

## More than Keeping Up the Facade: The U.S.-GCC Summit at Camp David

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The declarations that follow summit meetings rarely disclose much of substance, and the declaration following the U.S.-GCC summit at Camp David is no exception. The Joint Statement is presented in full on the White House web page at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>, and it is an almost ritual reiteration of the fact that the U.S.-GCC strategic partnership will continue, nations will consult and aid each other, and the U.S. and GCC want peace but will use force to achieve it.

### Reasserting the U.S. Strategic Partnership with the Arab Gulf

There is one truly important theme. The ritualistic statements do include a clear and continuing U.S. commitment to a strategic partnership with the GCC and Arab Gulf, and U.S. efforts to make it clear America will not somehow turn away from its Arab partners and “normalize” relations with Iran in ways that ignore the many other threats Tehran poses to the region.

They state that the U.S. and GCC states will,

reaffirm and deepen the strong partnership and cooperation between the United States and the GCC. The leaders underscored their mutual commitment to a U.S.-GCC strategic partnership to build closer relations in all fields, including defense and security cooperation, and develop collective approaches to regional issues in order to advance their shared interest in stability and prosperity.

The United States shares with our GCC partners a deep interest in a region that is peaceful and prosperous, and a vital interest in supporting the political independence and territorial integrity, safe from external aggression, of our GCC partners. The United States policy to use all elements of power to secure our core interests in the Gulf region, and to deter and confront external aggression against our allies and partners, as we did in the Gulf War, is unequivocal.

...In this spirit, and building on the U.S.-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum, the leaders discussed a new U.S.-GCC strategic partnership to enhance their work to improve security cooperation, especially on fast-tracking arms transfers, as well as on counter-terrorism, maritime security, cybersecurity, and ballistic missile defense.

These statements also included some important nuances that both sides need to put into actual practice,

The United States is prepared to work jointly with the GCC states to deter and confront an external threat to any GCC state's territorial integrity that is inconsistent with the UN Charter. In the event of such aggression or the threat of such aggression, the United States stands ready to work with our GCC partners to determine urgently what action may be appropriate, using the means at our

collective disposal, including the potential use of military force, for the defense of our GCC partners.

As with Operation Decisive Storm, GCC states will consult with the United States when planning to take military action beyond GCC borders, in particular when U.S. assistance is requested for such action.

## **Less than a Treaty, an Uncertain Compromise on Iran and the P5+1 Agreement with Nuclear Breakout Overtones**

The U.S. came very close to saying it will treat the GCC states in much the same way as Article 5 treats NATO – a statement reinforced later and equally directly by President Obama in a press conference.

At the same time, the U.S. was careful to ensure that the Joint Statement referred to the “territorial integrity” of the GCC states, and did not offer or imply the kind of open-ended guarantee to respond to Iranian and other third party actions outside their territory that some GCC states may want to describe as aggression.

At least some in the Gulf wanted a far stronger reassurance, as well as an agreement that at least implied that the U.S. would somehow help the GCC states reverse Iran’s strategic expansion into Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and deal with GCC country claims that Iran was interfering by dealing with the Shi’ite in Bahrain. Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Some also wanted a NATO-like formal treaty –ignoring the real world political problems this would present in terms of the U.S. Congress, how the U.S. would define its territorial coverage, and how the U.S. would then have to deal with other regional allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Israel.

What they got in terms of Iran was a more general set of U.S. assurances, in return for a broad endorsement of a fully successful P5+1 agreement with Iran – a commitment that will only have meaning if a final agreement is ever reached, and if they accept a final agreement,

They reviewed the status of negotiations between the P5+1 and Iran, and emphasized that a comprehensive, verifiable deal that fully addresses the regional and international concerns about Iran’s nuclear program is in the security interests of GCC member states as well as the United States and the international community. The United States and GCC member states oppose and will work together to counter Iran’s destabilizing activities in the region and stressed the need for Iran to engage the region according to the principles of good neighborliness, strict non-interference in domestic affairs, and respect for territorial integrity, consistent with international law and the United Nations Charter, and for Iran to take concrete, practical steps to build trust and resolve its differences with neighbors by peaceful means.

This portion of the Joint Statement reflects a far more sophisticated and valid approach to the P5+1 nuclear negotiations than Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s almost blanket condemnation of an agreement that does not yet exist and which no one can yet assess. At the same time, it papers over the lack of any statement of how both sides will respond if no agreement is reached or if the agreement does not seem adequate.

