

# Next Test for Obama: Soothing the Saudis

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Mar 24, 2014

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](/experts/dennis-ross)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

---

## The kingdom will have a raft of complaints for the president when he visits Riyadh.

**P**resident Obama will visit Saudi Arabia this week. Based on what I hear from key Saudis, he is in for a rough reception. Rarely have the Saudis been more skeptical about the United States, and if the president is to affect Saudi behavior, it is important for him to understand why.

Fundamentally, the Saudis believe that America's friends and interests are under threat, and the U.S. response has ranged from indifference to accommodation. The Saudis see Iran trying to encircle them with its Quds Force active in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and their own eastern province. The Saudis see an Iranian effort to shift the balance of forces in the region dramatically in Tehran's favor, whether by killing Sunni Muslims in Syria, mobilizing Shiite Muslim militias in Iraq, providing arms to the Houthi rebels in Yemen or fomenting unrest among Saudi Shiites.

Unlike the Israelis, who see the Iranian nuclear program as an existential threat, the Saudis perceive Iranian encirclement in existential terms. Like the Israelis, they are convinced Iran is determined to acquire nuclear arms but see it as an instrument in its pursuit of regional hegemony.

Fair or not, Saudi leaders believe the U.S. is seeking detente with Iran and is turning a blind eye to Tehran's troublemaking in the region. They see the Iranians using the nuclear program negotiations to buy time, and fear that the U.S. is so anxious to do a deal and avoid conflict with Iran that it refuses to compete with the Iranians in the region or to back U.S. friends as they do so. U.S. hesitancy in Syria, and particularly the perceived unwillingness to act militarily even though the president had established a "red line" on chemical weapons, has done much to feed this impression.

Unfortunately, the Saudis' view of American policy toward Egypt adds to their sense of disquiet. They see the Egyptian military involved in a life-and-death struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood and jihadi terrorists in the

Sinai, both of whom are also perceived as a threat to Saudi Arabia. And yet they see the U.S. withholding Apache helicopters. They may not like the withholding of any weaponry from the Egyptian military, but withholding helicopters, which are effective as a counter-terror weapon, is inexplicable to the Saudis. This leads them to question whether the U.S. defines its interests in the region in a way that is compatible with Saudi Arabia's.

None of this means that the Saudis will turn away from the United States; Saudi leaders know that only the U.S. can safeguard Saudi Arabia against external threats. Nonetheless, the Saudis' disquiet can lead them to pursue policies that are destructive to U.S. interests -- and theirs.

A case in point is the Saudi offer to pay for the \$2-billion to \$3-billion arms package Egypt is seeking from the Russians. At a time when Putin needs to pay a price for flouting international norms in Crimea, this is hardly the time to be offering funds for Russian arms. Even from their own perspective, how can the Saudis possibly hope to persuade Vladimir Putin about the high costs of backing Syrian President Bashar Assad if they are going to pay for the Egyptian arms request? Obama should make this point with King Abdullah.

Unfortunately, insecurity often leads to self-destructive policies, and the Saudis and Egyptians are signaling the Obama administration that they will go their own way if they can't count on us. The fact that Obama added Saudi Arabia to his itinerary indicates that he is aware of the problem. But given the depth of the Saudi doubts, the president will be unlikely to succeed if he offers only words of reassurance.

Instead, he needs to take the concerns head-on. That does not require him to accept Saudi complaints. However, he needs to show that he has no illusions about the Iranians, spelling out that we know what the Quds Force is doing and the steps the U.S. will take to counter it. For example, intercepting clandestine Iranian arms shipments would show we mean what we say.

Imagine the effect on the Saudis and others if it had been the U.S. and not Israel that intercepted the Klos C ship this month carrying Iranian weapons destined for the Gaza Strip. Few things would more clearly demonstrate to the Saudis that we will not allow nuclear negotiations with Iran to prevent us from countering Iran's de-stabilizing actions in the region.

Egypt and Syria will be harder nuts to crack. But focusing on our common strategic objectives is a starting point: preventing Egypt from becoming a failed state, ensuring that jihadis cannot gain footholds in Egypt or Syria, and stopping the genocide in Syria. Perhaps, on Egypt -- where the Saudis cannot afford to be Egypt's ATM forever -- the president could offer to lift the hold on key weapons in return for the Saudis using their influence to get Egypt to finalize an agreement with the International Monetary Fund.

The president will likely have difficult discussions in Riyadh. Understanding, however, that his hosts will be looking for actions and not just good words may yet make them productive.

*Dennis Ross is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. Previously, he served as a senior Middle East advisor to President Obama.*

Call ()

Send SMS ()

Add to Skype ()

You'll need Skype CreditFree via Skype

*Los Angeles Times*

---

## RECOMMENDED

---

### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

◆  
Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

### TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

Gulf & Energy Policy (/policy-analysis/gulf-energy-policy)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Gulf States (/policy-analysis/gulf-states)

