

Cheney in the Middle East: Defining Key Issues and Mutual Interests

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Brief Analysis

Vice President Dick Cheney departed today on a trip to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. A bland statement issued from his office on May 3 said he was asked to travel by President Bush and would be having "discussions with the leaders of these countries on key issues of mutual interest." No details were offered of the subjects of these discussions, but vice presidents do not travel halfway around the world unless there is important business to conduct.

It seems reasonable to assume that the situation in Iraq and the challenge posed by Iran's nuclear project will be central, with perhaps some discussion of the Middle East peace process. The four Arab countries were named in March as an "Arab Quartet" that Washington hoped would help revive the Arab peace plan. Despite the prevailing congressional and press judgment that Cheney plays a less central role in administration policymaking than formerly, the vice president's agenda likely also includes some issues that can only be decided by the heads of state he meets.

Saudi Arabia

With the growing energy of its diplomacy, arguably the most important place Cheney will visit is Saudi Arabia. He was last in the region in November 2006, when he made the long flight to Riyadh merely for a meal and discussion with King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and Crown Prince Sultan. The Thanksgiving Day weekend visit was supposedly at the request of Abdullah, who reportedly asked Cheney -- following the Democratic victory in congressional elections -- not to withdraw U.S. forces abruptly from Iraq.

Since then, Saudi diplomacy, centering on the efforts of Saudi national security advisor and former ambassador to the United States Prince Bandar bin Sultan, has tried to cool tensions and outflank Iran in Lebanon, and brokered peace between the Palestinian Fatah and Hamas factions. (Though the Saudi efforts in Lebanon have been helpful to U.S. policy, the Saudi failure to secure Hamas approval of the 2002 Arab peace plan offering conditional recognition of Israel proved a setback for U.S. interests on the Palestinian front.) Any hope that the March Arab summit in Riyadh would see the relaunch of the Arab peace plan with Israel proved fruitless -- it was merely reiterated, even though

there had been clandestine Saudi contacts with Israel in the preceding months.

Also, there was shock in Washington, although no official condemnation, when King Abdullah labeled the United States and coalition presence in Iraq as being an "illegal foreign occupation," a formulation that seemed to approve insurgent attacks on U.S. forces. There was more surprise when it was reported that Abdullah had decided not to accept a hitherto unannounced invitation from President Bush for a state visit this summer. And Abdullah's refusal to host Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki in the days preceding last week's Sharm al-Sheikh summit on Iraq was an ugly reminder that the Saudi monarch is constrained by his own conservative Sunni constituency from offering much support to the Shia-dominated administration in Baghdad.

The vice president will seek to understand Saudi reasons for such an unhelpful public comments and actions and solicit Saudi suggestions on how to deal with the possibility of a nuclear-armed Iran. He will also likely try to track the power politics in Riyadh: one of King Abdullah's half-brothers, Prince Abdul-Majid, died of cancer on May 5, aged 67, almost certainly an uncomfortable reminder to the 84 year-old monarch and his 83-year-old crown prince of their own mortality.

The UAE

When the U.S. military left Saudi Arabia at Riyadh's request in 2003, the UAE (along with Qatar) absorbed the relocated forces. It now plays host to a significant U.S. Air Force presence at the al-Dhafra air base, while the Jebel Ali port welcomes more U.S. Navy port calls than any other place outside the continental United States. In Abu Dhabi, Cheney will meet Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, who plays a low-profile leadership role, especially in comparison with his younger brother, the crown prince, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, and Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, ruler of Dubai, the UAE's other main emirate. Sheikh Khalifa apparently is fully supportive of Washington on the potential threat posed by a nuclear Iran, which sits directly across the waters of the Persian Gulf.

The glittering skyscrapers of Abu Dhabi and Dubai are symbols of the way the Gulf states have thrived because of the high price of oil and despite the chaos in Iraq and shadow of Iran. Cheney will thank Khalifa for his support but should remind him that his country's prosperity and stability is in large measure a consequence of U.S. security. Despite having a territorial dispute with Tehran, the UAE, and particularly Dubai, thrives on trade with Iran even while Washington is trying to isolate Iran economically.

This week the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz and the accompanying ships of its strike group arrive in the region's waters, replacing the departing USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and its carrier group, but joining the USS John C. Stennis, already on patrol in the area since February. This continues the deployment of two carrier groups under the Bahrain-based command of the U.S. Fifth Fleet, a level of naval force last seen at the time of the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Analysts see it as a way of impressing Iran that whatever happens in Iraq, the United States can still exert military power.

Jordan and Egypt

While the oil-rich states of Saudi Arabia and the UAE are directly concerned with U.S. policy in the Gulf, the link to Jordan and Egypt is less immediate. But both Jordan's King Abdullah II and Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak receive huge amounts of American aid and remain key political players in the Arab world, particularly the Sunni Arab states, and both are thought to be worried by the growing regional prominence of Shia (and non-Arab) Iran and the growing dominance of Iran's Shiite Arab allies in post-Saddam Iraq.

Cheney might well see his visit as a chance to enhance the diplomatic roles of Egypt and Jordan. Publicly, there is a perception that both Cairo and Amman are being outflanked by the assertiveness of Saudi Arabia, whose influence has been enhanced by the revenues generated from its export of oil at \$65 per barrel. Both countries are also potentially useful to counter the influence of Syria, which seems anxious to reassert a hegemonic role in Lebanon

and force Washington to concede a high price for any barriers it puts on insurgents crossing into Iraq. Both could also do more to help on Iraq. Jordan already trains Iraqi military personnel but Egypt does not.

Each leader can be expected to raise the issue of the Middle East peace process. In Egypt, the vice president should press for greater efforts to constrain Hamas influence in Gaza. He should also seek a clear reading of Mubarak's plans for his eventual succession. In Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, a repetition of concern about flows of funds to Islamist charities would not go amiss.

Conclusion

All four countries on Cheney's itinerary last year indicated a desire to explore the development of peaceful nuclear energy. Whatever their domestic energy demands, this was seen as a diplomatic response to possible military nuclear developments in Iran. Cheney can impress on his hosts the danger -- and even the silliness -- of such moves.

U.S. allies often complain that Washington is not involved enough in Middle East diplomacy. But the vice president will follow in some of the footsteps of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, who visited Egypt, Israel, Iraq, and Jordan in late April. And Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who attended the Sharm al-Sheikh summit, will also be back in the region in mid-May. Such activity suggests much effort to make progress on a range of subjects, often apparently conceding previous positions, as with the partial rapprochements with Syria and Iran. As reputedly the president's closest adviser, Cheney should be able to help decide where progress can be made, what are the real mutual interests, and how helpful several of Washington's closest allies are prepared to be.

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