



President Obama's Visit to Saudi Arabia

*Dr. Stuti Banerjee**

President Barack Obama visited the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Germany and the United Kingdom (20-25 April 2016). The broad agenda for the visit was “to coordinate the US’s approaches on issues ranging from the counter-ISIL campaign to efforts to promote regional stability in the Middle East, support for Ukraine and its sovereignty and territorial integrity, efforts to promote global economic growth...” with its partners and allies in the Gulf and Europe.¹

The visit to Saudi Arabia was important, as it comes at a time when differences between the two alliance partners have become pronounced. The White House stated that the visit was “...a follow up of the summit of the heads of States of the Gulf region, which was held in Camp David, US in 2015.” According to the White House “the summit will be broken into three different sessions -- one on regional stability, one on defeating ISIL and al Qaeda and counter-terrorism cooperation, and then one on Iran and regional security and efforts to prevent destabilizing actions across the region.”² Five working groups have been established to strengthen U.S.-GCC security cooperation, as committed at the Camp David Summit. On the issue of defeating ISIL and stabilising the region, the US and the GCC would support counter-ISIL coalitions and make contributions range from flying missions as part of the air campaign, to leading the Coalition’s working group on counter terrorist financing, and launching new centers for countering terrorist messaging.³

However, there are other important issues between the two nations that were also addressed.

Differences between the US and Saudi Arabia became pronounced after the popular civil uprisings in the region. They continued to grow as the two nations became critical of each other.

- The US withdrawing its support to Hosni Mubarak, President of Egypt and a longstanding American ally, was viewed unfavourably within Saudi Arabia.
- The US criticised the quashing of popular revolt in Bahrain (2011) by Bahrain government with the help of Saudi troops.
- Saudi Arabia was critical of no action being taken by President Obama in Syria (2013), despite his pledge to act if Syrian President Bashar al-Assad were to use chemical weapons.
- The current issue of friction between the two nations is the US agreement to end the Iranian nuclear crisis. The nuclear deal between the US and Iran has been opposed by Saudi Arabia, and by concluding the deal Saudi Arabia feels that the US has not taken its interests into consideration.⁴

There are problems within the kingdom too. Saudi Arabia is facing economic problems as a result of the low price of crude oil and other energy resources in the international market. This has affected its ability to maintain domestic budgetary expenditure as well as international financial commitments. The economic slowdown has affected the job market and the government's ability to maintain its social spending, such as providing subsidies on oil and electricity, jobs for the people, spending on education etc. The situation is further compounded by the opening of the Iranian energy markets to international buyers. Low oil prices have also constrained the government's ability to respond to crises in the neighbourhood, such as the civil wars in Yemen, Syria and Iraq. This has, in turn, provided Iran with an opportunity to further build its influence in the region.

Under stress, Riyadh has responded in unpredictable ways, often at odds with Washington's interests. They have launched a military offensive in neighbouring Yemen that has failed to defeat the Houthi rebels and has empowered the Qaeda affiliate there. They have executed dozens of men on terrorism charges, including a prominent dissident Shiite

cleric, Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, leading to protests in front of the Saudi embassy in Tehran. The cleric's death was also condemned by the US. Saudi Arabia has largely walked away from Lebanon, suspending billions of dollars in promised aid as Iranian influence has grown.⁵

There are now reports in the US media that, Saudi officials have reportedly informed the Obama administration that the Saudi government is willing to sell off nearly a trillion dollars in assets held by them if the 9/11 bill became a law,⁶ a position that will ensure detrimental economic consequences for both the US and Saudi Arabia.

The 9/11 bill or the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA) is a bi-partisan bill that has been moved in the US Congress, which allows the US citizens to sue the governments of countries that fund terrorist groups like al Qaeda. The act will allow terrorism victims, like victims of the September 11 attacks, the right to pursue foreign states and sponsors of terrorism in federal court. The legislation would also afford this right to families of other American victims of terrorism, which have occurred since September 11, 2001. This bill allows the victims of the 9/11 attack to sue the Saudi government and claim financial damages.

The White House has indicated that President Obama would veto the legislation stating that the bill would "create a precedent" that could lead other countries to file lawsuits against the US government.

