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WHEN THE U.S. WILL INTERVENE IN THE GULF, AND OTHER NOTES FROM THE CAMP DAVID SUMMIT

June 2, 2015

By John Hannah

I've held a number of discussions with people who have direct knowledge of the conversations that took place at this month's Camp David Summit between President Obama and leaders from the GCC. I thought it might be useful to relay some of the highlights of what I picked up – understanding full well that what was relayed to me is neither the complete picture nor necessarily a fully objective one.

1. According to my sources, Obama went out of his way to stress his understanding of the threat that Iran poses to the region. Rather than contest the Gulf states' gloomy assessment of Iran's nefarious intentions, the president largely agreed with them. He fully acknowledged that Iran has been dangerously expanding its influence, particularly through the use of proxies like Hezbollah. He repeatedly expressed appreciation for his guests' concerns that Iran would try to use any sanctions relief from a nuclear deal to spread further havoc in the Middle East. But he countered that the best way of meeting that challenge is through a two-pronged strategy: First, a verifiable agreement that prevents Iran from developing nuclear weapons; and second, a unified U.S.-GCC position that builds the capabilities necessary to block Iran's regional expansion.
2. Obama went so far as to characterize Iran as a "fascist" regime. At the White House dinner that he hosted on May 13, Obama seemed to qualify this harsh assessment by noting that there did exist "other" voices in Iran that need to be identified, worked with, and strengthened. As the summit progressed the next day at Camp David, however, Obama's concern for Iranian moderates seemed to recede, increasingly overtaken by his focus on establishing a meaningful strategic partnership with the GCC that could effectively counter Iranian aggression.
3. The president made clear that the security of the Gulf was a vital U.S. interest. He said it was therefore his duty

and responsibility to maintain America's power and influence in the region. Withdrawal is not an option for the United States.

4. On multiple occasions, Obama emphasized in private the message that became the summit's main headline: The security and sovereignty of the GCC states constitutes a red line for the United States. He appeared intent on leaving no doubt that any Iranian effort to threaten or attack the Gulf countries directly would be met by a U.S. military response. In short, if Saudi Arabia or any of its smaller, less strategically significant neighbors is attacked by Iran, America will be at war – or so Obama wanted his guests to believe.

5. And short of an outright attack? Well, that's where things got a bit more interesting. Truth be told, the odds of Iran launching a conventional assault across the Gulf are low, all things considered. Why risk triggering a direct confrontation with a vastly more powerful U.S. military, after all? The far more likely scenario: covert penetration and interference, subversion, sabotage, terrorist attacks, and local proxies instigating destabilizing acts of civil unrest and low-level violence. Those are Iran's preferred tools. Where possible, its modus operandi has generally been to keep its hand hidden, its role plausibly deniable.

So what will the U.S. do when the Shiite-majority cities and towns of Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province – i.e., where all the oil is – erupt in wide-scale protests against the royal family, with Iranian media, politicians, and clerics agitating them on? While the issue was certainly not addressed directly at the summit, in his introductory presentation Obama made an unsolicited point that caught his guests by surprise and left them somewhat bemused. He told them fairly bluntly that the United States would find it very hard to intervene on behalf of their regimes should they one day wake up and find themselves in a showdown with large masses of their own people. The message: Absent a smoking gun of Iranian interference, the Gulf monarchies will be on their own in the face of any domestic uprising that threatens their rule. An unmistakable corollary of sorts to the pointed criticism that Obama directed at Sunni Arab leaders in his April interview with the New York Times, where he impolitely observed that “[T]he biggest threats that they face may not be coming from Iran invading. It's going to be from dissatisfaction inside their own countries.” Paging Hosni Mubarak.

6. What about Iranian-backed aggression and meddling elsewhere in the Middle East? That's where Obama apparently went into full Lawrence-of-Arabia mode. Quite striking, really. Foreign Policy head honcho David Rothkopf has already written on this, but I'll add my two cents. Obama left his visitors with the very strong impression that he's essentially all-in on their notion of building some sort of Sunni expeditionary capability that could do battle against Iranian-led forces and other bad actors (the Islamic State?) across the region. Given his own extremely ambivalent relationship to the exercise of American military power (especially in the Middle East), and his long-held view that it's about time our putative allies started pulling their own weight on security matters, I suppose we shouldn't be shocked at the president's apparent enthusiasm for this proposal. The Gulf leaders came away with the understanding that Obama is ready to establish a very serious, high priority U.S. program to train, arm, and develop a dedicated force – drawn presumably from the militaries of the Arab and Sunni world –

that would be capable of deploying to regional hotspots to do battle with Iran, its proxies, and other extremist groups that threaten regional peace and stability. A Sunni Foreign Legion, of sorts. Or at least that seems to be the thought.

7. But determining precisely what Obama has in mind is not entirely clear. Even as he seemed to endorse the need for a unified Sunni fighting force, he also injected notes of caution about the potential pitfalls of foreign military interventions in general, even Arab-led ones. This was apparently most evident in his discussion of Yemen, where Obama's deep ambivalence about the Saudi-led campaign is quite apparent. In the first instance, the president made clear that anything beyond America's current behind-the-scenes role in Yemen would be counter-productive and out of the question. Deeper, more direct U.S. military involvement, he opined, would only end up backfiring, enflaming the situation, and further fueling extremist hatred of the United States throughout the Islamic world.

