

French President Hollande Shows Obama the Way

The invitation to and the visit of French President François Hollande to attend the summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council on May 4-5, 2015 was both a meaningful symbol and a signal to the United States, the historic ally of the Gulf countries. It directly alluded to the changing attitudes of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States toward the United States as a result of differences on Middle East issues.

The visit was symbolic of changing relationships in two ways. The first is that Hollande is the first Western leader to be invited to a GCC (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman, and Bahrain) summit. The last foreign leader to be invited to the summit was the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in December 2007. The second is that it pre-empted the U.S.-Arab summit to be held in Washington, D.C. in mid-May and was given equal prominence.

It is clear by now that France has taken the lead in Europe in its criticism of the negotiations, supposed to be concluded by the end of June 2015, between the G5+1 and Iran on the latter's nuclear program. In implicit comparison with and scarcely veiled allusion to present U.S. policies, both the French president and Saudi King Salman have referred to the constancy, reliability, and credibility of France in standing by its friends and in its positive stance to Middle East issues, specifically toward Iran.

Disagreements and cooling of relations between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have occurred for two main reasons. The Saudis have continually criticized the U.S. failure to launch a military strike against the Syrian Assad regime in September 2013. Above all, the Saudis are conscious that they and the U.S. have different objectives. Obama wants a deal on the

nuclear issue and a rapprochement with Iran; Saudi Arabia wants the influence of Iran to be limited. It fears the possibility of Iranian hegemony in the Middle East, and control or threat to the Strait of Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb, thus jeopardizing more than 30 percent of the world's oil shipments.

France, like Saudi Arabia, has always been critical of Iran's nuclear program and refused to make a deal with Iran in November 2013. Both countries are opposed to any premature lifting of sanctions on Iran. The Gulf States contrasted French clarity on Egypt, Iran, and Syria with U.S. inconsistency.

Saudi Arabia in July 2013 was unhappy with the Obama policy for a number of reasons. The U.S. had abandoned Egyptian President Mubarak in 2011, had supported Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, and had halted temporarily the sending of its annual military aid to General Sisi when he became president of Egypt.

On February 15, 2015, the Egyptian air force bombed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (IS) installations in Libya. IS had beheaded 21 Christian Copts on a beach in Tripoli. The next day, France signed an arms deal, worth 5.2 billion euros, with Egypt, a country concerned about its security. The deal involved 24 Rafale fighter-bombers, a frigate, air-to-air missiles, and cruise missiles.

President Hollande's visit in May 2015 to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf was successful, diplomatically and economically. The new Saudi foreign minister, Adel al-Jubeir, remarked that France was a historical ally and trading partner that had proved reliable. He pointed out the common views between the two countries – on Syria, Yemen, Iraq, terrorism, and most of all on Iran's nuclear program.

The commercial and military ties between France and Saudi

Arabia are increasing. Relations had been evident in December 2013, when Saudi Arabia agreed to fund \$3 billion's worth of French weapons to help the Lebanese military, the largest grant given to the country's armed forces. The grant included armored personnel carriers, helicopters with air-to-ground missiles, and navy patrol ships.

The visit to Saudi Arabia on May 5, 2015 was Hollande's fourth to the country. A day earlier, his visit culminated in an economic deal with Qatar, worth billions of euros. This was a contract for 24 Rafale combat aircraft worth 6.3 billion euros (\$7 billion) and promises of more orders related to defense, transport, energy, and health issues. There was also agreement on drivers and mechanics, and on the training of intelligence officers.

The French honeymoon continued in Saudi Arabia with the setting up of committees to discuss 20 projects worth billions of dollars. They deal with arms exports, solar power installations, Airbus, civil aircraft deliveries, transportation projects with a rail infrastructure in Keddah, and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.

France is seeking a strategic relationship with the Gulf countries, one that may in the extreme imply military action.

It is based on common determination to fight Islamist terrorism. The success of France was shown immediately by the fact that Secretary of State John Kerry changed his schedule to travel to Riyadh to work out plans for the May 13-14 U.S.-Arab meeting in Washington, D.C.

France has been trying to exert political influence as well as make economic gains. It has not replaced the U.S. in the extent of its influence on Middle East countries, but the Obama administration must now be aware that France has become a more important player in the area because of its strong position on Iran. It is not too late for the Obama administration to take heed and change the nature of its

ongoing negotiations with Iran.

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