

# Get Serious About a Buffer Zone in Syria

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## Obama needs to show that he's willing to shift the Middle East balance of power against Iran.

President Barack Obama's meeting with leaders from the Gulf Cooperation Council at Camp David next week is likely to be a pivot point in the region. If not satisfied, several of the Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, will increasingly act independently of U.S. wishes given their belief that they must do more to counter the Iranians; already we are seeing this in Syria and Yemen.

If the president hopes to blunt this trend, he will have to reassure the leaders of these states that a potential deal on the Iranian nuclear program will lead us neither to forsake our ties to them nor permit Iran, flush with new resources because of sanctions relief, to threaten them without an American response. It will not be an easy sell.

Unlike the Israelis who focus on the nuclear issue and see any deal that allows Iran to be a nuclear threshold state as a profound strategic danger, the Gulf Arab states are far more preoccupied with Iran's meddling in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. For them, an Iran not squeezed financially will be freer to do even more on the ground with its Shiite proxy militias to shift the balance of power further in its favor. Listen to Arab commentary in the region, and a persistent theme is the Iranians are now the dominant influence in four Arab capitals: Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut and Sanaa. It does not help that Iranian officials emphasize their newfound power in these capitals, or that Qasem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Forces, is no longer a shadowy figure but now appears prominently with Shiite militias, often on YouTube, in Tikrit and Baghdad. Indeed, the Islamic State group may be our priority, but for the Saudis, it's Iran.

So Obama will have his work cut out for him at Camp David. His Arab counterparts will expect concrete commitments designed to address their concerns. True, they will expect promises of new military hardware. But that won't be their main ask. They will seek explicit American commitments to their security. While they may not insist

on a formal alliance or treaty obligation, they will not be satisfied with vague assurances in the event they come under attack from Iran or its proxies -- and their definition of the threats from Iran and its proxies is likely to include efforts at destabilizing them.

For the president, that presents a problem. He has spoken about being willing to support the Gulf Cooperation Council states against external threats, but not internal ones. He sees greater inclusiveness and improved governance as being as important to their security as any commitments we make to counter external threats. While the president may well be right, there will be little receptivity to such a message. In all likelihood, with the administration wanting the summit to go well, Obama will probably choose either not to raise the issue of political reform or at best tread lightly on it in his conversations.

At any time, this would be a difficult topic, but especially now when these states will be challenging the president to show that he will not accept Iranian hegemony in the region. Neither new arms transfers nor even an increased American military presence in the region will likely suffice to allay the fears of the Gulf leaders. They want to know what specific steps we will take to counter threats to them.

To be sure, actions at this juncture that show we will compete with the Iranians and raise the costs of their aggressive behavior would impress the Gulf states more than any verbal promises or even the provision of new military weaponry. But there is one step more than any other that would impress the Gulf states and show that we will not acquiesce in the growth of Iranian power in the region: creating a buffer zone along the Turkish-Syrian border.

Nothing would do more to change the realities on the ground in Syria. It could provide a place for the roughly 6 million people displaced in Syria to go and respond to a humanitarian imperative; it could revitalize a more secular Syrian opposition by giving them a base to develop in Syria at a time when the Bashar Assad regime is reeling with losses in Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur; it would show that time is running out for Assad and affect both the Russian and Iranian calculus about the value of looking for a real political process to settle the conflict. In addition to putting us in a position to insist that the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Turkey coordinate their actions with us and play their part in financing and policing the zone, it would unmistakably signal a readiness on our part to actually shift the balance of power against the Iranians in the region.

Significantly, it would also demonstrate that we will not sacrifice our interests in the region for fear of how the Iranians would react in the nuclear negotiations. Obviously, the Iranians have slowed none of their efforts to gain leverage in the region over concern of how we might react in the nuclear talks. The fact is the nuclear negotiations have never been a favor the Iranians are doing for us -- the deal embodied in the framework understanding serves Iranian interests. Such a deal can also serve our interests, provided the Iranians don't think they are simply deferring their nuclear weapons option and it does not trigger a series of Gulf Arab state reactions either on proliferation or in the region that proves destabilizing.

That, of course, is why Obama is seeking to reassure them. If he wants the Camp David summit to succeed in this respect, now is the time for him to get serious about a buffer zone in Syria.

*Ambassador Dennis Ross is counselor and William Davidson distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.* ❖

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