

Center for Strategic and International Studies

**Conference Call on the Gulf Cooperation Council
Leaders' Visit to the White House on May 13**

Participant:

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COLM QUINN: Hey, folks. This is Colm Quinn from CSIS. We're about to kick off this call. What I'll do is I'm just going to hand over to Dr. Alterman. He's going to give some brief remarks and then we can open up to your questions. Just remember we'll have a transcript of this posted later on and audio as well on CSIS.org. So I'm going to hand over to Jon to kick us off.

JON B. ALTERMAN: Can everybody hear me now?

Q: Loud and clear.

MR. ALTERMAN: OK, thanks.

It's unclear just how historic this meeting is going to be next week. There is a desire to make it historic. There is even talk about a potential Obama Doctrine emerging from it. But it seems that there's a lot that we still don't understand that's still being worked out. It'll be worked out partly with Secretary Kerry in Paris. But there's a way in which nobody really knows exactly what they're trying to come away with.

I think from the Gulf side there's a desire to leave reassured from an administration that has often left them feeling insecure. But what would it really take to reassure the Gulf States, who are facing what they see as an expansionist Iran at multiple levels? The U.S. is really focused on the nuclear threat from Iran, and the U.S. argument is that negotiating an arrangement with the Iranians over their nuclear program will make the Gulf States more secure. But from the Gulf State perspective, the nuclear program is only one of the many parts of the Iranian threat. There is the Iranian involvement in Syria, there is the Iranian involvement in Yemen, there is the Iranian involvement in Bahrain and elsewhere that they see as in many ways being a more urgent threat, a more vital threat, and a threat that the United States doesn't really share their assessment of.

I think in a profound way, whatever comes out of this, there's an ability for the United States to have maximum impact precisely where it's least important. That is, if the Gulf States want to be assured that Iranian ships aren't going to cross the Gulf and put Iranian troops on their shores to occupy the Gulf States, there's a high ability of the United States to reassure on that front, and I think the United States' ability to prevent that from happening is high. But nobody thinks the likelihood is very high. The real threat, in their mind, is over Iran's asymmetrical actions, what Iran is doing in Yemen, what Iran is doing elsewhere. And there, I think, you have really fundamentally different U.S. assessments of what the problem is and what to do.

And from a U.S. perspective, you have a couple problems arming the Gulf States to make them feel more confident in that regard. One is maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge. But as we've seen in Yemen, you also have the problem of what happens when you make allies more capable and then they use your weapons and training to do things that you think are not only against their own interests, but also against U.S. interests? And we've seen some of this strain emerging in Yemen, an operation which

has surprised Saudis and Americans in their ability to sustain this kind of complex operation for as long as they have. But if what this means is the U.S. is arming the Gulf States to act in Yemen and Libya and other places, independent of U.S. judgment, using U.S. training and equipment, I think that presents a difficult problem for the United States.

And ultimately, when it comes to issues like Iran's regional behavior, is there anything the United States can do that would reassure the Gulf States? Because the Gulf States feel that Iranian actions are not a consequence of this Iranian president, it's not a consequence of the Islamic Republic. In many cases, they have told me quite frankly they think this is a pattern of Persian expansionism that dates back millennia. And while they feel that they're fighting a millennium-long struggle, I can guarantee you the United States is not going to be committed to fighting a millennium-long struggle against another ethnic group or sectarian group or anything else. It seems to me that where they most want reassurance is where the U.S. is both least able and most unwilling to provide it. And that's why it seems to me that while we may have some positive things emerging from this summit, my guess is that the summit is going to leave everybody feeling a little bit unsatisfied.

So that's what I have to sort of start off with, and I'd welcome any comments people would like – or questions people would have going forward.

Q: Hi, Jon. This is Rachel Oswald with Congressional Quarterly.

My question has to – when you talked about the Gulf States, you kind of described them kind of uniformly. But are there any differences within the group? Specifically thinking about Qatar and Oman, where they may not see things from quite the same prism that, for example, Bahrain and Saudi do.

MR. ALTERMAN: There are profound differences between the Gulf States, and I think that the most fundamental difference is how formal they want the U.S. assurance to be. The Emiratis had initially spoken about some sort of treaty. In many countries, the idea of having a defense treaty with the United States is political poison. We have all different kinds of defense agreements with the Gulf States and they all work differently. So I think on a whole range of things there are different attitudes toward the Iranians, there are different attitudes toward partnership with the United States, there are different sensitivities about the U.S. presence, there are different shopping lists for things that people want, and there's different willingness to accept U.S. constraints on weapons sales and different willingness to pursue other countries that produce weapons.

