

Washington and the UAE Discuss Iran

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

Sheikh Muhammad's visit is an opportunity for the White House to clarify its views on Iran, which the Gulf Arab countries do not see as being subject to the standards of universal political freedoms otherwise espoused by Washington.

Tomorrow, April 26, President Obama and the crown prince of Abu Dhabi will meet in the White House to discuss "common strategic interests." It will likely be a challenging conversation because of differences over the regional threat posed by Iran.

Crown Prince Sheikh Muhammad bin Zayed al-Nahyan is a younger brother of Sheikh Khalifa, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and president of the seven-member federation of the United Arab Emirates. The effective day-to-day leader of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Muhammad has been in almost continuous discussions with U.S. officials recently. On April 8, he was visited by Defense Secretary Robert Gates; on April 13, National Security Advisor Tom Donilon met with him; on April 14, he spoke with U.S. Central Command head Gen. James Mattis.

Behind the diplomatic platitudes, there is U.S. irritation that the UAE joined Saudi Arabia in sending security forces to Bahrain in March, reinforcing a government facing widespread demonstrations by the majority Shiite community. And Abu Dhabi is annoyed that -- having provided U.S. forces with the use of the al-Dhafra Air Base, from which aircraft carry out surveillance on Iranian activity in the Persian Gulf -- there is not greater recognition of the threat posed by Iran. Dubai, another member of the UAE, allows the U.S. Navy to use the port of Jebel Ali. The conservative Arab states of the Gulf are increasingly concerned about Iran's nuclear program and the danger of Iranian-sponsored insurrection in local Shiite communities.

Differences over Bahrain led to the delay in the UAE providing twelve F-16 fighters to the international forces patrolling the Libya no-fly zone. Along with Qatar, which has provided four fighters, these units provide the NATO-led operation in Libya with important international and Arab political cover.

Last week, Sheikh Muhammad flew to Riyadh for a meeting with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who is thought to share UAE views on the Iranian threat. Both countries were disappointed at the speed with which the White House dropped support for former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and are concerned about the reliability of their alliances with the United States.

Sheikh Muhammad's visit is an opportunity for the White House to clarify its views on Iran, which the Gulf Arab countries do not see as being subject to the standards of universal political freedoms otherwise espoused by Washington. The Obama administration should also tell Abu Dhabi that its military support for Bahrain's government makes Iranian mischief an almost self-fulfilling prophecy. The administration should also demand that the UAE release political activists who have recently been detained for demanding greater freedom.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the [Gulf and Energy Policy Program \(/template102.php?](/template102.php?SID=23&newActiveSubNav=Gulf%20and%20Energy%20Policy%20Program&activeSubNavLink=template102.php%3FSID%3D23&newActiveNav=researchPrograms)

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