi Arabia that the agreement reached with Tehran over its nuclear program will indeed make the Middle East safer, and that Washington remains a reliable ally. On July 20, during an inspection of Israel's frontier with Lebanon alongside his counterpart Moshe Yaalon, Secretary Carter described what Washington saw as pressing threats for the security of the Middle East, including not only ISIL, but also Iranian proxies such as Hezbollah.<sup>1</sup>

The White House's decision to dispatch Carter rather than Secretary of State John Kerry, who had personal responsibility for the drafting of the Iran agreement, was significant. It signaled that the Obama administration does not regard any further discussions with its allies in the Middle East on the contents of the agreement as necessary, as the terms have already been finalized and there is little chance of its obstruction by Congress. Instead, the Obama administration is more likely to focus on providing its Middle Eastern allies with security guarantees in the wake of the agreement, including by ensuring that sales of US weapons systems to its allies continue. This assessment is supported by remarks made by Carter on the eve of his journey, when he said he was "not going to change anybody's mind in Israel. That's not the purpose of my trip".<sup>2</sup> Carter also stressed that there was nothing in the clauses of

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<sup>1</sup> Sobelmann, Batsheva, "Ashton Carter Seeks to Reassure Israelis on Iran Nuclear Deal", *Los Angeles Times*, July 20, 2015. <http://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-israel-carter-iran-deal-20150720-story.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Phil Stewart, "U.S. Aims to Shift Israel Focus to Security Ties after Iran Deal", *Reuters*, July 19, 2015, at: <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/07/19/us-usa-israel-carter-idUSKCN0PT0PM20150719>

the agreement which would hinder the US from protecting its allies, sentiments echoed by officials traveling with the Secretary of Defense.

Washington's Gulf Arab allies hope that the US will continue to help in stemming Iranian influence in the Middle East, particularly now that Tehran has access to billions of dollars of previously frozen reserves held in Western banks. The Gulf states fear that a newly-unfettered Iran will be better able to project its power across Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, through its proxies. The Israelis, meanwhile, worry that the fact that Iran has kept the infrastructure of its nuclear installations intact as part of the agreement may ultimately lead to Tehran's development of a nuclear bomb. There is also a risk that the new agreement may precipitate a regional arms race in a dash to acquire nuclear weapons, an eventuality which the US would like to avoid.

## Results of the Visit

Carter's Middle East tour was plagued by a number of difficulties even before it started.

### Impacts on Israel

Benjamin Netanyahu's government remained unconvinced of Carter's assurances that the US-Israeli alliance would remain strong, a cornerstone of US foreign policy<sup>3</sup>, and thus continued to protest against the Iran agreement. In other words, and as described by another US official, Carter did not hope to change the mind of Netanyahu, but rather wanted to assure the Israeli premier of American commitment to Israeli regional security.<sup>4</sup> Carter also used the opportunity to discuss Iran's destabilizing influence on the Middle East, and how the US could cooperate with Israel in confronting these challenges.<sup>5</sup>

Nonetheless, tensions between a visibly uneasy Netanyahu and his American guest were obvious, with neither men giving a statement to the media before or after their meeting in Jerusalem. The Israeli prime minister's protests, however, did not carry the

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<sup>3</sup> Sobelman

<sup>4</sup> Jamie Crawford, "Secretary Carter Meets Allies Skeptical of Iran Deal on Middle East Trip", *CNN*, July 21, 2015, at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/21/politics/ashton-carter-israel-saudi-arabia-iran-deal/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

day with the US administration<sup>6</sup>; commenting the following day from an airbase in Jordan, Carter limited himself to pointing out that “friends can disagree”.<sup>7</sup>

Other topics discussed by Carter and Netanyahu were intelligence sharing and contingency planning for possible outcomes in Syria, including scenarios related to ISIL<sup>8</sup>, but it appears that the US Defense Secretary did not in fact offer an anticipated package of military support to the Israelis. Israeli observers have suggested that this is because the Obama administration is waiting for the Iran nuclear agreement to pass through Congress before taking any steps to support Israel.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of what Israel seeks to secure in return for the Iran nuclear deal, Tzipi Livni, former foreign minister and part of the Zionist Camp opposition faction, described “a new security system, guarantees and diplomatic arrangements”<sup>10</sup>, in addition to the USD 3 billion in aid which Israel already receives from the United States.

