



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

ASSESSMENT REPORT

# What the US–Gulf Camp David Summit Achieved

Policy Analysis Unit - ACRPS | May 2015

What the US-Gulf Camp David Summit Achieved

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## Introduction

On May 14, 2015 at the presidential retreat of Camp David in Maryland, US President Barack Obama hosted the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. This US--Gulf summit came in the context of the Obama administration's efforts to contain growing Gulf anxiety over the implications of the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) reaching a nuclear agreement with Iran at the end of June. The GCC states are afraid that the lifting of economic sanctions on Iran and the return of its frozen assets in the US as a result of the agreement will embolden Iranian support for its allies in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. The Gulf states also fear that an American retreat from the Middle East will leave them exposed to any potential Iranian incursions, particularly as the final deal will likely preserve Iran's nuclear infrastructure. The Obama administration has tried hard to reassure Gulf allies of its commitment to their security by means of agreed military arrangements. The guarantees provided by Washington at the summit, however, did not extend to the signing of a mutual defense treaty. While the GCC states were trying to obtain more specific commitments over their security, the Obama administration tried to obtain GCC agreement for the nuclear agreement with Iran to strengthen its position before Congress, which has doubts over Iran's intentions and the chances of Tehran adhering to any possible agreement.

## Waning Confidence in the American Ally

Convening the US-Gulf summit was no easy matter. Four out of six Gulf leaders were absent. The absence of the Sultan of Oman and the President of UAE on health grounds was understandable, but the absence of Saudi monarch King Salman bin Abdelaziz, who stayed in Riyadh to oversee the humanitarian truce that Saudi Arabia had declared in Yemen, cannot be understood outside of the context of the suspicion and disappointment that the Gulf Arabs feel towards the Obama administration. As evidence of the tensions, the White House announced on May 8, a week before the summit, that the Saudi king would attend, only for Riyadh to announce two days later that it would be sending Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and his deputy Prince Mohammed bin Salman instead.

Saudi Arabia denied that King Salman's absence implied any protest at the positions of President Obama; Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir attempted to dispel doubts by describing the summit as "unprecedented", and said it would raise joint relations to an

"entirely different level over the next decades."<sup>1</sup> However, that did not prevent the Gulf states, through journalists close to the regimes and via other channels, from indirectly stating their disappointment over the policies of the Obama administration in the region. This affirms the existence of real tension between the two sides.<sup>2</sup>

The ramifications of the anticipated nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5 + 1 are not the only source of anxiety for the Gulf states. There is also anxiety over the decline in American influence in the region and the attempts by Iran to fill the resultant vacuum in arenas such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This is one of the reasons that pushed the GCC states, under Saudi leadership, to take the initiative away from Washington. They see that the US has made everything in the region contingent on the fight against ISIL and striking a nuclear agreement with Tehran.

## Differing Priorities

The conflicting statements of both sides suggest a disagreement over the order of priorities and how to deal with them. The Gulf states are trying to obtain a list of security guarantees to rely upon when confronting any direct Iranian expansion, or indirect expansion by means of its regional proxies, should sanctions be lifted as a result of the nuclear agreement. This would be particularly the case should Iran start to arm itself with more advanced weapons. At the same time, the US wants its GCC allies to back such an agreement by giving them limited security and military guarantees. Perhaps what worries the Gulf allies is Obama's position and equivocal language towards Iran, and particularly his administration's refusal to sign a mutual defense treaty with the GCC. "But I want to be very clear", Obama stated in the post-summit press conference, "The purpose of security cooperation is not to perpetuate any long-term confrontation with Iran or even to marginalize Iran."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Liptak and Elise Labott, "Obama: US would use military force to defend Gulf allies," *CNN*, May 14, 2015, at: <http://cnn.it/1LkmbqW>.

<sup>2</sup> Elise Labott, "Gulf allies, worried about Iran, show more muscle with the US," *CNN*, May 14, 2015, at: <http://cnn.it/1PVIiVm>.

<sup>3</sup> "Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after GCC Summit," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2015, at: <http://1.usa.gov/1HI5VaE>.

Because any potential final agreement with Iran will leave its nuclear infrastructure intact, allowing it to keep centrifuges with limited capacity to enrich uranium for 15 years, as well as maintain its know-how and ability to enrich uranium, Tehran will be able to make a nuclear bomb in the future if it so wishes. Some Gulf states hinted that they might try to develop their own nuclear programs. In light of this, the greatest worry for the Obama administration is a regional nuclear arms race, particularly after the Saudi announcement that it would try to obtain nuclear capabilities to match those of Iran if the latter acquired nuclear weapons in the future. Likewise, the Obama administration has refused to include the Gulf states under the American nuclear defense umbrella.<sup>4</sup>

Another important note of discord between the two sides concerned the Syrian and Yemeni situations. The Gulf states seek broader American support in Syria to change the regime of President Bashar al-Assad and end the conflict that has destroyed the country and made refugees of more than half of its population. Obama, on the other hand, thinks that the Syrian conflict “may not end” before he leaves office.<sup>5</sup> With regards to Yemen, the final statement issued by the summit called for the continuation of the ceasefire and a shift from military operations to a political process through the Riyadh Conference.<sup>6</sup> It is well known that the US pushed for the five-day ceasefire that the Arab alliance declared for May 12-18, 2015 with the Houthis and forces loyal to ousted president Ali Abdallah Saleh. Although the US pledged to confront “Iran’s activities destabilizing the region” whether there is an agreement or not, this seems uncertain given American hesitancy and ambiguity over Syria and Yemen, and its focus on fighting ISIL and al-Qaeda. This further increases Gulf worries over the true positions of its American ally.