More importantly, it ignores the growing concern in the GCC that if an agreement with Iran preserves Iran’s technology base and nuclear fuel cycle, the GCC states must have their own nuclear power and fuel cycle – effectively matching one nuclear weapons break

out option with another. The fact that some of the wisest and most respect voices in the GCC – like Prince Turki of Saudi Arabia who has also been a strong advocate of a WMD-free zone is reported to support such a position is a warning to both Iran and the U.S.

It is also important to note, that the GCC is scarcely united on how to deal with Iran, just as it is divided to some extent over virtually every security issue. For all of the Arab conspiracy theories about the U.S. pivoting to Iran at their expense, and calls for the U.S. to wave a magic wand in limiting the expansion of Iran's influence in the region, the fact remains that Oman largely stands aside from the other states in the GCC, Qatar is less hawkish than the Saudi and Bahraini regimes, and it is not clear that the UAE's Emirates have a clear consensus with each other, much less with Saudi Arabia.

### **Papering Over Terrorism and the Wars in Failed States: The Facade on Dealing with Counterterrorism**

Another core part of the document deals with a reality that neither U.S. nor its GCC partners are ready to face: Neither side has a convincing or coherent policy for dealing with the broader threat from religious extremism and sectarian violence, or the “failed state wars” in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.

The Joint Statement does call for unified action in broad terms and suitable Summitese buzzwords:

The leaders decided to enhance their counter-terrorism cooperation on shared threats, particularly ISIL/DAESH and Al-Qa'ida, to deter and disrupt terrorist attacks with a focus on protecting critical infrastructure, strengthening border and aviation security, combating money laundering and terrorist financing, interdicting foreign fighters, and countering violent extremism in all its forms.

The leaders, furthermore, discussed how best to address regional conflicts and defuse growing tensions. In this context, the leaders discussed the most pressing conflicts in the region, including Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, and what could be done to advance their resolution. They decided on a set of common principles, including a shared recognition that there is no military solution to the regions' armed civil conflicts, which can only be resolved through political and peaceful means; respect for all states' sovereignty and non-interference in their internal affairs; the need for inclusive governance in conflict-ridden societies; as well as protection of all minorities and of human rights.

### **The Yemen Facade**

In practical terms, however, it does not address the fact that the U.S., Saudi Arabia, and the other GCC states have no clear answer to either using force effectively in Yemen or coming to grips with the fact that its problems go far beyond the Houthi, AQAP, or Iran, and reflect deep internal differences, failed governance, a failed economy, a demographic nightmare, and structural problems like a shortfall of water,

With regard to Yemen, both the United States and GCC member states underscored the imperative of collective efforts to counter Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula, and emphasized the need to rapidly shift from military operations to a political process, through the Riyadh Conference under GCC auspices and UN-facilitated negotiations based on the GCC initiative, National Comprehensive Dialogue outcomes, and the Security Council's relevant resolutions. Taking into consideration the humanitarian needs of civilians, they welcomed the start of a five-day humanitarian pause to facilitate delivery of relief assistance to all those in need and expressed hope it would develop into a longer, more sustainable ceasefire. They expressed their appreciation for the generous grant of \$274 million provided by Saudi Arabia for the UN humanitarian response in Yemen. The United States reaffirmed its commitment, in partnership with GCC member states and

other members of the international community, to seek to prevent the resupply of Houthi forces and their allies in contravention of UN Security Council Resolution 2216.

The fact is that both the U.S. and the GCC have no clear solution to using force on the ground, particularly Saudi Arabia, which does not seem to have real support from its GCC counterpart Oman, another critical GCC state. They also have little prospect that air or seapower will be enough, that there is no solution to Yemen as a failed state without security, and no lasting prospect for security without dealing with Yemen's far deeper challenges.

Yemen presents a major dilemma for all sides in choosing to act or not act. Short of some form of internal compromise between Yemen's factions, or some kind of "victory" lasting enough to allow some civil progress, Yemen represents a fundamentally impractical and unaffordable challenge in armed nation building. It is not a burden Saudi Arabia can take on, and it is not one the U.S. has any domestic political support to address, or that has a strategic priority for the U.S. beginning to approach its cost and risk.

### **The Syria Façade**

Somewhat similarly, the Joint Statement is little more than a vacuous effort to paper over the lack of a common plan for effective action when it comes to Syria,

The leaders committed to continue working towards a sustainable political resolution in Syria that ends the war and establishes an inclusive government that protects all ethnic and religious minorities, and preserves state institutions. They reaffirmed that Assad has lost all legitimacy and has no role in Syria's future. They strongly supported increased efforts to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL/DAESH in Syria and warned against the influence of other extremist groups, such as Al-Nusrah, that represent a danger to the Syrian people, to the region and to the international community. They expressed deep concern over the continuing deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria and condemned the prevention of aid distribution to the civilian population by the Assad regime or any other party.