So I – so this is one of the things – and part of the reason why you've had so many meetings in the GCC – they had a GCC Summit in Riyadh and there's the GCC foreign ministers meeting in Paris and more – is I think the GCC is trying to figure out what they want to ask for in a more unified way. But the reality is they have very, very different desires/expectations/fears, and they have different attitudes toward the Iranians,

with the Qataris and the Omanis being most concerned with antagonizing the Iranians, and the Emiratis and the Saudis being the least concerned.

Q: Jon, hi. This is Paul Shinkman with U.S. News and World Report.

On the strength of both of those things, I'd be interested to get your perspective – you know, given the premium that the White House has put on – has put on local countries taking responsibility for the conflicts that are happening there – the U.S. is not going to lead these conflicts, even though we sort of have, de facto – I wonder if you think that that gives any leverage to these countries as they come back to the U.S. in terms of requests for treaties or additional weapons that they're not getting before. Do they have any kind of new mandate now that they didn't have, say, last year?

MR. ALTERMAN: Because they're – I'm sorry, I didn't hear all of that. Because they're – because they're doing more on their own?

Q: Well, just because of the White House rhetoric about pushing these countries to start taking more responsibility for conflicts in their neighborhood instead of the U.S. immediately rushing to war.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yeah, you know, the argument that some make – and I think the UAE ambassador made this yesterday – is that the United Arab Emirates has fought alongside the United States in multilateral operations six times in the last 15 years or so. They can do so effectively partly because of the interoperability of equipment. They argue that the UAE has been there, and the UAE is acting, and that should make it easier for the UAE to get more equipment. But at the same time, I think we're seeing in Yemen and elsewhere a certain reservation about when these countries act independently rather than in concert with the United States. And on top of that, we have a foreign military sales system that everybody thinks is completely broken. So even if the U.S. were to pursue weapons sales, these would take quite some time.

One of the things, certainly, that the U.S. can do – and which I would expect will come out of this summit – is a streamlined way of expediting weapons sales when there are conflicts. And we've certainly seen in Syria the Jordanians and the Emiratis, who are very much carrying out actions in Syria that are in cooperation with U.S. efforts and aligned with U.S. efforts, there's certainly an effort to expedite the sale of weapons and munitions to those countries.

Q: Dr. Alterman? Sorry, go ahead.

Q: Jon? This is George Condon with National Journal.

Now, I'm easily confused, I admit, but I'm confused about two (things ?) on this – on this summit. One, what the president's personal relationships are like with these leaders. And secondly, Camp David is almost always used for symbolic reasons, to show – to let, you know, Prime Minister Blair and President Bush joke about using the same

brand of toothpaste and to show a personal relationship with the president or a closeness in the relationship. What is the import of having this at Camp David?

MR. ALTERMAN: Well, this is only the second summit the president's had at Camp David. He had a G-8 summit at Camp David. I think it is meant to create the reassurance that this is more than just business. It is meant to generate images of people engaging informally. But in – it's very complicated to create personal intimacy when there are so many people coming in for a short period of time. So you can create the images, but will you really be able to create the feeling of closeness, the feeling of intimacy, the sort of family retreat aspect of Camp David if they're having dinner in Washington the night before and then trooping out and trooping back? I think they'll try to create it, and they'll create the images, but I'm not sure they'll have as much success creating the desired feelings.

Q: What are the relationships with the president right now?

MR. ALTERMAN: Well, it depends on the people. King Salman has only just become king, so it's not a longstanding relationship. Mohammed bin Zayed will be coming from the UAE. I think they have a broader relationship. There's been a lot of contact with the National Security Council and others, and he just saw Mohammed bin Zayed last month in Washington. I'm not aware of a close relationship with either the emir of Qatar or the king of Bahrain. And then, of course, because Sultan Qaboos from Oman is not able to come, I'm not sure that the person who is coming is somebody the president has a close tie with. So I think it's varied.

Q: Can I just –

Q: Dr. Alterman, this is Mike – oh, I'm sorry, go ahead.

Q: Hey. Juliet Eilperin from the Post.