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<sup>4</sup> Julie Hirschfeld Davis and David E. Sanger, “Obama Pledges More Military Aid to Reassure Persian Gulf Allies on Iran Deal,” *The New York Times*, May 14, 2015, at: <http://nyti.ms/1E7WpjE>.

<sup>5</sup> Rania al-Jamal and Sami Aboudi, “Obama tries to reassure the Gulf states and does not expect the war in Syria to end soon,” Reuters, May 16, 2015, at: <http://bit.ly/1e6BYyG>.

<sup>6</sup> “US-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2015, at: <http://1.usa.gov/1HjNwej>.

## Iran the Essence of the Disagreement

The main impetus for holding the Camp David summit was to secure Gulf backing for a possible agreement with Iran in June, or to at least stave off strong opposition. Although the summit's final statement achieved some of what the American administration wanted—the Gulf states agreed that “a comprehensive, verifiable deal” was in their security interests<sup>7</sup>—Obama was unable to secure unconditional Gulf backing for a potential agreement, nor even for the previously signed framework agreement. Obama admitted as much when, at the post-summit press conference, he said that his advisors had shown Gulf officials details of the potential deal with Iran, but that he did not ask them to sign to show agreement.<sup>8</sup> He also recognized the legitimacy of the Gulf states' anxieties over the potential weakening or lifting of sanctions on Iran and how that might boost its destabilizing activities in the region. According to the Saudi foreign minister, the Arab leaders received assurances that the goal of the final agreement was to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons or possessing the capacity to do so, and cutting off all pathways in that direction. He added however that it was too early to know if the final agreement would be acceptable.<sup>9</sup> The contradiction lies in the fact that Obama himself stated that Iran, whether or not there was an agreement with it, would remain a threat to regional stability.<sup>10</sup> This only reinforces Gulf misgivings over relying on shaky American promises and guarantees.

## Unambitious Security Relations

Security and defense cooperation formed one of the main topics for US-GCC bilateral talks at the Camp David summit. The Gulf states came to the summit with ambitions to obtain stronger defense relations, even a mutual defense treaty, something that the Obama administration has been lukewarm about offering. Obama administration officials argued that a written treaty on the matter was unnecessary, and that the

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<sup>7</sup> “US-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement.”

<sup>8</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after GCC Summit.”

<sup>9</sup> Julie Pace, “Obama Offers Gulf Nations ‘Ironclad’ Security Cooperation,” *Time*, May 14, 2015, at: <http://ti.me/1JyMKKa>.

<sup>10</sup> “Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after GCC Summit.”



president's assurances over the US commitment to Gulf security were sufficient.<sup>11</sup> The final statement of the summit duly stated that "the United States shares with our GCC partners ... a vital interest in supporting the political independence and territorial integrity, safe from external aggression, of our GCC partners. The United States policy to use all elements of power [including military power] to secure our core interests in the Gulf region, and to deter and confront external aggression against our allies and partners ... is unequivocal."<sup>12</sup> The intended American measures, which were laid out in an annex, can be summarized as the development of a region-wide ballistic missile defense system including an early warning system with American technical assistance, intensification of arms sales, an increase in joint military training and maneuvers against external threats and terrorism, boosting the security of computer networks against hacking, increasing naval security, and training special forces and Gulf intelligence agencies.<sup>13</sup>

All the aforementioned measures require the Gulf states' own efforts, with American support. In practice, these measures do not constitute an automatic and immediate American defense to confront any external dangers. The most the US is thinking of providing in its offer to the Gulf states is to make them a "key non-NATO ally,"<sup>14</sup> a status that would grant them the possibility of assistance and training normally only offered to NATO allies, but would not include mutual defense.

## Conclusion

It has become clear to the GCC states following the Camp David summit that the Obama administration is, for the moment, only interested in reaching a nuclear agreement with Iran that will make the latter a partner in the war against ISIL. To this end, the US is willing to overlook, albeit if only part of the time, Iranian actions causing

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> "US-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement."

<sup>13</sup> "Annex to US-Gulf Cooperation Council Camp David Joint Statement," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, May 14, 2015, at: <http://1.usa.gov/1cZMqrD>; and "Remarks by President Obama in Press Conference after GCC Summit."

<sup>14</sup> Labott

instability in the Arab region. The Obama administration is trying to obtain the help of the Gulf states in persuading Congress to accept this policy, and also wants them to accept a truce with Iran and agree to non-escalation against the intrusive policies Tehran is following in the Arab region. At the same time, the Obama administration wants to send an implicit message to the Gulf Arabs that the defense of their interests and their security falls on their own shoulders, largely depends on their own capabilities, and that the role of the US is complementary to their own. In this context, it is possible to understand the extent of Gulf displeasure at Obama administration policies in the region, and their anxiety towards the negotiations with Iran. Ultimately, this means taking the initiative, rather than waiting for the US green light, as happened in Yemen.

Accordingly, self-reliance in confronting the major challenge of regional Iranian intervention requires the Gulf states to take on Iran through various means. Just as Iranian intervention in regional affairs is not direct, but rather takes place through proxies, confronting Iran does not require military preparations alone, however important they are, but also requires the formulation of social and economic policies to foster the cohesion of Arab societies in the Gulf and the Arab Middle East more broadly. Any future military confrontation demands the bolstering of elements of one's own strengths; raising the level of coordination between the GCC states; and strengthening the power of society, which will serve to reduce reliance on the outside and strengthen state sovereignty, thus ultimately serving the interests of the GCC states. This goal can be achieved, but it comes at a cost, and requires change to the prevailing culture and lifestyle to which large portions of these societies have become accustomed.