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ASSESSMENT REPORT

Obama Seeks to Allay Gulf Fears in Farewell Visit to Riyadh

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2016

GCC-US Summit in Riyadh: the Rise of Suspicions over US Foreign Policy in the Region

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Introduction

Saudi Arabia hosted leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council and US President Barack Obama for a high profile summit on April 21, 2016. The meeting came less than a year after the US president had hosted the heads of the state of the Gulf countries at the US presidential retreat at Camp David. In Riyadh, the parties emphasized the “strategic partnership” that binds them together¹, but the meetings were clearly overshadowed by a perception in Gulf capitals that the Obama Administration was willing to overlook Iranian transgressions across the Gulf in order to arrive at a nuclear deal with Tehran. This barely veiled concern resulted in palpable tensions overshadowing the meetings in the Saudi capital.

Beyond Iran, Gulf States have made no secret of their disenchantment with US policy in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq where Washington has concentrated its efforts entirely on combatting radical jihadist groups such as ISIL and al-Qaeda and its affiliates, completely ignoring Iranian regional expansion in the same countries. Gulf States, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in particular, view the departure of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad as a necessary precondition to the conclusion of a peace deal in Syria, which is at odds with the official US approach. For its part, Washington has come to vacillate between a convenient ambiguity on the question of the fate of Assad, and acquiescence to his maintaining power.

The widening rift between the Gulf states and the US over the question of regional policy priorities has led some of the former to question the wisdom of their continued and outright dependence on America for security and defense. Following the publication of an extensive April interview with outgoing US president Barack Obama by Jeffrey Goldberg in *The Atlantic* (extracts had been reprinted in Gulf newspapers during the previous month), these doubts were only exaggerated.² Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf States were particularly taken aback by Obama’s description of them (together with European countries) as “free riders” unwilling to make any commitments to regional

¹ “United States-Gulf Cooperation Council Second Summit Leaders Communique,” press release published by the White House, April 21, 2016: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/united-states-gulf-cooperation-council-second-summit-leaders-communicue>

² “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, April 2016: <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>

interventions. Further to this, Obama used the interview to blame Saudi Arabia for the spread of radical, violent Islamism across the globe.

Obama makes no secret of his desire for the greater integration of Iran into the regional security order, and the American president has publically stated his desire that Iran and Saudi Arabia should work together to arrive at "some sort of cold peace" and cooperate across the Gulf.³

Obama's proposals in the same interview go further still, with the president stating:

*"An approach that said to our friends 'You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran' would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East."*⁴

With their long-standing alliance with the United States now increasingly called into doubt, Gulf States have begun to explore other avenues for independent, unilateral action that would allow them to defend their interests. Efforts have already begun along these lines, for example, through the Saudi formation of an intra-Arab military coalition aimed at tackling the Houthi militia in Yemen, launched in March 2015. The announcement of a pan-Islamic military alliance against terrorism at the end of the same year should be seen as a continuation of this approach. While the stated aim of the coalition is to combat ISIL and other violent jihadists, many observers believe that the real motive behind the formation of the fighting force is simply to thwart Iranian expansionism.⁵

³ "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*.

⁴ "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*.

⁵ Maria Abi-Habib, Adam Entous, "U.S. Widens Role in Saudi-led Campaign against Houthi Rebels in Yemen," *The Wall Street Journal*, April 12, 2015: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-widens-role-in-saudi-led-campaign-against-yemen-rebels-1428882967>

Different Strokes

The Obama Administration views the fighting of terrorism, and specifically ISIL, as its main policy priority in the Middle East. Seen from this view, Iran is part of a prospective solution to and not necessarily a part of the problem in the region. This was echoed neatly by Robert Malley, an Obama Administration policy adviser on the Middle East, who holds that Saudi-Iranian competition in the Middle East has fanned the flames of sectarianism and instability across the region, thereby indirectly benefitting ISIL. Malley also believes that the Saudi campaign against Yemen's Houthis, who it sees as Iranian proxies, has drawn resources and attention away from the battle against extremism. US Deputy National Security Adviser Benjamin Rhodes, who travelled with Obama to Riyadh, described the meetings as a "moment of opportunity" to strengthen the two fragile ceasefires in Yemen and Syria, and to provide a setting for Gulf States to turn attention to fighting jihadist extremism rather than single-mindedly focusing on political transition in Syria.⁶