Despite the debate on the 9/11 bill, American officials have expressed ambivalence about the Saudi government before, noting the kingdom's dismal record on human rights and involvement in supporting the radical views of Islam. Nevertheless, the US still relies on the kingdom for a number of reasons, notably for the position that Saudi Arabia holds in the region and in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia also supports and facilitates the US military presence in the region and currently is a secure base for the US to channel its resources to fight the Assad regime in Syria. Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia has largely come to the conclusion that the US no longer shares the concerns of the kingdom for the region.

This view is bolstered by the publication of a series of interviews given by President Obama to *The Atlantic* magazine, where he made it clear that, " (the US) needs Europeans

and Gulf countries to be actively involved in the coalition; (the US) will apply the military capabilities that are unique to (it), but (it) expects others to carry their weight.” He further stated that the relationship with Saudi Arabia was “complicated”.⁷ The President also stressed on the fact that the future of the US lies with its engagements with Asia, Africa and Latin America.

During this visit President Obama stated that, reports of a strain in the relationship are “overblown.... and the friendship and cooperation that exist between the United States and the Gulf countries has been consistent for decades.” He further pointed out that, “...what is true between the United States and the GCC, as is true with all of (the US) allies and friends, is that at any point in time, there are going to be differences in tactics.”⁸ He did admit that the biggest difference between the US and the GCC States continues to be Iran. The GCC countries joined the US in supporting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. During the summit meet, leaders discussed the challenges posed by Iran’s problematic regional activities and underscored the importance of an inclusive approach to de-escalating regional conflicts.⁹ While the GCC States and Saudi Arabia in particular remain apprehensive of the deal, President Obama stated that the US will continue to negotiate with Iran, “...that's not a sign of weakness, that's a sign of strength.”¹⁰

It is unlikely that this visit has diffused the suspicion of Saudi Arabia about President Obama’s lack of interest in the region or shifted the President’s views on the current US Middle East policy. President Obama has earlier, made it clear that the US will welcome Syrian refugees, but the crisis is more acute for the European nations than for the US. He has also stated that “ISIL is not an existential threat to the US...”¹¹ expressing his view that US involvement would be in support of actions of its allies in the region.

Thus, this visit can be viewed as a continuation of the engagement between the two nations that have continued to remain allies despite differences. It would be up to the next US President to overcome this fissure in the relationship.

**Dr. Stuti Banerjee is Research Fellow with the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.*

The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ The Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Press Briefing Previewing the President's Travel to Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and Germany,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/14/press-briefing-previewing-presidents-travel-saudi-arabia-united-kingdom>, (Accessed on 19 April 2016).

² Ibid.

³ The Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Fact Sheet: Implementation of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Partnership,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-implementation-us-gulf-cooperation-council-strategic>, (Accessed on 25 April 2016).

⁴ James M. Dorsey, “Obama in the Gulf: Opportunity in Troubled Relations,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/obama-in-the-gulf-opportu_b_9723070.html?section=india, (Accessed on 19 April 2016).

⁵ Ben Hubbard & Nicholas Kulish, “Obama to Visit a Saudi Arabia Deep in Turmoil,” *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/19/world/middleeast/obama-to-visit-a-saudi-arabia-deep-in-turmoil.html?_r=0, (Accessed on 16 April 2016).

⁶ U.S. Senators Charles E. Schumer and John Cornyn announced the “Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act,” (JASTA) legislation, which works to deter international terrorism and provide access to financial justice for those who have suffered at terrorists’ hands. First, JASTA amends the Foreign Sovereign Immunities Act (FSIA) so that foreign sponsors of terrorism cannot invoke “sovereign immunity” in cases arising from a terrorist attack that kills an American on American soil. Second, JASTA amends the ATA so that civil suits against foreign sponsors of terrorism can be held accountable in U.S. courts where their conduct contributes to an attack that kills an American.

⁷ Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine,” *The Atlantic*, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>, (Accessed on 19 April 2016).

⁸ Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “Remarks by President Obama in Q&A with the Press -- Riyadh, Saudi Arabia,” <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/remarks-president-obama-qa-press-riyadh-saudi-arabia>, (Accessed on 25 April 2016).

⁹ Op. Cit 3, Office of Press Secretary, The White House, “Fact Sheet: Implementation of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Partnership”.

¹⁰ Op. Cit 8, Office of the Press Secretary “Remarks by President Obama in Q&A with the Press -- Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.”

¹¹ Op. Cit 7, Jeffery Goldberg.