

Saudi Snub at the Nuclear Summit?

by [Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson \(/experts/simon-henderson\)](/experts/simon-henderson)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

What with Yemen, Iran, Syria, and oil, U.S.-Saudi relations appear to have many dimensions these days, so there is little time for questionable diplomatic gestures that could complicate the imminent nuclear and GCC summits.

The most junior representation at this week's Nuclear Security Summit in Washington will be the delegation from Saudi Arabia. Beginning March 31, President Obama will host representatives from fifty-seven countries and international groups, including the presidents or prime ministers of Britain, China, France, Japan, and Turkey, foreign or other senior ministers from various other countries, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. All of the participating nations either consider themselves allies of the United States or value their relationship with Washington -- Russia is one notable absentee, Iran is another.

Yet Saudi Arabia is unique in not sending a political figure to head its delegation, instead choosing Dr. Hashim Yamani, president of the King Abdullah City for Atomic and Renewable Energy (KACARE). This stands in sharp contrast to other participating Middle Eastern states: the Jordanian delegation is led by King Abdullah; Morocco is sending the king's brother, Prince Moulay Rachid; Algeria is sending its prime minister; Egypt and the United Arab Emirates are sending their foreign ministers; and Israel will be represented by energy minister Yuval Steinitz, a close ally of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu.

Ironically, Dr. Yamani, who holds a PhD in physics from Harvard, may be one of the only representatives who is technically familiar with the summit's subject matter, which will focus on securing nuclear materials and preventing nuclear smuggling. He also led the Saudi delegation at the previous three summits: 2014 in The Hague, 2012 in Seoul, and 2010 in Washington. This year, however, his presence amid so many heads of state and senior officials suggests continuing Saudi irritation with Washington over last year's nuclear agreement with Iran -- and perhaps President Obama's recent profile in the *Atlantic*, which contained many criticisms of the kingdom.

To be sure, U.S.-Saudi diplomacy remains close -- Ambassador Joseph Westphal met with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, known as MbN, in Riyadh yesterday, then spoke with Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir today. But MbN was initially expected to lead the Saudi delegation this week, since his role as interior minister makes him the key person on domestic security issues, while poor health inhibits King Salman's ability to travel. Yamani's attendance therefore suggests coolness.

With President Obama due to visit Riyadh in three weeks for a Gulf Cooperation Council summit -- where he will no doubt be challenged to explain his Iran policy -- the administration appears to have a great deal of hard diplomatic work ahead of it. Last week, Richard Stengel, the undersecretary of state for global diplomacy and public affairs, stopped in Riyadh to meet with deputy crown prince and defense minister Muhammad bin Salman (MbS), likely with the aim of encouraging him to resolve the Yemen conflict through peace talks. The day before Obama arrives in Riyadh, Defense Secretary Ash Carter is due to meet with MbS as well. In short, U.S.-Saudi relations appear to have a lot of moving parts these days, so there is little time for misunderstandings and public gestures that can be interpreted as snubs.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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