The Gulf States do share the White House's concern over the threat posed by terrorism and the need to combat extremist groups. However, GCC members tend, in general, to view Iranian expansion in the Gulf and Tehran's support for Assad, as well as Shia sectarian militia across the Middle East, as the greatest risk to regional stability. Gulf States view attitudes held by the likes of Robert Malley and others as abetting Iran and fanning the flames of sectarianism. They have a sense of growing and impending danger; this, coupled with growing indifference on the part of the US, has emboldened Gulf States and particularly Saudi Arabia to strike out on their own when seeking to confront Iranian challenges to their security and national interests.⁷

⁶ Michael D. Shear and Ben Hubbard, "Obama Reassures Persian Gulf Allies About Security," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/22/world/middleeast/obama-saudi-arabia-summit.html>

⁷ Arshad Moammed and Jonathan Landay, "Saudi rift with Iran likely to hinder U.S. peace effort in Syria," Reuters, January 5, 2016: <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iran-usa-idUSKBN0UJ0HJ20160105>

Outcomes of the Summit

In their final communique the US and Gulf States reflected the delicate balancing act that both had carried out to demonstrate that the “strategic partnership” binding them together has not been shaken over the previous years. Reality on the ground, however, tells a different story. By the end of the summit neither the Gulf States nor Washington had changed their positions. Indeed, the only shift was seen by Obama, who offered limited succor with a brief, hollow, and circumspect criticism of Iran.

On the other points discussed in the meetings, from the ‘war on terror,’ to Syria and the issue of military cooperation, a summary of achievements shows little change in the position of either party. The points can be summed up as follows:⁸

Iran

While the White House underlined its shared concern over the potential for Iranian activity to destabilize the region, Obama nonetheless emphasized the need to calm tensions and avoid conflict with Tehran. In the final communiqué the United States seems to have won the promise from the Gulf States to express:

...support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, noting that successful implementation of the JCPOA, thus far, has blocked Iran’s pathways to a nuclear weapon and enhanced regional security and stability.

Similarly, GCC members secured a US assent to a passage of the text which read:

...reaffirmed the need to remain vigilant about addressing Iran’s destabilizing actions in the region, including its ballistic missile program and support for terrorist groups such as Hezbollah and other extremist proxies, in Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

Evidence can also be found of a compromise between US desires for a cooling down of sectarian tensions across the Gulf, and the GCC States’ insistence that Iranian aggression be ended first. This joint approach seeks to acknowledge:

⁸ All quotes taken from “United States-Gulf Cooperation Council Second Summit Leaders Communique,” April 21, 2016 and “Annex to U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, May 14, 2015: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>

...the need for broader dialogue to resolve the region's conflicts, as well as their shared interest in reducing sectarian tensions. GCC countries reaffirmed their willingness to build trust and resolve longstanding differences through engagement with Iran; it being understood that Iran must engage the region according to the principles of good neighborliness, strict non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for territorial integrity, consistent with international law, including the United Nations Charter.

The War on Terror

The final communique of the 2016 Riyadh meeting also welcomed gains made in the battle against ISIL in Syria and Iraq, with the United States hailing increased Gulf support for the international coalition against the group, as well as decisive GCC action to prevent terrorist attacks. Parties to the Summit also praised progress toward a "durable, inclusive" political settlement in Yemen through the dialogue process underway at the time in Kuwait. Yet repeated attempts by ISIL and Al Qaeda affiliates to exploit the vacuum of power in Yemen and expand further in the south of the Arabian Peninsula were not ignored. In this regard, the communique reflects GCC acceptance of an American position in which the need to curb the present power vacuum in Yemen—seen as a fertile environment for jihadist groups—necessitates a political settlement which could in effect legitimize a political role for the Houthi rebel group.

