

Obama's worldview at odds with Riyadh's

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Washington

Much has been written about tensions between the United States and Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners in the wake of US President Barack Obama's semi-successful trip to Saudi Arabia.

Most of the analyses have pointed to policy differences between the two countries:

1) The United States sees the Iran nuclear deal as a victory for stability in the region because it precludes Tehran from developing nuclear weapons; Saudi Arabia sees the deal as giving Iran a pass on the nuclear issue and allowing Tehran to use revenues that accrue from easing sanctions to bolster its destabilising activities in the Arab world.

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2) The United States sees the Yemen conflict as a humanitarian disaster that has allowed al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State (ISIS) to make gains there; the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates say they have taken an important stand against Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

3) The United States accepts that Syrian President Bashar Assad will likely remain in power for an interim period; Saudi Arabia wants Assad to leave immediately.

4) Underlying these problems is

a perception among Saudi officials that the United States is no longer a reliable security partner because of Obama's focus on Asia.

Although these policy differences have contributed to the strains in the relationship, there are also strong ideological differences between how Obama and the Saudis view the region that received much less attention.

In his interviews with the Atlantic that formed the basis of Jeffrey Goldberg's article *The Obama Doctrine*, the US president said sectarianism is a big part of the problem facing the Middle East.

In Obama's words: "You've got a violent extremist ideology or ideologies that are turbocharged through social media. You've got countries that have few civic traditions, so that as autocratic regimes start fraying, the only organising principles are sectarian."

It seems that part of Obama's problems with Saudi Arabia is his perception that the Saudis are fixated on the Shias in the region and want to lead the Sunnis in an all-out effort to squash them and keep Shia Iran in check.

In Obama's mindset, such sectarian policies are not only unhelpful to the cause of Middle Eastern stability but detract from the main goal of defeating ISIS.

It was not coincidental that Obama, during his trip to Saudi Arabia, made a strong case for GCC countries to help Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi consolidate power and fight ISIS. Obama was implicitly stating that if the Saudis and other Gulf states simply view Abadi as just another Shia politician who has links to Iran, then the struggle against ISIS will not come to a favourable conclusion anytime soon.

In an interview with New York

Times columnist Tom Friedman in April 2015, Obama stated that if the Iran nuclear issue is put into a box, "it's possible that Iran, seeing the benefits of sanctions relief, starts focusing more on the economy and its people. And investment starts coming in, and the country starts opening up. If we've done a good job in bolstering the sense of security and defence cooperation between us and the Sunni states... then what's possible is you start seeing an equilibrium in the region, and Sunni and Shia, Saudi and Iran start saying, 'Maybe we should lower tensions and focus on the extremists like [ISIS] that would burn down this entire region if they could.'"

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In other words, Obama said that the policy of opening up to Iran not only has the potential to make it a more responsible state in the region but contributes to a lessening of sectarian tensions. However, from the Saudi perspective, opening up to Iran merely emboldens Tehran to carry on its nefarious actions in the region.

In addition, Obama does not see Iran and its assistance to Shia groups as the main problem in the Middle East. In Obama's view, the chief threats are ISIS and like-minded groups that seek to destabilise the region and the internal problems facing most Arab countries. Obama told Friedman in the same interview: "The biggest threats that they [Gulf Arab countries] face may not be coming from Iran invading [but from] dissatisfaction inside their own countries."



US President Barack Obama boards Air Force One at Stansted Airport, England, on April 24th, at the end of trips to Saudi Arabia, England and Germany.

Hence, despite renewed US commitments to Saudi Arabia's security and promises of more arms sales to the Gulf states, it is clear that Obama sees the region and its problems from a profoundly different ideological perspective than the Saudis and nothing in the remain-

ing months of his presidency is likely to change this view.

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An awkward but essential relationship

Viewpoint



Rashmee Roshan Lall

Every now and then, the US-Saudi relationship is described as "awkward", but never more so than now when US President Barack Obama made a swift late-April trip to Riyadh and met with King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.

No one, it was reported, was left with a warm and fuzzy feeling, especially not the principals. A statement released after the meeting said that the two leaders "exchanged views", which is "diplomat-ese" for their having failed to agree on much.

