

Obama's Visit to Riyadh: Competing Agendas?

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Brief Analysis

On June 2, President Barack Obama departs for the Middle East, where he is scheduled to deliver a major speech in Cairo on June 4. But his first stop is Riyadh, where he will meet Saudi king Abdullah. Officially the two men will, in the words of a White House spokesman, "discuss a range of important issues, including Middle East peace, Iran, and terrorism." The U.S. agenda, however, is almost certainly wider: the very fact of the meeting, only announced on May 26, suggests that Obama foresees a major role for Saudi Arabia in his approach to a range of issues -- on which King Abdullah has his own perspectives.

Background

The upcoming meeting will not be the first encounter between the two men; they met in London at the April gathering of the G20 (Saudi Arabia qualifies as the world's largest oil exporter). On that occasion, President Obama was caught on video bowing to the Saudi monarch, a gesture at odds with proper protocol (heads of state merely shake hands) and regarded as obsequious by the president's detractors and those wary of close U.S. links with the kingdom. The two leaders also met privately in London and have reportedly spoken by telephone several times. A good working relationship appears to be emerging despite the differences in age (Abdullah is eighty-six, Obama forty-seven) and ethical norms (on May 29, according to the official Saudi news agency, a murderer was publicly beheaded in the Saudi capital and the body and head left on display for several hours).

Saudi Peace Plan

Most speculation is focused on whether Obama will be able to coax Saudi Arabia into a more active diplomatic role in the Middle East peace process. At the center of the discussion is the Arab League-supported 2002 Saudi peace plan, which offers Israel diplomatic recognition by the Arab world in return for Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 territorial lines and an agreed resolution to the Palestinian refugee issue. The plan, which helped Riyadh recover from the embarrassing fact that fifteen of the nineteen hijackers in the September 11 attacks were Saudis, has been moribund because of initial Israeli rejection of the plan and U.S. coolness to it. Saudi Arabian unwillingness to engage diplomatically (and publicly) with Israel has also been no small contributor to its stagnation.

Riyadh sees the plan as reinforcing Abdullah's personal diplomacy (he authored the initial version) as well as Saudi leadership of the Arab world. But while the king seems to personally advocate some engagement -- he and Israeli president Shimon Peres exchanged greeting messages at a UN interfaith conference in New York in December -- he has been unwilling or unable to go further absent a major Israeli concession such as a settlement freeze.

Obama, who is also expected to discuss the Middle East peace process in his Cairo speech, presumably would like to present a Saudi gesture on this issue, such as allowing Israeli airliners to transit Saudi air space, trade relations with Israel (the neighboring United Arab Emirates quietly allows more than \$1 billion in trade annually), visas for Israelis, or the appointment of an American Jew as U.S. ambassador in Riyadh (the position is currently vacant and the Obama administration has yet to nominate a candidate).

Nuclear Iran

Another central issue in the talks will be Iran's nuclear program, which concerns many of the Persian Gulf Arab states as much as it does Israel. Indeed, it is probably Abdullah's number-one priority, which he has consistently told U.S. leaders must be dealt with through force and coercion, not Obama-style engagement. Abdullah is almost certainly not happy with Obama pushing diplomacy with Iran until the end of the year before considering further sanctions.

Iraq

Since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, Riyadh has been unhappy about the emergence of a Shiite-dominated administration in Baghdad. This has exacerbated Saudi concerns about the clerical regime in Tehran and its influence on the majority Shiites in Iraq as well as Shiite communities in other parts of the Middle East. For example, Riyadh has worked to blunt Iranian support for Hizballah in Lebanon and was undoubtedly disquieted by recent

Shiite disturbances in Bahrain. In 2007, King Abdullah refused to meet Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki at a conference in Egypt, and the slight is still felt. Last week, in a statement on an Iraqi government website, al-Maliki accused Saudi Arabia of having "negative positions," allowing Saudis to become insurgents in Iraq, and said that more diplomatic reconciliation would be "useless" without a change of heart in Riyadh. This prompted an angry denial by Saudi interior minister Prince Nayef, who urged Baghdad to improve its own border security. Officials in Washington are very conscious that without Saudi cooperation in stopping jihadist fighters, the military situation in Iraq could worsen, causing a delay in a key Obama administration policy of drawing down U.S. forces.

Yemen

On June 1, Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Salih visited Riyadh for talks with King Abdullah, just three days after CIA deputy director Steven Kappes was in the Yemeni capital discussing al-Qaeda and the fate of approximately a hundred Yemeni detainees locked up at the Guantanamo Bay detention facility (Yemen has the largest national group at the facility, which Obama is intent on closing). The United States reportedly wants to repatriate these Yemeni detainees to Saudi Arabia because it is not satisfied with Yemen's ability to stop them from returning to terrorism. Meanwhile President Salih wants the United States to fund the construction of a detention facility in Yemen for the detainees.

Pakistan

Washington also considers Saudi Arabia an important influence on Pakistan because of Riyadh's political links with that country's likely future leader, Nawaz Sharif, as well as the kingdom's necessary role in mobilizing an anti-jihadist consensus. There is also concern that if Iran develops nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will look to Pakistan for nuclear guarantees to supplement or replace U.S. security promises.

Energy

This week started with the price of oil at a seven-month high, above \$67 per barrel, a reflection of both production cutbacks by the Saudi-led Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and revived hopes for the recovery of the world economy. In an interview with a Kuwaiti newspaper on May 26, King Abdullah stated that "the fair price is \$75, maybe \$80." But U.S. willingness to challenge Saudi Arabia on this point is uncertain. On May 28, in an interview with the Financial Times, U.S. energy secretary Steven Chu warned that Americans would have to learn to live with higher oil prices. The following day, President Obama, who campaigned on increasing the energy independence of the United States, said he was going to indicate to King Abdullah that "we're not going to be eliminating our need for oil imports in the immediate future . . . that's not our goal." But he did say that "it's [not] in Saudi Arabia's interests to have a situation in which our economy is dependent -- or disrupted constantly -- by huge spike[s] in energy prices." Meanwhile U.S. officials, concerned that oil revenues can be diverted to fund extremism (or, in Iran's case, fund its nuclear program), told the Wall Street Journal on May 29 that the Taliban in Afghanistan "received significant donations from . . . Gulf nations such as Saudi Arabia."

Obama's Challenge

In his interview with the Kuwaiti newspaper, King Abdullah, asked to comment on Obama's planned speech in Cairo, said, "Perhaps [Obama's] speech will include justice to Arab and Muslim causes." He continued, "We ask nothing from [the United States] other than fairness and justice to the causes of Arabs and the Islamic religion . . . a religion of justice and moderation, a religion of tolerance, love, and brotherhood."

In his conversation with the Saudi king, Obama will be seeking more than a list of platitudes. That the visit is taking place at all suggests that Obama is expecting some definitive policy achievements to emerge. The diplomatic reality, however, is that breakthroughs are rare, especially with Saudi Arabia, which prefers to keep its options open. News of the Riyadh meeting may well be quickly overshadowed by Obama's speech in Cairo, but what happens in the Saudi capital will remain of great importance to U.S. interests in the region.

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