

# PRESIDENT OBAMA'S MEETING WITH GCC LEADERS IN SAUDI ARABIA: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR HEIGHTENED COOPERATION

By Dr. John Duke Anthony

This week President Obama will travel to Riyadh to meet with King Salman of Saudi Arabia. The next day he is scheduled to meet with leaders of the six Gulf Cooperation Council countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

According to a [White House Press Briefing](#), these meetings will be broken into three sessions – one on regional stability, one on defeating ISIL and al-Qaeda and counterterrorism cooperation, and

one on Iran and efforts to prevent the Islamic Republic's destabilizing actions across the region.

The day before the meeting of the two heads of state, U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter is expected to meet with Saudi Arabian and GCC nation defense officials. According to U.S. Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes, that meeting will focus on “enhancing GCC capability, interoperability and how to confront asymmetrical threats.” Mr. Rhodes



Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Sa'ud and President Barack Obama during the king's September 2015 visit to Washington. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

also expects that the U.S. Defense Secretary “will have specific conversations about how to enhance certain defense capabilities across the Gulf.” Whether this might advance further consideration of a reported pan-GCC missile defense system in which several GCC members have expressed an interest and willingness to purchase – and which the American aerospace and defense manufacturing sectors remain prepared to sell, though there are reports that the Israel lobby and a leading American think tank are allegedly opposed – remains unclear.

## Sticks and Stones

President Obama's visit comes at a propitious moment. It will take place at a time when aspects of U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and GCC countries are being vilified. U.S. domestic political campaign rhetoric, legislation contemplated by the U.S. Congress, the media, and special interests are seemingly opposed to strengthening and expanding America's strategic, economic, national security, and related interests with and in Saudi Arabia and the other GCC countries. In addition, the visit comes on the heels of President Obama's comments in a [recent article in \*The Atlantic\*](#) in which he was characterized as portraying various Arab and GCC allies as “free riders” and thinking that Saudi Arabia needs to “share” the neighborhood with Iran. If the quoted remarks accurately depict the President's views, the implication is inescapable: namely, such comments from a sitting U.S. President can only cause America's longstanding GCC allies to wonder how the U.S. head of state really analyzes and assesses their value as strategic partners and American allies in what is arguably the world's most vital region.

One way of gauging how some in the GCC region interpreted the President's reported remarks was an *Arab News op-ed* written by Saudi Arabia's HRH Prince Turki Al Faisal, former Director General of Saudi Arabia's General Intelligence Directorate and Ambassador to Great Britain and the United States.

Prince Turki rebutted President Obama's characterization. He did so by citing a litany of the Kingdom's policies, positions, and actions. These, he emphasized, prove beyond doubt that Saudi Arabia has gone far – and often further than others on innumerable occasions in its relationship with the United States for decades on end – to prove its worthiness as a valued ally.

The Kingdom has done this, Prince Turki added, at what on occasion have been extraordinary financial and geopolitical costs that few other nations were willing to assume or bear. He concluded by stating, “We are not free riders.” Although he did not say so, he might have noted no less accurately that the mutual benefits that have accrued to the American and Saudi Arabian as well as other GCC member-states' citizens over 80 years have been and remain the envy of practically every other country.

## The Meetings: An Opportunity to Renew Trust and Strategic Reassurances

The meetings in Riyadh come almost a year after President Obama hosted his GCC counterparts in the United States for a summit at Camp David. That gathering focused, as this one is expected to, on strengthening U.S.-GCC ties. Despite *The*



U.S. President Barack Obama hosted leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council for a summit meeting at Camp David in Maryland, USA, in May 2015. Photo: Saudi Press Agency.

*Atlantic's* portrayal of the President's views, whether accurate, misquoted, or not, one cannot possibly believe the President is other than fully cognizant of the multi-faceted and reciprocally rewarding strategic relationship between the two sides.

In any event, meetings of high-ranking and well-intentioned leaders can be and in history often have been moments of enormous and enduring import. Think the American Constitutional Conventions. Think Yalta. Think NATO. Think the United Nations. And think how on this occasion, like few others, the President will sit with his six GCC country counterparts to explore ways to prioritize and fine-tune the dynamics of America's relations with the decision-makers of governments that serve as

stewards of the lion's share of the resource that drives the engines of the world's economies and hence humanity's material well-being.

President Obama may also seek to clarify and reassure

America's friends, allies, and strategic partners in the GCC that the U.S. position, role, and commitment to the GCC region's security, stability, and prospects for prosperity remains as firm as ever and enduring. He will also have an opportunity to learn about the reforms within Saudi Arabia and the GCC to diversify and

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strengthen the economic health and vitality of its members. Further, he will have a privileged occasion to advance U.S. private and public sector involvement in Saudi Arabia's economic restructuring.

It is apparent that the United States has a coveted place ahead of many nations to participate in those among the Kingdom's new initiatives associated with Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. [Expected to be announced April 25, 2016](#), the new initiatives are being described as a "Vision for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." They are expected to include developmental, economic, and social components intended to position Saudi Arabia for the future.

At a time, on one hand, when some in the GCC perceive that America has let them down, and when, on the other, if various published reports are credible, the President appears to have certain misgivings of his own, this

is exactly when meetings such as this can be extraordinarily timely, relevant, and necessary. The upcoming visit to Saudi Arabia for the bilateral meetings and the historic GCC summit may well provide the leader of the world's most technologically, economically, financially, and militarily powerful nation to accomplish – for the American and the GCC region's peoples, their neighbors, and the world beyond – the right thing, at the right time, with the right people, in the right way, with the right results. Among them: the requisite steps to increase cooperation, deepen economic ties, and make clear that the United States has no intention to turn from Arabia and the Gulf towards Asia or other regions, let alone lessen in any way – at a time of ongoing meddling by Iran and its allies in the internal affairs of GCC countries – America's deep and abiding commitment to the defense of its GCC country partners.

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