### Impacts on Saudi Arabia

Carter made efforts to reassure Riyadh of the United States’ commitment to the security of its Gulf allies, affirming the undertakings made by Obama to the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, whom he hosted at Camp David in May. The Secretary of Defense also confirmed that the US would work with Saudi Arabia to contain Iranian expansion across the Middle East through its local proxies.<sup>11</sup> Following a meeting with the Saudi monarch King Salman, on July 21 in the Red Sea port city of Jeddah, Carter also conveyed the only two caveats which the Saudis had with regards to the Iranian agreement: that it should be accompanied by a rigorous verification and monitoring system; and that mechanisms be put in place for the reintroduction of international

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<sup>6</sup> Stewart

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Sobelman

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

<sup>10</sup> Ibid

<sup>11</sup> Missy Ryan, “Carter Vows to Help Saudi Arabia Contain Iran’s Regional Ambitions”, *The Washington Post*, July 22, 2015: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/carter-vows-to-help-saudi-arabia-contain-irans-regional-ambitions/2015/07/22/db535af8-2ff3-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/carter-vows-to-help-saudi-arabia-contain-irans-regional-ambitions/2015/07/22/db535af8-2ff3-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3_story.html)

sanctions on Iran in the event of its noncompliance with the terms of the agreement<sup>12</sup>. According to Carter, his deliberations with Saudi officials also touched on the strengthening of defense ties, including the possibility of a missile defense shield, naval defenses, cybersecurity and cooperation for the training of special forces units<sup>13</sup>.

Although he put a brave face on it, Carter could not hide the strains which now affect Saudi-US relations, rooted in the disagreements between the two sides over regional priorities. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel Al Jubair even warned Washington on July 16 that his country would forcefully retaliate against any Iranian recklessness in the Middle East.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, in a statement that coincided with the visit by Carter to the Gulf, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamanei said that "we do not negotiate with the United States over regional or global affairs, and not even on bilateral relations. The nuclear program is an exception, where we negotiate with the Americans to further our own interests."<sup>15</sup> While protesting these remarks by the Iranian cleric, the US insisted that they had no bearing on the deal.

Saudi-US tensions with regards to Yemen were also on display. Despite an acknowledgement by Carter that Iran was intervening in the Arabian Peninsula through the Houthis, he also stressed the importance of a political resolution to Yemen's problems, one which would allow for the re-establishment of peace in the country.<sup>16</sup> This was an implicit expression of an American desire for Saudi Arabia to end its airstrikes against targets associated with the Houthi militia and deposed president, Ali Abdullah Saleh. Rather than a focus on fighting the Houthis, the US would prefer for Saudi Arabia to concentrate greater efforts on the battle against ISIL in Iraq and Syria, as well as Al Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula (AQAP)—a group which is active in Yemen

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Burns, "Carter: Saudis Welcoming Iran Deal with Reservations," The Associated Press, July 17, 2015, at: <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/ff319b4ea0124b0c91ce0f0f595304b2/carter-saudis-welcoming-iran-deal-reservations>

<sup>13</sup> "Saudi Leaders Seek US Reassurance on Iran Deal in Meeting with Ashton Carter", *The Guardian*, July 22, 2015, at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/22/saudi-arabia-ashton-carter-iran-deal>

<sup>14</sup> "Saudi Arabia Warns Against Iranian 'Adventurism'", *Gulf News*, July 16, 2015: <http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/saudi-arabia-warns-against-iranian-adventurism-1.1551667>

<sup>15</sup> See "Khamanei: the Nuclear Agreement Will Not Change Iran's Relationship With the United States", *Al Hayat*, July 16, 2015: <http://goo.gl/rq26Su>

<sup>16</sup> "Saudi Arabia Warns Against Iranian 'Adventurism'"



and which is itself opposed to the Houthis.<sup>17</sup> While those two groups are fierce enemies of the Saudi monarchy, Riyadh's current priority is the battle against Iranian proxies, and particularly the Houthi militia in Yemen, who it fears will evolve into a Hezbollah-like military force on its doorstep.

Another worrying sign for Washington was the announcement by Saudi Arabia in June that it had agreed with France to investigate the feasibility of constructing two nuclear power plants on Saudi territory. The Saudis have also reportedly arrived at similar agreements with Russia and South Korea.<sup>18</sup> All of this is taking place at a time when Riyadh is expressing decreased confidence in its American allies, and seeks to build alternative alliances with other partners who could help the Saudis strike back at the Iranian-backed Houthi militia in Yemen. At present, the American role in that effort is limited to providing logistical and intelligence support.

## Conclusion

Despite the relentless efforts of the Obama administration to persuade two of its Middle Eastern allies—Israel and Saudi Arabia—that the United States is a reliable ally, skeptics of American foreign policy in the region seem to be multiplying. This is a result not only of the nuclear agreement reached with Iran, but also a number of other regional issues which the Obama administration is approaching with a mix of trepidation and uncertainty. It appears that the White House was prepared for these responses by its two traditional Middle Eastern allies, and therefore did not attempt to win them over but merely to limit the extent of their discontent. The administration's success in doing so will be a vital indicator of its ability to overcome domestic opposition in Congress, where Israel's supporters amongst both Democrats and Republicans have already begun a campaign seeking to block the agreement with a vote on September 17. The deal's opponents, however, seem to have their work cut out for them.

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<sup>17</sup> Ryan

<sup>18</sup> "Saudi Leaders Seek US Reassurance on Iran Deal in Meeting with Ashton Carter"