Syria

The parties at the Riyadh Summit were determined to find common ground with regards to the Syrian crisis. The terms in the final communique stressed the need for a ceasefire and a political resolution that will keep Syria's state institutions intact at the same time as efforts move forward in combatting ISIL and the al-Nusra Front. While the US seemed satisfied with references in the paper to battling jihadist groups, the text also stipulated that Syria's post-conflict political transition should exclude Bashar al-Assad, in line with demands from the GCC. The paper read:

The leaders expressed solidarity with the Syrian people and emphasized the importance of the full implementation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2254, to include immediate humanitarian access to besieged and hard-to-reach areas and the release of any arbitrarily detained persons.

Military Cooperation

With regards to military cooperation, the Summit participants remained broadly in line with agreements reached between the two parties at Camp David the previous year. Thus, in 2016, the summit in Riyadh maintained in its final statement the importance of self-reliance of the GCC member states for defense issues. The wording was similar to that laid out after the previous meeting, where the United States conferred “Major Non-NATO Ally” status to the six members of the GCC, allowing them the right to benefit from specialist training and advanced weaponry from the US. While the provisions of that agreement fall short of a joint defense pact, they did provide for a joint ballistic missile defense and early warning system that would be maintained by the Gulf States with technical assistance from the US. The terms agreed in the Camp David Summit also provided for the intensification and expediting of arms sales, specialized training, and joint military exercises. It also called for strengthened cyber security for critical infrastructures across the Gulf as well improved naval security and provided for US training of the Special Forces and security/intelligence agencies of the Gulf States.

Conclusion

The April GCC-US Summit in Riyadh was the fourth, and almost certainly the final, visit by President Obama to the Gulf since the beginning of his first presidential term in January 2009. The official’s three previous visits failed to calm GCC fears around the gradual unwinding of US influence across the Middle East, and the consequent power vacuum that could then be filled by other, ambitious regional powers such as Iran or Russia. With growing US reliance on domestic oil sources, alongside the drop in oil prices globally, Obama remains a proponent of the view that Gulf States should in the future play a much smaller role in American politics. Many in the United States view developments at Camp David and in Riyadh as more than a simple change in direction of the Obama Administration, and instead see the shift as a sign of much deeper and more long-term institution-level change.⁹

With this in mind, relying on the next US president (whoever that may be) does not seem a wise move for the Gulf States, particularly when all of the frontrunners for the

⁹ See Stephen M. Walt, “The United States Should Admit it No Longer has a Middle East Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, January 29, 2016: <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/29/the-u-s-should-admit-it-has-no-middle-east-policy-obama-cold-war-israel-syria/>

position seem unlikely to reverse the shifts initiated by Obama. Among the Democratic Party candidates, Hillary Clinton, who after all was Obama's former Secretary of State, seems to offer a virtual continuation of his White House. The less likely Democratic contender, Bernie Sanders, while offering some positive change in US policy towards Palestine, is likely not to hold any favoritism for the Gulf States, not necessarily out of love for Iran, but more out of an opposition to the types of governmental systems in the GCC. Meanwhile frontrunners for the Republican nomination, Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, have both made aggressively negative statements about Saudi Arabia: the election of either of these two would not bode well for the Arab States in the Gulf.

Given these shifts, the Gulf States must now look to strengthen their own military capabilities, perhaps by building a region-wide or pan-Arab military coalition that would protect their interests and allow for an Arab-Iranian dialogue from a position of strength. Turkey is a prime contender for such an alliance, and could play a leading role. Such an alliance must provide for the collective self-defense of Arab states and isolate them from foreign intervention, but it must also balance the need for national sovereignty against the need for individual liberties and political freedoms of the citizenry. Indeed, it is increasingly impossible for the Gulf States, or for any countries, to seek to build independent or strong foreign policies without strengthened popular support for their foreign policies—which can only be guaranteed by a generally stronger relationship between the peoples and the governments of the region, and the implementation of government policies more closely bound to popular aspirations.