I just wanted to follow up on that earlier question about this idea that the administration has talked about empowering regional allies to take responsibility for their regions. You've talked about, obviously, that there are unintended consequences, but I'm just wondering if, Jon, you could elaborate a little more on, well, again, does the U.S. just have to live with that? Is that basically they've outlined this different way of conducting foreign policy in an effort to not get entangled in further wars in the Middle East and they have to accept what flows from that? Or do you see a conscious effort by the administration to either reassess that strategy or limit what the fallout is? I was just wondering if you could just elaborate a bit on that. Thanks.

MR. ALTERMAN: I don't – I don't think the administration's completely worked out what it thinks about that. There are certainly a number of people in the military who say this is a necessary consequence of enabling your allies.

And you're not going to agree with them all the time and you deal with it. And there are other people who look at what's happening in Yemen and say this may be a huge, complex humanitarian emergency, and it's entirely manmade, and doesn't the U.S. have a responsibility to play a more active role? Secretary Kerry was able to do what a number of American interlocutors haven't been able to do for the last month or so, and seems to have persuaded the Saudis to adopt a pause at some point in the near future.

I don't think people have worked out the way this works. I don't think the administration has a unified view. I don't think it's trying to lead someplace. I think they are reacting to what is a rapidly shifting environment. But again, I think that the most important part of all of this is we do not see eye-to-eye with many of our allies on precisely what would constitute the kind of Iranian aggression that would spark an American reaction, because the Iranians tend to act asymmetrically and the United States is best at responding to conventional military forces.

And where they are exactly right now and where they'll be exactly next Friday on coming to an agreement on that—to me—is a very big question, because the pre-eminent threat that our allies feel is from what many people in the Gulf will say at the drop of a hat, which is Iran controls four Arab capitals. And that's simply not an American view.

Q: Dr. Alterman, Mike Shear at The New York Times.

Two questions: One, you know, how – what metrics are there that we should have as observers of this process next week to get some sense of whether or not it's successful or not? In other words, are there certain things that, in your view, they have to come away with for this to have been successful – either in terms of weapon sales or in terms of treaties or in terms of statements of one thing or another?

And then, at the top you also talked about this idea that there were people talking about some sort of Obama doctrine. It doesn't sound like, having listened to you now, that you think that that's really likely. They seem less certain, if anything, about what's happening there. But what would that – I mean, what is it that you think could emerge out of this that would begin to shape some kind of doctrine from the Obama administration's perspective about what's going on in this world and how to handle it?

MR. ALTERMAN: Well, I think there will be an impulse to try to do a lot through language. And there'll be an impulse on the GCC side to discern what does the language really do. There's a strong desire for weapon sales. I think there will probably be some sort of announcement. You can talk about joint training. Other things are harder. You know, the fact is we have 35,000 troops in the region already. So in many ways, it's hard to argue to do a huge amount more.

And ultimately, there's sort of a conundrum. And we've seen this with the briefings with the Gulf States over the Iran negotiations over the last year. And that is that American officials have gotten frustrated that they try to talk specific technical details with the GCC states about where the Iran negotiations are, and the leadership's

not really interested in technical details because they're interested in how they feel. And the technical details don't really assure them. They want a visceral sense that the United States has their back.

And they don't have that sense. And I think the way to judge this summit will likely not come in the immediate aftermath of the summit, but whether there comes a greater confidence that shapes the way people act, a greater willingness to consult, a greater amount of coordination because people feel they have a connection and a confidence in where the U.S. is. Leaders up and down the Gulf have told me for years they haven't felt it. You know, there's only so much we're going to be able to tell from the language and the announcements. And I think it'll take six months of seeing how people behave to figure that out.

Q: Hi. Peter Barnes from Fox Business.

I joined the call late, and I was just – did you – did anybody ask or did you comment on this Wall Street Journal report that the Saudis now might be seeking nuclear weapons themselves? And if so, I can circle back to –

MR. ALTERMAN: I didn't see the report and I didn't comment on it. So I'm 0-for-2 on that, I'm sorry.

Q: Well, what about that prospect. What do you think about that and is that something that could happen?

MR. ALTERMAN: My – I would be shocked if the U.S. extended a nuclear umbrella to the GCC states at this point in time. I could see it somewhere down the road. I could see it after there's – after several steps. I just – I don't think that's coming. I don't – I cannot imagine that's coming out of this summit.