So what is new?

The United States and Saudi Arabia did not agree on much. How could it be any different with two countries that are so different in temperament, habit, culture and aspiration? One is a religiously orthodox monarchical family estate; the other a fiercely freedom-loving, self-regarding democracy with an advancing (if contentious) socially liberal agenda.

It was arguably simpler in 1945 when Saudi King Abdulaziz, Salman's father, met US president Franklin Delano Roosevelt on board the US Navy cruiser USS Quincy in the Great Bitter Lake segment of the

Suez Canal on Valentine's Day 1945. Then, the trade-off was straightforward: The United States would provide security, the Saudis oil. Both countries were worried about communism and were content to stay in touch if not exactly in sync.

Now, it is all changing. Even while Obama was in Riyadh, veteran Saudi former intelligence chief Prince Turki al-Faisal was pronouncing that "there is going to have to be a recalibration of our relationship with America".

Some would say the recalibration has already happened. The "Salman doctrine" is a sign. It has been described by the well-connected Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi as the king's decision "that Saudi interest comes first" and that Riyadh cannot link its fate to its alliance with the United States.

The intervention in Yemen signalled the start of a new muscular Saudi decisiveness. Then there is the "Mohammed bin Salman doctrine", which encompasses the modernising dreams of the 31-year-old deputy crown prince. He has unveiled his Saudi Vision 2030, which includes the creation of the world's largest sovereign wealth fund, among other initiatives.

In truth, though, it is the United States that set the recalibration of relations in motion, not just by pursuing a nuclear deal with Iran and remaining, as the Gulf Arabs see it, silent about Tehran's regional meddling and adventurism.

There is the blowback from 9/11. It has been 15 years coming and is stirring a delayed revulsion towards Saudi Arabia among America's elected

officials. One does not have to be Saudi (or, for that matter, Arab) to wonder if this is because of the bounty of fracking, enabling the United States to become one of the world's largest energy producers and reducing its reliance on Saudi oil.

In the long term, such an expedient uncoupling from Saudi Arabia may be both ill-timed and imprudent. Fracking produces approximately 300,000 barrels of natural gas a day but how long can it continue given all the worrying reports about its environmental, health and safety consequences? Only cheap and plentiful renewable energy can liberate the United States from dependence on oil and that day is some way off.

Short-sighted and stubborn, the US Congress continues to debate a bipartisan bill that would allow American victims of the 9/11 attacks to sue the Saudi government and claim damages if Riyadh were found by US courts to be complicit.

What a time to be doing this. If anything, the Saudis are now better partners in the so-called war on terror than in 2001. CNN reporter Fareed Zakaria recently recalled retired US Army general David Petraeus telling him that "the most significant strategic shift during his time in uniform was that Saudi Arabia went from being a tacit supporter to an aggressive foe of jihadi groups".

That sounds about right because the House of Saud is as much in the sights of the jihadi groups as the United States, the West, Israel, India and others. Though the Saudis undoubtedly bear significant responsibility for the spread of an intolerant interpretation of Islam and for exporting it around the world,

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they arguably lost control of the extremist levers more than 30 years ago.

In any case, it would be foolish for the United States to legislate to allow its citizens to claim damages if American courts find the Saudi government complicit. First, can that even be proved?

Second, to strip Riyadh of sovereign immunity might turn Washington into a target as well. Consider the lawsuits that citizens of different countries could bring against the US government – the house destroyed by a drone strike in Pakistan; the death of a family's main breadwinner in a bombing raid on the Iraq-Syria border; the bride who was widowed before the marriage rites because of a US strike on wedding party in Afghanistan.

For all sorts of reasons, America's interest is to stay deeply engaged with Saudi Arabia. Eddy's account of the FDR-Abdulaziz meeting provides a worthwhile postscript. He describes the simple good faith with which the Saudi king straightforwardly asked for an honourable friendship with FDR because he was known "as the champion of every freedom and because the US never colonises nor enslaves". The American president, wrote Eddy, "gave Ibn Saud the double assurance" that he personally, as president, would never do anything which might prove hostile to the Arabs and the US government would make no change in that.

How far we have come.

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