

Cheney's Middle East Trip:

Iran Tops a Weighty Agenda

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Brief Analysis

On March 16, Vice President Cheney departs on a Middle East trip that will take him to Oman, Saudi Arabia, Israel, the West Bank, and Turkey. Coming less than two months after President Bush's trip to the region, the vice president's itinerary is intriguing. His undisclosed agenda with "key partners," in the words of the White House announcement, is likely to include the peace process, the price of oil, Iraq, and Iran. And among those issues, Iran will likely be the most mentioned, especially given this week's controversial resignation of Adm. William Fallon as the top U.S. commander in the Middle East -- a move attributed in part to differences on Iran between him and the White House.

Iran Tied to Other Regional Issues

Iran, particularly its nuclear ambitions, will certainly be the dominant theme in Cheney's meetings with regional leaders. Many of the issues mentioned in the White House trip agenda -- and many of the main U.S. policy concerns associated with the countries being visited -- are linked with Iran. For instance, the inclusion of Oman, a key ally in the Persian Gulf, is likely connected at least in part to its strategic coastline facing Iran at the Strait of Hormuz, the route through which up to 20 percent of the world's oil passes daily.

Cheney will also face Iran questions related to Admiral Fallon's sudden resignation after a magazine article asserted that his views diverged from those of the White House. These differences reportedly included his disapproval of military action against Iran. According to the article's author, if Fallon left the post, it might signal that the administration intended to go to war with Iran. When coupled with the diplomatic confusion caused by the December U.S. National Intelligence Estimate on Iran, which downplayed the regime's nuclear aspirations, the Fallon incident will no doubt put Cheney in the position of explaining U.S. intentions to many of his hosts.

Although the Arab states of the Gulf, including Saudi Arabia and Oman, have publicly rejected military confrontation with Iran in favor of diplomacy, both look to the United States as their ultimate security guarantor. For decades, Oman has been discreetly generous in providing air bases and other facilities for the U.S. military, while Saudi Arabia, which no longer provides such arrangements, is the leading beneficiary of a new \$20 billion U.S. military

package aimed at bolstering regional allies against Iran. The kingdom also recently upgraded its strategic missile force with more modern Chinese solid-fuel rockets, replacing its obsolete liquid-fuel stock.

Cheney is also likely to discuss Iran -- particularly its support for Hizballah and Hamas -- in his meetings with Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas. Some Hamas fighters in Gaza have been trained in Iran, and Iranian rockets have enabled the group to reach targets in southern Israel, home to 250,000 Israelis. Their conversations could also focus on whether President Bush can or should push for progress in the peace process during his planned trip in May.

Pushing the Saudis?

As the world's largest oil exporter, Saudi Arabia has considerable diplomatic power and financial muscle, but its actions are often at odds with U.S. policy. In her March 12 congressional testimony, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, commenting on the kingdom's efforts against Islamic extremism, noted, "I would be the last to say that there has been anything like the kind of progress that I think we will need. . . . This is a very high priority." Cheney will therefore push for progress, but he may not achieve much. Many commentators have suggested that the Saudis are waiting for the next U.S. administration, viewing Bush as a lame duck. In reality, the kingdom's own succession issues are arguably more influential: King Abdullah is eighty-five and described as being "limited," and at least one senior prince, theoretically a potential successor, is dying of cancer.

In addition, Cheney will press Washington's view that the kingdom should think carefully before attending the Arab League summit to be hosted by Syria at the end of the month. He will also seek Saudi help with the Palestinians. At the Paris donor's conference in December, the kingdom proudly declared itself as "one of the largest, if not the largest" donors to the Palestinian Authority (PA), promising an additional \$500 million for development projects. But its \$92 million annual budgetary support for the PA, reconfirmed in Paris, is a relatively paltry sum representing just a few hours' worth of oil revenues.

Partly because of such stinginess, the PA has received just \$260 million out of the higher-than-expected \$7.7 billion pledged in Paris, forcing Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayad to juggle monthly salary commitments. Meanwhile, the Lebanese finance minister expressed confidence this week that Saudi Arabia would deposit \$1 billion in Beirut's central bank to boost its foreign exchange reserves.

Oil will be on Cheney's agenda as well -- with crude prices currently topping \$110 per barrel, it would be difficult for him to repeat his past assertion that high prices are not a U.S. domestic political issue. When President Bush visited the kingdom in January, his request that the Saudis pump more oil was rejected by the Saudi oil minister the very same day it was tendered. U.S. energy secretary Samuel Bodman visited shortly thereafter, but with similar results. Cheney will be under pressure to say something publicly, and at the same time try to avoid yet another Saudi rebuke.

Iraq and Its Neighbors

At each stop, Cheney can expect questions about U.S. strategy in Iraq, particularly regarding the "surge." In November 2006, King Abdullah summoned him to Riyadh over Thanksgiving weekend reportedly to urge the United States not to withdraw abruptly from the country (even though he labeled U.S. involvement there as an "illegal, foreign occupation" only a few months later). Cheney is also likely to be asked how Fallon's resignation will affect the situation there, given the former commander's reported view that U.S. Middle East policy has focused too much on Iraq and a quick drawdown of U.S. troops.

The success of Turkey's recent foray into isolated parts of northern Iraq, where the extremist Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) has found sanctuary, will be another topic of conversation. Quiet U.S. operational support has helped rebuild strained relations between Washington and Ankara ever since the Islamic-rooted ruling party began to solidify its political power. Cheney's visit to Ankara will build on the progress achieved during recent White House

visits by both President Abdullah Gul and Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The vice president will likely encourage political action to diminish the problems caused by the PKK in southeastern Turkey, which amplify the tension that the group's presence in Iraq causes for Baghdad's relations with Ankara.

The announced itinerary does not mention any side trips to Iraq or Afghanistan. They remain possibilities, however, albeit dangerous ones; the last time Cheney traveled to Afghanistan, a suicide bomber blew himself up at the entrance to a base the vice president was visiting. Cheney needs to meet with the leadership of both countries at some point, and he often feels personally obligated to visit with U.S. forces when he is in the region -- such needs could take him to either hotspot during the current trip.

Unclear but Crucial Outcome

Cheney has made a career of saying little. But assuming that Iran is the main agenda item, his trip could indicate how the Bush administration plans to deal with the troublemaking, missile-equipped, and potentially nuclear-armed Iran -- and what it plans to leave for the next administration.

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. ❖

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