



329  
MAY  
2015

## SPILLING THE BEANS, RIYADH STYLE

**Eckart Woertz**, Senior Research Fellow CIDOB

\* This article was published in Open Democracy on 19 May 2015

**S**audi Arabia and other oil rich Gulf countries don't want to live in the shadow of an Iranian nuclear bomb. Yet when the US embarks on an agreement to prevent this very possibility, they fear it might lead to a grand bargain that gives Iran carte blanche for expansionism in the Middle East.

Jamal Khashoggi, a journalist close to the Saudi ruling family, is already speaking of the "inter-Muslim struggle of the century" and Prince Turki al Faisal, former chief of Saudi intelligence and erstwhile ambassador of his country to Washington, is travelling the conference circuit warning that Saudi Arabia will strive to get a nuclear device should Iran do the same.

To alleviate such fears US President Obama invited leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to Camp David on May 14. Besides even more weapons, GCC leaders hoped for a formal defense treaty beyond the informal guarantees that exist and in fact have materialised in the past, for example during the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991.

However, the US has been **disinclined** to enter into a formal agreement with potentially unstable autocratic states, as it fears to be drawn into their domestic and regional policy agendas. In an interview with New York Times columnist Tom Friedman, Obama argued that the main threats to the stability of the Gulf states are not external, but rather come from disaffection of youth and other domestic constituencies.

A lecture in liberal democracy was not what Gulf leaders had hoped for. When it became clear that a formal agreement was not on the table, King Salman of Saudi Arabia decided not to show up at Camp David in a remarkable snub to the American hosts.

In an apparent move of solidarity, King Hamad of Bahrain, whose restive country is dependent on Saudi aid and political assurances, followed suit, preferring to watch a horse show with Queen Elizabeth. Sheikh Khalifa of the UAE and Sultan Qaboos of Oman could not attend due to ill health and thus underlined the approaching succession issues of the region's aging rulers.

Only Kuwait and Qatar sent their heads of state. The UAE sent their de facto ruler, Crown Prince Muhammad of Abu Dhabi. Saudi Arabia also sent its Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, who is Minister of Interior, besides Deputy Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the young son of the king and Minister of Defense, a rising star in the royal family.

Instead of grander joint strategies and formal agreements, the talks revolved around military technicalities, like cyber warfare and missile defense systems—the very external threats Obama had identified as secondary to Gulf security in his NYT interview.

For the Gulf countries, the disappointment of Camp David is the latest in a series of events reflecting perceived US unreliability. They see Iran's support for the Shiite-led government in Baghdad, the Assad regime in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi rebels in Yemen as aggressive expansionism in the face of US indifference and naivety.

They fear US disengagement as a result of reduced reliance on Middle East oil, in the wake of the shale boom and growing focus on the Asian policy theatre. They have not forgotten how the US turned its back on their fellow autocrat Mubarak when Egyptian street protests escalated, and how it did not follow up on its self-declared red lines when the Assad regime used chemical weapons against its own population.

As the Gulf countries realise that they cannot rely on the US to pursue their foreign policy agendas in the Middle East, they have put forward initiatives of their own. At times these have been adventurous and shown the limits of petrodollar diplomacy and warfare by proxy. The UAE and Egypt bombarded the strongholds of the Islamist rebels in Libya that Qatar supported. More recently Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia have decided to bury their differences about the Muslim Brotherhood and have lent their concerted support to a Syrian rebel coalition that was able to achieve territorial gains in the north-west of the country, but also included Al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra.

Saudi Arabia's initiative to build an alliance of ten regional countries for intervention in Yemen is the largest and most daring effort in that vein. In addition to the GCC countries (except Oman), the alliance includes Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan and Sudan. Yet like the Camp David snub, or Saudi declining a seat in the UN Security Council in 2013, the Yemen intervention appears hasty and lacks strategy.

Airpower alone will not be able to overwhelm the Houthi rebels—hardly an Iranian puppet, but a domestic party with their own agenda. Material support from Iran is recent and marginal at best. The Houthis rely on US-supplied weaponry to no small extent, which they have either captured or obtained from their ally, former Yemeni President Saleh.

Meanwhile, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) has benefitted from the campaign against its Houthi adversaries and has been able to take hold of the southern port city of Mukalla. Despite all differences, the Houthis have also formed a buffer against AQAP. Gulf countries should be careful what they wish for. They entered the Yemeni quagmire without a back up plan, and their airstrikes have caused numerous civilian casualties and a humanitarian crisis.

Pakistan has refused to provide ground troops and Egypt is reluctant to do so, remembering well its disastrous Yemen intervention of the 1960s. The Gulf countries themselves seem to be unable to put boots on the ground. They are among the largest arms importers in the world and their military expenditure is ten times higher than that of Iran, but they lack training, maintenance and unit cohesion.

Like much of Gulf society, white-collar mentalities are common: Saudi billionaire Prince Al Waleed has promised a Bentley to Saudi pilots participating in the Yemen campaign. It is unlikely that such a military could prevail in ground combat against tribal fighters in mountainous terrain. The outcome of earlier border clashes with Houthi rebels in 2009 does not bode well in that regard.

With the ill-conceived Yemen intervention and the diplomatic snub of Camp David, the Saudis are involuntarily spilling the beans and proving that Obama has a point: petrodollars and weapons cannot buy them security unless they put their societies on a more equal and open footing. Rather than arms expenditure their real competition with Iran will be about economic diversification, educational achievements, military organisation and a national sense of purpose.