Q: But the Saudis, like anybody else, could, you know, probably buy this technology themselves and do it outside of the – their alliance with the U.S., if they're – if they're upset enough.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yeah, but the question is would they do it if the Iranians hadn't gotten a bomb first, right, because if they were to do it preemptively there'd be two consequences. One is it would dramatically strain their relations with the United States. And second is that it would probably prompt the Iranians to accelerate the development of a nuclear program. So the would be 0-for-2 if they did that. I just – I don't – I don't see that happening.

Q: Thanks.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yeah, there's speculation – and certainly I've had senior royals tell me in the last two months that if anybody tells you that if Iran develops a bomb

they won't also develop a bomb, they're lying to you. That's a direct quote, "They are lying to you." But that's premised on the Iranians having the bomb first.

Q: Thanks.

MR. ALTERMAN: Yep.

Q: Hey, Jon. Good morning. This is Toluse Olorunnipa with Bloomberg News.

I have two questions.

MR. ALTERMAN: Somebody's talking, but breaking up.

Q: Hello. Can you hear me now?

MR. ALTERMAN: Yes, I can. Thank you.

Q: Thanks. This is Toluse Olorunnipa with Bloomberg News.

I have two questions. The first is I've seen some reports attendance is in doubt for this summit, that there may be several heads of state, either for health reasons or other reasons, who may not show up and may send deputies. Is that a concern? Is that an issue that you're looking at? Is the – is the Saudi king, is he confirmed now? And what happens if he or other leaders don't show up? Is that going to be seen as a snub of the U.S.?

And then my second question is about – you talked about the qualitative advantage that Israel needs to keep in terms of weaponry in the region. Is your sense Israel is sort of making its case the U.S. in the run-up to this summit? Or are they – are they voicing their concerns about anything that the U.S. may do with the GCC?

MR. ALTERMAN: OK. I haven't heard that King Salman is or is not coming. I think the assumption is he is. My guess is that he will because it would be perceived as a snub if he didn't make the trip. On the other hand, he has a certain – a certain bargaining position to say that he won't come just to come. But my guess is that at the end of the days he will be there, and the ones who won't be there are both Sheikh Khalifa from the UAE, who is sick, and Sultan Qaboos from Oman, who is sick.

The Israel question is an interesting question because Israel and many of the Gulf States are fundamentally aligned when it comes to the Iranian threat. And Israel doesn't really fear direct attack from any of the Gulf States, but does fear attack from Iran. So arguably more weapons in the hands of the Gulf States would make Israel feel stronger rather than weaker.

My guess of where this all comes out is because U.S. law requires Israel to maintain a qualitative military edge over any other regional country, that the Israelis

would see this as an opportunity to both deter Iran and to obtain for Israel more and better weaponry with which Israel could directly deter the Iranians. So in many ways for Israel this can be a twofer, because Israel both has the Gulf States deter Iran and then gets the QME windfall from ensuring that its weaponry is better than what the Gulf States have.

Q: One more question from Paul here at US News.

I realize that Iran is definitely going to occupy a great deal of the discussion, if not most of it, but I wonder if there are any other major issues you think are going to take up any serious real estate on the agenda. Is the fight against the Islamic State group, is that going to come out – their potential expansion – or anything else?

MR. ALTERMAN: Yeah, well, I think – I mean, to my mind the – all of the jihadis are operating in places where you have proxy wars going on in the region. In every place we have proxy wars we have jihadis, and in every place we have jihadis we have proxy wars. So there's clearly a relationship. I think Syria will take some of the time. I think Yemen will take some of the time. But from the perspective of the Gulf States, that is all a manifestation of Iran's asymmetrical actions in the region.

You know, the president's been quoted as saying that the real – the most fundamental challenge is an internal challenge in these states. I don't think that's where a lot of this is going to dwell. I don't think the president is likely to talk a lot about reaching a new equilibrium in the region where Iran sort of rises to its rightful roles. I think this is largely going to be defensive. But when you talk with the Gulf States about Iranian actions that threaten them, the perception is it's not just the nuclear issue.

In many ways the more profound issues have to do with Iran's regional behavior. And I'm sure those issues will come up. And there will be an effort to get the United States to commit to knocking back Iranian regional malfeasance. And I think probably some reluctance from the United States, for example, to get directly involved in Yemen and other places. And that's probably going to be some issue of contention.

All right. Thank you very much for your time, everybody. Have a good day.

Q: Thank you.

MR. QUINN: All right, thanks, folks. We'll have the transcript of this up later on. And if you have any more questions or any follow up that you need, you have my email, cquinn@csis.org or give me a call. All right, thanks, guys.

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