



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

Obama's Visit to Saudi Arabia

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | April 2014

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Series: Assessment Report

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Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

PO Box 10277

Street No. 826, Zone 66

Doha, Qatar

Tel.: +974 44199777 | Fax: +974 44831651

www.dohainstitute.org

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Introduction

US President Barack Obama visited Riyadh on March 28 to meet with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, following three years of growing tension between the two allies. The deterioration in relations started with Saudi's lack of confidence in American military protection following the Arab Spring revolutions. The kingdom was displeased with the way America readily cast off its previous Egyptian ally Hosni Mubarak in 2011, a move that indicated the US administration's ability to quickly abandon its close allies in the region. On more than one occasion, Saudi Arabia also expressed its displeasure with the American position on the protests erupting in Bahrain in 2011, which the Kingdom and other GCC nations saw as Iranian incitement of the Shiite Muslim community in the Gulf. This subsequently resulted in military intervention, backed by Saudi and other GCC nations, to support Bahrain's regime in quelling the protests, ignoring the United States' condemnation of this move.

On top of this, the US has been mysteriously hesitant in its support for the Syrian Revolution, which is the only uprising supported by the Saudi Kingdom, though its support is related to its struggle with Iran rather than a belief in the revolution's demands. Obama's indifference, even to the sufferings of civilians in Syria, further fuelled Saudi Arabia's displeasure, particularly after his administration failed to implement a punitive strike on the Syrian regime forces after they blatantly violated Washington's "red line" against chemical weapon use. Tensions reached their peak last November when the five permanent members of the Security Council along with Germany (P5+1) arrived at a transitional agreement with Iran that would enforce restrictions on its nuclear program in return for relaxing the blockade imposed on the country. The agreement surprised Saudi Arabia since it was the result of months-long secret negotiations between the US and Iran. The discovery of petroleum and gas on American soil combined with the resulting decrease in US dependency on Gulf oil does not help things. From a Saudi point of view, the US's eventual self-sufficiency in oil could lead to a decline in US military protection in the region that would leave the allied countries exposed, both strategically and security wise, to Iranian influence.

The Ukrainian crisis, along with Russia's annexation of Crimea last March, despite American-European warnings, further stirred fears that the US is gradually retiring from the global scene under Obama's administration, caring little for its allies' interests and security concerns, and leaving behind a dangerous power vacuum. This scenario is

reminiscent of what happened to Iraq following the withdrawal of the US at the end of 2011, leaving it open to Iranian influence— Saudi Arabia's ultimate geostrategic foe.

Reassurances but no Changes

Obama's visit to Riyadh came about under the above context. Acknowledging the kingdom's fears, the US seems keen to reassure Saudi Arabia of its loyalty, but does not seem to be ready to give up on its current policies on any of the issues Saudi Arabia disagrees with. In a statement about Obama's visit, the White House announced that Obama would not touch on issues of religious freedom and human rights, including women's rights in the Kingdom. The main goal of this visit, the statement continued, was to discuss security issues that are most urgent to the region, which include the nuclear negotiations with Iran and the "civil war" in Syria. It seems both allies, however, found time to discuss the situation in Egypt.

Iran

White House officials claim that this visit reaffirmed the importance of Saudi-American relations, and assured Saudi Arabia that the US would prevent Iran from possessing nuclear weapons. They also acknowledged Iran's activities in the region that are causing instability, trying to placate Saudi by explaining that the nuclear negotiations are separate from these other regional activities that worry Saudi and other GCC nations. The president further noted that the US will not withdraw from the Middle East or leave it exposed to another power such as Iran, but remained insistent on proceeding with the negotiations and the openness that he has adopted with the new Iranian administration led by President Hassan Rouhani.

Syria

On Syria, Deputy National Security Advisor Benjamin Rhodes, who accompanied the American president on his visit, stated that Obama's administration is considering expanding on a program to assist the "moderate" Syrian opposition forces and strengthen their position against both the regime forces and the Jihadist currents tied to al-Qaeda. Before leaving Riyadh, Rhodes noted that the US has reinforced its coordination and work with Saudi Arabia on the Syrian issue. Other officials have also said that the two countries

are in agreement on the necessity of a political transition in Syria and support for al-Assad's "moderate" opponents.

The above statements were understood as an American attempt to please the Saudis, who resent the United States' refusal to allow the kingdom to provide "moderate" fighters from the opposition with anti-aircraft missiles. This refusal comes in spite of Saudi Arabia's detailed plan, which guarantees that the missiles would not fall in the wrong hands and that, in the case they do, they could be electronically monitored and discontinued from a distance. According to a statement published in the *Washington Post* on March 27, a day before Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia, the details of this program, still under debate, include training more Syrian opposition forces in camps in Jordan, northern Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. The program also considers supporting opposition-run local councils and civil police in the liberated areas of Syria and securing safe paths for aid delivery to these regions. The aim of the program is to convey to al-Assad's regime that a military solution in Syria is not possible, especially in light of his forces' recent advancements on the ground.

The main point of contention, however, continues to be the provision of "moderate" opposition forces with anti-aircraft missiles in order to shift the military imbalance caused by the regime's air advantage. Washington still has many doubts and apprehensions regarding this issue. In anticipation for his visit, Obama had already expressed that there is little probability his administration would change its policy towards the Syrian crisis. Obama also put across the notion that there is little to be done to stop the Syrian conflict which may last "another decade".

Egypt

During this visit, the US affirmed its interest in achieving stability in Egypt and minimizing the disputes that have arisen since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak. Although the US does not strictly deem the Egyptian Army's overthrow of Morsi as a military coup, since deeming it as such would have meant the end of military aid to the country in accordance with American law, it did express its displeasure with the army's handling of the situation after Morsi, particularly the violent treatment of the Brotherhood. Such a stance provoked Saudi Arabia and led it, along with the United Arab Emirates, to provide large financial assistance to fund and sustain the coup d'état and support the presidential candidacy of Abdul Fattah al-Sisi, previous defense minister and leader of the coup. Disagreements over Egypt have abated following the US's implicit acceptance of al-Sisi's "civil" candidacy.

At this point, the United States is happy with just demanding that Cairo commits to a roadmap that would include all segments of Egyptian society.

Conclusion

It seems clear that the American-Saudi dispute essentially revolves around Riyadh's worry that the US is withdrawing from many international arenas, including the Arab world. Saudi Arabia fears that the US's attempt to reach an agreement with Iran may be at its expense. It also sees the United States' hesitancy in Syria as evidence of the country's weakness, causing more anxiety over Washington's commitment to the security of its allies and their ability to depend on American preventive power. The Obama administration's quick abandonment of its allies during the Arab Spring has only reinforced these suspicions.

President Obama's visit served as an attempt to quell these fears and reaffirm the US's commitment to the Gulf region's security and prevention of Iranian control. At the same time, there were no signs that the US would adopt different policies toward Iran or its allies, especially in Syria. Obama also continues to consider Nour al-Maliki's government an ally in the fight against terrorism in spite of its sectarian policies and the marginalization of a large portion of Iraqi society. Developments show that the American and Saudi counterparts will have to live with their differences in order to maintain their relationship as allies, which puts Saudi Arabia, in its current situation, in need of guarantees. These guarantees cannot be given by any president, American or otherwise, but must stem from a movement of the Arab people in this eventful period.