Restating problems that have steadily worsened since 2011, and that the UN and USAID now estimate have put more than 11 million people and half of Syria's total population at risk, is not a solution or even the beginning of a common effort. The U.S. does play a critical humanitarian role, and there are some signs of more effective Saudi-UAE-Qatari cooperation in dealing with rebel movements, but none of this is addressed in the Joint Statement and there is little sign the Summit produced any progress at a classified level.

There is no clear U.S. policy beyond sporadic bombing and a glacially slow effort to train some 15,000 rebels for an undefined effort towards an unknown goal. Saudi-UAE-Qatari cooperation seems more likely to create a future extremist threat, and a lasting legacy of Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict that will leave an opening for Iran to exert influence in both Lebanon and Syria, and to create a Shia bridge to Iraq. Neither the U.S. nor GCC efforts seem likely to produce lasting stability or security or to be making a meaningful attempt to address Syria's critical need for national unity and national recovery.

### **The Iraq Façade**

The Joint Statement is more useful when it comes to Iraq,

The United States and GCC member states further affirmed their commitment to assisting the Iraqi government and the international coalition in their fight against ISIL/DAESH. They stressed the importance of strengthening ties between GCC member states and the Iraqi government, based on

the principles of good neighborliness, non-interference in internal affairs, and respect for state sovereignty. They encouraged the Iraqi government to achieve genuine national reconciliation by urgently addressing the legitimate grievances of all components of Iraqi society through the implementation of reforms agreed upon last summer and by ensuring that all armed groups operate under the strict control of the Iraqi state.

This is a case where the U.S. must take deep responsibility for invading Iraq without any plan or initial capability for stability operations and the years of counterinsurgency and armed nation building that followed. Iraq is also a country where it is far from clear that the U.S.-led air campaign, present training and assist mission for its ground forces, and diplomatic efforts are moving it towards unity, independence from Iranian influence, or offering any real hope of military success as long as the narrow focus is exclusively on Iraqi territory, leaving the threat of ISIL/Daesh (or its successor) on the Syrian-Iraqi border.

It is also a case, however, where Saudi Arabia and most other GCC states have been far too slow to directly compete with Iran in reaching to the Iraqi government, in playing an active role in trying to reconcile Sunni and Shi'ite Iraqis, and in giving Iraq strong economic and security incentives to counterbalance Iranian influence. Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi may not be perfect from a GCC viewpoint, but he is far better than Maliki and offers a window of hope that the GCC states should do everything possible to encourage rather than let close.

### **The Libya and Israel Palestinian Facade**

On another somewhat positive note, the Joint Statement closed with some mildly useful ritual efforts to flag the Libya crisis and Israeli-Palestinian peace problems, but strictly at the Ministerial Facade 101 level.

### **The Value of Dialogue**

All that said, the Summit did serve at least one other critical function. It made the leaders of the U.S. and GCC address their mutual distrust and problems more openly. Hopefully, it will make those outside the Summit think a little harder as well.

The U.S. media -- and far too many U.S. think tanks -- spent the week before the Summit focusing on why the King of Saudi Arabia was not coming to the meeting, some creating their own conspiracy theories about Saudi Arabia and its royal family.

The actual meeting demonstrated two very different things. First, both they and their Gulf counterparts should have focused on why the King of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf heads of state should come rather than why they weren't. They should have focused on what the key issues were, and what such a meeting could accomplish.

Second, the fact the king did not come was ultimately far more useful than his coming would have been. It sent a useful signal to all sides and countries that they need to do far more to cooperate in shaping a common approach to security, to dealing with Iran, and to finding broader solutions to the "failed state wars" in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq.

On the part of the U.S., the Summit meeting showed this Administration that it needs to listen far more carefully to its allies and reassure them far more clearly. It also needs to show its strategic partners that it can go from concepts and rhetoric to meaningful action. So far, this Administration has far too often reversed the order of Aesop's fable about the "Frogs Who Desired a King." If President Bush was King Stork, President Obama has

tended to be King Log. On the part of the GCC states, the Summit showed them that the U.S. is a meaningful strategic ally but not a magic answer to the failures of Arab states, every regional security problem, or the divisions within the GCC and Arab world.

Hopefully, the summit also have sent a broader signal to those in the GCC. Bad as some of the U.S. media and think tank commentary before the summit may have been, the U.S. side never approached the surrealistic whining and conspiracy theories of far too much GCC media and far too many commentators. At least for a while, it seemed that the GCC now had three major exports: petroleum, blame, and responsibility. The Summit sent a signal that only the first such GCC export is useful.

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