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Obama's Saudi Summit: Focus on Iran, Syria, Egypt, and Terrorism

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President Barack Obama will meet with Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah on Friday amid mounting reports of acute Saudi disillusionment with Obama's foreign policy. The Saudis, like other Middle Eastern allies including Israel, are concerned that Obama cannot be trusted to safeguard their national interests in the face of Iran's military buildup, the political turbulence of the "Arab Spring," and deepening internal conflicts in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. President Obama should convince King Abdullah that he can depend on Washington's security cooperation at a time of rising uncertainty in the Middle East.

A Lack of Trust. At heart, the chief issue mar- rying bilateral relations is a lack of trust. Riyadh sees the Obama Administration as a fair-weather friend that came into office looking to extricate the U.S. from Middle Eastern conflicts. The Saudis and other Arab kingdoms were appalled by the total U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, which left Iran as the dominant foreign influence there and left Iraq's Sunni minority under the thumb of Iraq's Shia-dominated government.

The Saudis were also shocked by the speed at which Obama abandoned Egyptian president Hosni

Mubarak, a longtime U.S. ally. They were further troubled by the Administration's public embrace of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, which the Saudis perceive as an ideological enemy that has spawned an Islamist backlash against the Saudi monarchy. To offset Washington's withholding of some military aid to Egypt, Riyadh last month offered to finance an arms deal worth more than \$2 billion between Cairo and Moscow.

The impending U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and the Administration's self-proclaimed "pivot to Asia" have exacerbated worries about the willingness and ability of the U.S. to continue to underwrite Gulf security. This could not come at a worse time, given Iran's nuclear push, surging ballistic missile capabilities, and aggressive support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria and militant Shia factions both in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen and within Saudi Arabia's predominantly Shia Eastern Province.

The Saudis believe that the Obama Administration has failed to pay sufficient attention to Iranian support for terrorism and subversion. They fear that if Washington reaches a nuclear deal with Iran, it will turn a blind eye to Iran's hostile acts against its neighbors. And if the nuclear negotiations fail, they doubt that Obama will take military action to prevent a nuclear Iran.

Sadly, their doubts on this score were heightened by the President's failure to enforce his own red line against Syria's use of chemical weapons last year. After threatening to launch military reprisal strikes, Washington backed down and acceded to a half-baked diplomatic agreement brokered by Moscow that let Syria off the hook and allowed it to evade its

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disarmament commitments without penalty. A similar bad deal with Iran would have disastrous implications for the security of Saudi Arabia and other countries threatened by Iran.

Reforging Strategic Cooperation with Saudi Arabia. President Obama came into office believing that military power is a 19th-century concept with little relevance in the modern world, but Iran is building its military strength, particularly its ballistic missile force—the largest in the Middle East. Iran has also mobilized its military assets to shore up Syria’s Assad regime with Revolutionary Guards from the elite Quds Force, Hezbollah fighters from Lebanon, and Iraqi Shia militias.

President Obama should reassure the Saudis that he is fully aware of the military, subversive, and terrorist threats that Iran poses to Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). More important, he should show that he is willing and able to take action to deter and defend against those threats. Specifically, President Obama should:

- **Underscore a firm U.S. commitment to defend allies threatened by Iran.** Iran poses a significant ballistic missile and asymmetrical warfare threat to Saudi Arabia and other GCC members. Washington should offer to help Riyadh upgrade its ballistic missile defenses, integrate them into an overlapping multi-layered GCC-wide system, and deploy U.S. or NATO mobile Patriot batteries to neutralize Iran’s missile threat. The U.S. should step up cooperation with Saudi intelligence and naval forces to identify, track, and intercept Iranian arms shipments to client groups, including the Houthi rebels in Yemen, which pose a threat to Saudi Arabia as well as the Yemeni government.
- **Clarify the terms of an acceptable nuclear deal with Iran.** A major source of Saudi anxiety is that a nuclear agreement will fail to halt Iran’s nuclear weapons efforts but will pave the way for a détente between the U.S. and Iran that will expose Saudi Arabia to greater threats. The President should publicly state that Washington will not sign any agreement that does not verifiably end the threat of an Iranian nuclear breakout through the dismantling of key parts of Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and much more intrusive international inspections. He should also make it clear that Iran’s continued support for terrorism and its human

rights abuses will remain obstacles to better Iran–American relations. His silence on these issues has fueled Saudi concerns that he will tolerate Iranian subversion in exchange for a nuclear deal.

- **Press for greater Saudi cooperation against al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists.** The Saudis, who initially remained in denial about Saudi links to the 9/11 terrorist attacks, became more forthcoming in cooperating against al-Qaeda after a series of terrorist attacks inside the kingdom in 2003, but much more needs to be done to stem the flow of private donations by wealthy Saudis to al-Qaeda and Islamist extremists fighting in Syria. The President should also press King Abdullah to reform Saudi Arabia’s education system, which still uses textbooks containing rampant hate speech against non-Muslims. Such sentiments fuel Islamist extremism and make young Saudis more susceptible to ideological brainwashing by al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.
- **Increase Saudi–American cooperation on regional issues.** Riyadh and Washington share an interest in shoring up stability in Egypt and helping Cairo defeat Islamist extremists. President Obama should offer to lift the hold placed on the transfer of U.S. arms to Egypt after Egypt’s elections. In exchange, he should request that Riyadh withdraw its offer to finance Egypt’s purchase of Russian arms and instead work with Cairo to find alternative arms sources in Europe or the U.S. Washington and Riyadh should also coordinate more closely on supporting Syrian rebels against the Assad regime and against Islamist extremists aligned with al-Qaeda.

Focus on Common Interests. President Obama should convince King Abdullah that the U.S. remains a reliable ally that is both willing and able to help defend Saudi Arabia against Iran. He should also push for more Saudi cooperation in fighting al-Qaeda and other Islamist extremists and in stabilizing Egypt and Syria.

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