But Obama also seemed to warn his guests that their direct role in Yemen was not necessarily the preferred route to go either. Instead, he suggested, the fight ideally needs to be Yemeni on Yemeni. At a more general level, he observed that Iran has been successfully expanding its influence for years across the region – not directly, but through the use of local proxies. With more than a hint of admiration for the skill and professionalism of Qassem Soleimani and the IRGC's Qods Force, Obama noted that Iran has consistently excelled at this type of sub-state conflict.

And that's when he let loose with this little gem: The Arabs, according to the president of the United States, need to learn from Iran's example. In fact, they need to take a page out of the playbook of the Qods Force – by which he meant developing their own local proxies capable of going toe-to-toe with Iran's agents and defeating them. The president seemed to marvel at the fact that from Hezbollah to the Houthis to the Iraqi militias, Iran has such a deep bench of effective proxies willing to advance its interests. Where, he asked, are their equivalent on the Sunni side? Why, he wanted to know in particular, have the Saudis and their partners not been able to cultivate enough Yemenis to carry the burden of the fight against the Houthis? The Arabs, Obama suggested, badly need to develop a toolbox that goes beyond the brute force of direct intervention. Instead, they need to, be subtler, sneakier, more effective – well, just more like Iran.

A brief time-out for some commentary: Are you feeling better yet? After all, what could possibly go wrong? Remember how well things went the last time Saudi Arabia unleashed the dogs of Sunni jihad to fight Soviet communism, Iran's Islamic Revolution, and other such evils? Billions spent around the world to bankroll extremist mosques, madrassas, and charities. The Taliban. Bin Laden. Al Qaeda. 9/11. We're still living with the blowback. Think about it. Feeling threatened, desperate, uncertain of U.S. support, and in an existential death match with an intensely sectarian Shiite Iran, who do you think the Wahhabis are most likely to turn to as potential proxies in a pinch? AQAP in Yemen? Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria? The Islamic State in Iraq? Impossible, you say? Maybe. But maybe not. The past isn't necessarily prologue, but it's certainly reason to proceed very, very cautiously. The president appears to have a special infatuation

with the relatively low cost, under-the-radar utility of black ops, covert action, and paramilitary activities. He also seems eager, even desperate, to ease the burdens of U.S. global leadership by compelling difficult allies to step up and police their own neighborhoods. Combine these impulses together and it all sounds great in theory as a means of countering Iran. But this is the Middle East and the coming jihad vs. jihad sectarian conflagration is only just getting started. So be careful what you wish for.

8. Back to the summit. A great deal of time at Camp David was consumed by detailed presentations from the Secretary of Defense, the CIA Director, as well as other senior U.S. officials on what more can be done to strengthen and expand America's relations with the GCC on the full array of security and intelligence issues.

9. The GCC leaders, of course, also got a lengthy briefing on the emerging nuclear deal with Iran and the status of the negotiations. They were given ample time to voice their concerns with the deal. The president acknowledged the legitimacy of those concerns and intimated that he in fact shared many of them. Nevertheless, Obama vigorously defended his diplomacy as the best means of securing not only the vital interests of the United States, but the Gulf states as well. He tried to assure his guests that sanctions relief would be gradual while inspections would be tough; indeed, the toughest ever. Nothing would be based on trust, Obama claimed, because Iran simply cannot be trusted. The President implied that unless Iran consents to his terms on sanctions and inspections, there would be no deal. He promised to keep the Gulf states fully apprised as the talks progressed.

10. The president neither sought nor received the GCC's approval for his April 2 Lausanne framework deal with Iran. He was allegedly quite fixated on criticism of the deal in the media, Congress and other quarters. Here, he and his staff came off to several of their Arab guests as exceedingly thin skinned and deathly afraid that some of the GCC states would follow Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's lead by publicly challenging the emerging deal. So rather than put pressure on the leaders to back Lausanne, Obama and his team were in a far more defensive posture, essentially pleading with them to withhold any judgment until an agreement is actually finalized in the coming weeks. Silence, not assent, was what the president was really seeking.

11. Whether because their expectations going into the summit were so low, or for some other reason, perhaps relating to the intoxicating effects of being so assiduously courted by the world's most powerful man for several days, some of the more skeptical Gulf leaders seemed to have left Camp David reasonably upbeat, all things considered. Rothkopf has noted this as well. I was told that they came in expecting zero, but left giving the summit a mark of 50 percent. Not great, for sure. But also not a disaster. Obama mostly came off as sincere and determined, and they were pleasantly surprised by the concreteness and ambition of at least a few of his proposals for expanded security cooperation. The proof will be in the implementation.

Make no mistake. There remains a systemic crisis in confidence between the key GCC states and the Obama

administration. The Gulf's top leaders still hate the Iran deal. But they're deeply skeptical that there is anything they can do at this point to stop it. The president seems hell-bent on an agreement, so they see their choice as either getting out of the way or getting run over. They believe that Israel, with all its clout in Washington, tried and failed. So what chance do they stand? Especially in the middle of a war in Yemen where their ability to sustain the fight is almost totally dependent on American munitions, they fear that a vindictive White House is still quite capable of imposing a steep price on them for crossing it on an issue so critical to Obama's legacy. Rather than pick a costly fight that they feel doomed to lose, the wiser course, the Arabs reason, may be simply to make the best of a very bad situation. Lock in as many concrete security benefits as they can from Obama now, while continuing to take whatever unilateral steps are necessary to protect their vital interests in Yemen, Syria or beyond, whether the U.S. agrees with them or not. Then just batten down the hatches and ride out the coming storm until January 2017, hoping beyond hope that the Obama years have been an unnerving aberration in U.S. foreign policy – rather than the new normal.

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