

Obama flies to Saudi Arabia amid rising tensions

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US President Barack Obama arrives in Saudi Arabia today for meetings with Saudi King Salman and the other crowned heads of the Sunni Arab oil monarchies that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council. The trip comes amid rising tensions both within the Middle East and between Washington and the Saudi royal family, over issues ranging from the nuclear deal with Iran to US legislation that would allow American citizens to sue Saudi Arabia over the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

These frictions notwithstanding, the House of Saud, with its medieval mass beheadings and extreme sectarian Wahhabi ideology, has remained a linchpin of US imperialist policy in the Middle East and a bulwark of reaction and repression in the Arab world for seven decades.

The most immediate source of conflict between Washington and Riyadh is the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, a piece of legislation before the US Congress permitting lawsuits against foreign governments responsible for supporting terrorist attacks on American soil.

With bipartisan support, including from both Democratic presidential contenders, Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders, the legislation is clearly aimed at the Saudi regime. It has been triggered in large measure by renewed attention to the continued censorship of a 28-page chapter from the report of the joint congressional committee on 9/11 that details Saudi support and funding for the September 11 hijackers, 15 of whom were Saudi citizens.

In an interview broadcast by CBS on Tuesday, Obama made clear his intention to veto any such legislation, raising the danger that it could trigger actions against the US itself. "If we open up the possibility that individuals in the United States can

routinely start suing other governments, then we are also opening up the United States to being continually sued by individuals in other countries." This line of argumentation is unintentionally revealing, given US imperialism's role as the world's main state sponsor of terrorism.

The Saudi regime has threatened punishing retaliation if the legislation is enacted. The Saudi foreign affairs minister, Adel al-Jubeir, reportedly personally informed the White House that Riyadh would retaliate with the wholesale sell-off of \$750 billion in US assets.

Such a "nuclear option" would not only deal a blow to the US economy, but would drastically reduce the value of Saudi assets themselves, exacerbating an already deepening crisis over the fall of oil prices. Whether the monarchy would really carry out such a reckless action or not, the fact that it threatens to do so is indicative of the tensions in the US-Saudi alliance.

At the heart of the controversy over the 9/11 report is the fact that this alliance has, since the CIA-orchestrated war for regime change in Afghanistan in the 1980s, involved the use of the Saudi regime and prominent Saudi citizens, such as Osama bin Laden, to mobilize Islamist fighters as US proxies. This has continued through the 2011 war in Libya and the ongoing conflict in Syria, which will no doubt be one of the main topics of discussion at the meeting in Riyadh.

US officials recently revealed that Washington is preparing to implement its "Plan B" in Syria should the cessation of hostilities negotiated at the end of February collapse and the talks between the Syrian government and Western-backed "rebels" in Geneva break down. It would involve the pouring of new and more deadly weapons into the conflict, in particular, anti-aircraft weapons that could be used to bring down both Syrian

government and Russian jets.

The unraveling of both the cease-fire and the talks now appears to be taking place. The Syrian Al Qaeda affiliate and its CIA-vetted allies launched an offensive in Aleppo province earlier this month, prompting a government counteroffensive.

The Saudi- and US-backed “High Negotiations Committee” representing the Islamist militias fighting the Syrian government announced Monday that it was suspending its participation in the UN-brokered talks, while the “rebels” chief negotiator, Mohammed Alloush, the leader of Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), a rabidly sectarian militia fighting to impose an Islamic state in Syria, wrote on Twitter urging a new offensive. “Strike them at their necks. Strike them everywhere,” he said, quoting a passage from the Quran.

The Saudis have long urged the provision of more weaponry, including man pads, i.e., portable surface-to-air missiles capable of bringing down both military jets and passenger planes.

Other tensions have arisen in relation to an interview with Obama published in the April issue of the *Atlantic* magazine in which the US president described the Saudis as “free riders” who depended on the US for their defense while seeking to pull it into conflicts that did not serve Washington’s interests.

That the monarchy would take offense is entirely understandable. Far from riding “free,” Riyadh has paid some \$95 billion in cash for US weapons systems under the Obama administration and negotiated deals worth over \$100 billion more, making it by far the biggest customer of the US military-industrial complex.

A significant amount of new spending has gone into replacing bombs and missiles fired at civilian targets in Yemen, where over a year of a Saudi war has killed thousands and left half the population on the brink of starvation. The Pentagon has provided both intelligence and logistical support for this bloodbath.

Another not incidental consequence of the war has been the dramatic strengthening of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has established a mini-state around the southeastern port city of Mukalla and amassed unprecedented financial resources and arms stockpiles.

As in its intervention in Syria, Saudi Arabia has waged the war in Yemen in the name of countering Iranian influence, though there is no evidence of major

Iranian support for, much less control over, the Houthi rebels.

Among the statements made by Obama in the *Atlantic* interview that grated the most with the Saudi monarchy was his proposal that it “find an effective way to share the neighborhood and institute some sort of cold peace” with Iran. Riyadh bitterly opposed the nuclear deal with Tehran, fearing it could signal a rapprochement between Iran and the US that would diminish its own role as US imperialism’s principal regional ally.

Despite the nuclear accord, Washington remains determined, including by military means, to prevent Iran from challenging its hegemony in the Middle East.

Growing strains within Saudi society itself resulting from falling oil prices and consequent reductions in spending that threaten to provoke social discontent are the backdrop to these geopolitical tensions. The stability of US imperialism’s key Arab ally is being called increasingly into question.



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