

# Managing the U.S.-Gulf Disconnect at Camp David

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Brief Analysis

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## President Obama should give full credence to Gulf perceptions of a direct threat from Tehran.

**T**he crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are due to arrive in Washington soon for meetings with President Obama and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leaders. The White House and Camp David meetings scheduled for May 13-14 will address U.S.-GCC security cooperation in the wake of recently announced parameters for a nuclear deal with Iran. The absence of the Saudi and Bahraini monarchs probably reflects King Salman's dissatisfaction with the outcome of last week's discussions between U.S. and Gulf officials in Riyadh and Paris. Yet a more fundamental issue is that the White House and most GCC capitals have different views about the Iran nuclear framework and its implications for the Middle East.

In particular, most GCC leaders are worried that sanctions relief and the presumed end of Iran's pariah status would embolden Tehran to increase its support to armed Shiite groups in Arab states, further destabilizing the region. King Salman has also expressed concern that a deal without adequate checks on Iranian nuclear development would ignite a Middle Eastern nuclear arms race. These fears are compounded by the perception that Washington is pursuing rapprochement with Tehran while turning away from Sunni Gulf allies and further regional entanglement.

In this context, GCC leaders would like deliverables more than words from Camp David. The best-case scenario from their perspective would be new plans for assertive U.S. action against Iranian interventionism, especially in Syria. This would go a long way toward convincing them that America is serious about containing Iran's influence. They have also emphasized written defense agreements with Washington, as well as weapons that provide a qualitative edge over Iran.

Yet there is a large gap between this GCC wish list and what the White House is actually prepared to give at Camp David. The Obama administration is interested in building on already-robust security relationships through

cooperation, training, and arms sales, but it is unlikely to proffer fundamentally new defense arrangements or initiate a major shift in U.S. policy toward Iranian interventionism. Given this reality, Washington should take advantage of the anticipated ten hours of meetings to move the strategic alliance forward, pursuing four main lines of effort in addition to new military arrangements:

1. **President Obama should give full credence in language and tone to Gulf perceptions of a direct threat from Tehran.** As Washington and its negotiating partners seemingly move toward an Iran deal that focuses narrowly on nuclear weapons, GCC leaders worry that the Islamic Republic is on the march, changing the balance of power in the region, and aiming to expand its interventionist model across their own borders. This is particularly true for Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, which have been targeted by Iranian-linked violence. As Abdulrahman al-Rashed wrote on Al-Arabiya's website on May 10, Gulf states fear that a narrow nuclear agreement would open "the floodgates for Iran to threaten the Gulf's very existence." President Obama does not need to agree with them on the efficiencies of a nuclear accord to convey that he understands their deep unease.
2. **The president should be open to imaginative ideas about how to expand cooperation against unconventional threats such as cyberattacks.** This would help showcase his nuanced understanding of the Iranian threat, essentially amending his suggestion in an April 4 *New York Times* interview that the Gulf monarchies' biggest concern is "Iran invading." For example, he might discuss the 2012 cyberattack on Saudi Aramco that was probably conducted with Iranian assistance. GCC leaders would welcome quantifiable deliverables to address the Iranian threat inside their borders.
3. **Washington should listen and learn during the summit, particularly in terms of getting to know Saudi deputy crown prince Muhammad bin Salman,** the king's favorite son who also serves as defense minister. The young royal has been the face of the kingdom's military campaign against the Houthis in Yemen, so President Obama would be wise to probe his other regional policy plans. Important areas in which to deepen cooperation include Syria, the anti-ISIS campaign, and countering extremism.
4. **The president should entertain ideas about the location and timing of future exchanges.** Relationship-building is essential to reassuring these allies, so Washington should use any frustrations over the Camp David summit as momentum toward planning additional opportunities for charting a path forward together. U.S.-GCC strategic ties are stronger and more important than any disconnects on specific policies.

*Lori Plotkin Boghardt is a fellow in Gulf politics at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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