

Riyadh Briefing: President Obama's Visit to Saudi Arabia

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The summit is a crucial opportunity for the two allies to repair relations, but major differences will likely persist.

What's on the agenda?

Whatever both sides say officially, the real answer is "Iran, Iran, and Iran," for several reasons: because of its nuclear program and what King Abdullah sees as President Obama's flawed diplomacy; because of its backing for Bashar al-Assad in Syria; and because, in Saudi eyes, Washington grossly underestimates the threat Tehran represents not only to the kingdom's own oil-rich Eastern Province and neighboring Bahrain, but also to the rest of the Middle East. Meanwhile, any prospect of Saudi assistance on a breakthrough in Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations has been made unlikely by Riyadh's refusal to allow the Washington bureau chief of the *Jerusalem Post*, a U.S. citizen, to accompany the president.

How's the meeting likely to go?

Diplomatic insiders say that this sort of meeting usually starts with a rather tense half hour as everyone expresses their frustrations. Then both sides get down to the business of deciding how to move forward. At ninety-one years old, King Abdullah probably only has enough stamina for a meeting lasting an hour or so, two hours maximum. He has difficulty standing up and tires easily. It could be a diplomatic disaster: a two-hour meeting with Secretary of State John Kerry in October, after the breakthrough in nuclear diplomacy with Iran, apparently did not get beyond the shouting stage.

What's on King Abdullah's mind?

The Saudi monarch sees the United States as his kingdom's ultimate security guarantor. But ever since Washington withdrew support for President Mubarak of Egypt in 2011, Abdullah and other Gulf leaders have worried about the reliability of Washington's posture toward even longstanding allies. President Obama's U-turn on military action

against Syria over its use of chemical weapons last summer only added to the concern, which has likely morphed into exasperation after recent events in Crimea, where the Saudis judge that President Obama was outmaneuvered by Vladimir Putin.

Who else will be in the meeting?

On the Saudi side, the two leaders will probably be joined by Crown Prince Salman, the king's seventy-eight-year-old half-brother and heir apparent; Prince Mitab bin Abdullah, the king's senior-ranking (though not eldest) son, who is also minister of the national guard; Prince Saud al-Faisal, the king's nephew and long-serving foreign minister; Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, the king's nephew and interior minister who recently became the point man on Syria; and Adel al-Jubeir, the Saudi ambassador to the United States and the king's most-trusted English translator.

What are they likely to agree on?

It is not obvious. King Abdullah wants Bashar out of Syria as soon as possible, largely to deliver a strategic setback to Tehran. This is apparently a shorter timeframe than President Obama has in mind. On Iran, the king is worried about the regime's existing nuclear capabilities, while President Obama's redline is a nuclear weapon. The king judges that Iran's nuclear progress already makes it a quasi-nuclear weapon state, and that U.S. diplomacy is giving Tehran the status of hegemonic power in the Gulf. He might even tell President Obama that the kingdom now needs to match Iran's nuclear status, perhaps by going to Pakistan for assistance. Egypt will be another source of disagreement. The kingdom's support for Abdul Fattah al-Sisi and the military appears total -- Riyadh has just declared the Muslim Brotherhood to be a terrorist organization and is financing the purchase of Russian weapons for the Egyptian military.

Where's Bandar?

That was perhaps the biggest question mark until a report today that he is in Morocco recovering from shoulder surgery and is due back in the kingdom next week. The ex-ambassador to Washington and now head of Saudi intelligence, Prince Bandar bin Sultan was apparently sidelined in terms of handling support for the Syrian opposition. He was replaced, but perhaps only temporarily, by Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who rose to prominence while running the Saudi deradicalization program in the years after the September 11 attacks. Whatever the full story, recent Saudi decisions suggest a policy debate on Syria -- it is now against the law for Saudi citizens to fight in Syria or support the armed rebels materially or financially. Riyadh has also declared two jihadist groups in Syria, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), to be terrorist organizations. At the very least, the kingdom seems to be acknowledging concerns that Saudi jihadists in Syria represent a danger to the kingdom if and when they return home.

Will President Obama have other meetings?

When President Francois Hollande of France visited Riyadh in December, he had a private luncheon with the king's son, Mitab. President Obama might also have a separate meeting with Crown Prince Salman, who could be the next king. Concern about Salman's health has not been allayed by his hectic travel schedule. After returning from recent state visits to Pakistan, Japan, India, the Maldives, and China, he chaired the weekly cabinet meeting the next day. And this week he went to Kuwait to attend the Arab Summit.

Another meeting had been proposed with the other leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Oman), who would have joined the Obama/Abdullah summit in a display of unity as well as support for U.S. policy. But two recent developments killed that idea: on March 5, Riyadh, Bahrain, and the UAE withdrew their ambassadors from Qatar to protest Doha's interference in their internal affairs, and on March 15, Iranian president Hassan Rouhani visited Oman.

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