

Wooing the Gulf States: From Riyadh to Paris to Camp David

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Brief Analysis

This week's Gulf Arab summit in Riyadh and Secretary Kerry's May 8 meeting with GCC foreign ministers in Paris will be crucial to fixing the agenda for next week's Camp David summit.

Amid a flurry of speculative news stories about what Washington can offer to placate Gulf concerns about the putative nuclear deal with Iran, a dress rehearsal of sorts took place on May 5 in Riyadh. The leaders of five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries were there -- Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates -- while Oman sent a special representative of Sultan Qaboos, who has been unwell. Also in attendance was French president Francois Hollande as the guest of honor, probably reflecting France's tough stance in the nuclear negotiations and its record as an arms supplier to the Gulf states. (Last month, for example, Qatar announced a \$7 billion deal for French fighter aircraft.)

Because the Riyadh summit served as an opportunity for Gulf leaders to voice their anxieties about current regional affairs, it provides clues as to what public statements might emerge from their May 13-14 talks with President Obama at Camp David. In most respects, they eschewed the sharp criticism of Iran that has emerged from Gulf capitals in recent months. They also avoided reiterating their unhappiness with Washington, which stems from the U.S. failure to punish Syria for using chemical weapons and from their fears that the Iran deal will only confirm Tehran's nuclear status rather than limit its capabilities. Yet while Gulf leaders would likely prefer to use the Camp David talks to confirm their alliances with the United States rather than widen the differences, there will be a price for Washington to pay.

At the end of the Riyadh meeting, President Hollande and King Salman of Saudi Arabia issued a joint statement emphasizing the need to reach a "robust, lasting, verifiable, undisputed, and binding deal with Iran," one that must not "destabilize the security and stability of the region nor threaten the security and stability of Iran's neighbors." But

the final communique of the summit itself reflected a broader range of concerns and gave less prominence to the nuclear issue. In order, the final statement addressed Yemen (seven paragraphs), the Palestinian cause (one paragraph), Syria (two paragraphs), Iraq/ISIS (one paragraph), Libya (one paragraph), terrorism (one paragraph), relations with Iran (one paragraph), Iranian nuclear concerns (one paragraph), and the long-festering dispute over Iran's occupation of three UAE islands (two paragraphs).

There was no reference to Iran's involvement in Syria or Iraq, nor its support for the Houthis, the targets of the ongoing Saudi-led air campaign in Yemen. The GCC leaders also expressed "keenness to build balanced relations" with Iran, while their disquiet about Tehran's regional influence was rendered as "mutual respect for the principles of good neighborliness." On the nuclear issue, they expressed hope that the initial framework agreement will lead to "a comprehensive final agreement ensuring the peaceful [nature of] the Iranian nuclear program."

In terms of vitriol, Israel and Syria were the only targets. Despite many reports of deepening Israeli-Gulf contacts due to shared interests on Iran, the GCC leaders "condemned the repeated brutal attacks carried out by the Israeli occupation authorities and Israeli extremists against the unarmed Palestinian citizens, religious shrines, and places of worship." On Syria, the GCC "expressed deep concern over the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation," blaming the Assad regime for the "killing, destruction, and use of heavy weapons, aerial bombs, and poisonous gas, which have resulted in the killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and the injuring and displacement of millions more."

As for Camp David, the communique mentioned that the GCC leaders "looked forward to their meeting" with President Obama, "wishing that the talks contribute to the strengthening of the close relations with the United States in light of current developments and events, and the enhancement of the region's security and stability." Such blandness obscures the main challenge for President Obama next week: how to get GCC approval for an Iran nuclear accord, or at least avoid public criticism of the deal's perceived weaknesses.

During bilateral talks in Riyadh today, Secretary of State John Kerry and the Saudi leadership discussed, in Riyadh's formulation, "negative Iranian interventions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other places." It will be interesting to see how much this mirrors the views of other Gulf states during Kerry's discussions with GCC foreign ministers tomorrow in Paris. There are important nuances in opinion between the different GCC members, which will also be reflected in who represents them at Camp David.

Saudi Arabia: The big question is whether King Salman will travel to the United States next week, an exhausting trip for a man of his age and health. If he does attend, which son will he bring: his favorite, Deputy Crown Prince and Defense Minister Muhammad bin Salman (a.k.a. MbS), an outspoken critic of Iran, or Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef (a.k.a. MbN), Washington's favorite? And if Salman stays home, will the kingdom be represented by MbS or MbN?

Kuwait: Emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah is the GCC's conciliator, preferring compromise over confrontation. Perhaps significantly, MbS held one-on-one talks with him in Kuwait yesterday.

Bahrain: King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa will likely savor the opportunity to have his relationship with the United States framed in military/diplomatic terms rather than criticism of his government's human rights record. Given the island's majority Shiite population, he is particularly conscious of the threat of Iranian mischief.

Qatar: Last year, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani was the bad boy of the GCC, but this year he is more of a team player.

UAE: President Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan is incapacitated, but his younger brother Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed (a.k.a. MbZ) is working to coordinate the GCC position. MbZ knows the overall importance of staying close to Washington, but regionally he is seeking a partnership with MbS, the Saudi architect of the war in Yemen, where

Washington wants a diplomatic solution. These goals may prove incompatible.

Oman: The sultanate is the odd-man-out of the GCC, preferring to engage with Iran and stay out of the coalition campaign in Yemen. Sultan Qaboos is the most likely no-show at Camp David, and whoever he designates as a substitute may cancel as well.

As for the next week's agenda, if Washington hews to the argument that Iran will be less dangerous with a nuclear agreement in place, it may only confirm the GCC's worst fears about the Iranian threat, which no new arms agreement with the United States can salvage. However, in the psyche of Gulf leaders, an undertaking from President Obama delivered personally and sealed with a handshake may have enough meaning to bridge the difference. The discussions will also take place against the symbolic backdrop of Camp David, where Egypt and Israel made peace in 1979. But the definition of success for this summit will more likely be a limited agreement than an historic pact.

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