



As Obama visits Riyadh, a look at US-Saudi relations amid Yemen war

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As the war in Yemen enters its second year, with a shaky ceasefire holding amid delayed UN-backed peace talks in Kuwait, uncertainty threatens the country's future.

The civil war, which resulted in a regional intervention in a bid to restore the internationally recognized government, has also drawn the indirect involvement of international powers, including the United States.

Following the nuclear deal with Iran - which is said to have strained US-Saudi relations - Washington's involvement in the Saudi-led Arab coalition in Yemen raises questions over both countries' bilateral commitments.

This comes against the backdrop of President Barack Obama's visit to Saudi Arabia for a summit with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on April 20.

"Officially, US involvement in the Yemen war is extensive because Washington agrees with GCC leaders that extremists mustn't gain power," Dr Joseph Kechichian, senior fellow at King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies told Al Arabiya English.

However, Arab Gulf rulers will insist on stability, which they believe cannot be accomplished while they are threatened by Iran, which Obama thinks “could be a force of good in the region,” Kechichian added.

Peter Salisbury, an associate fellow at the UK think tank Chatham House, told Al Arabiya English that he views US involvement in Yemen as a “payoff for the Iranian nuclear deal.”

The Americans “needed to prove that they were still proper allies for the Saudis after the Iran nuclear deal, but they had no interest in directly participating in the war... Right now, their main interest is maintaining their relations with Saudi Arabia.”

Fahed Nazer, former political advisor to the Saudi embassy in Washington DC, told Al Arabiya English that the “strain” in US-Saudi ties is due to philosophical differences between Washington and Riyadh, in that the “Obama doctrine” appears to avoid becoming militarily entangled in the Middle East, while Riyadh seems to have a more assertive foreign policy.

‘Oil for security’

Despite the differences, Kechichian says even if Washington appears to be interested in creating a “balance of power between Arabs and Persians,” it recognizes the GCC states as important allies due to the industrialized world’s dependence on oil resources.

Early into the Arab coalition intervention in Yemen, Obama said he had authorized US forces to provide logistical and intelligence support.

The Wall Street Journal reported that this included bombs and aerial refuelling missions for planes carrying out airstrikes.

“The United States is providing vital intelligence and logistical support to the Saudi-led campaign against the Iran-supported Houthi rebels and allies of former President Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen,” Nazer said.

Emma Ashford, research fellow with expertise in international security at US-based think tank the CATO Institute, told Al Arabiya English that Washington “provides essential military support for the GCC, which is one reason why these countries tend to look to the United States.

“This has been America’s role in the region for the last 20 years, but it’s important to note that this military help isn’t necessary for GCC countries to defend themselves.”

Nazer says the “oil-for-security” relationship has changed: “The United States has become less dependent on oil imports due to the revolution in shale technology, and Saudi Arabia has become less reliant on the United States as the ultimate guarantor of Gulf security due to the increasing capabilities of its armed forces.”

However, Obama told *The Atlantic* magazine that Gulf countries and other allies were “free riders” because of their overreliance on US military action.

Ashford says this “may have been unpleasant for those in the Gulf to hear, but it’s extremely accurate. Obama is effectively calling for regional states to contribute more to their own security.”

Nazer says the two countries continue to support each other in the military campaigns that each is leading. “Not only has Saudi Arabia been participating in the ongoing US-led airstrikes against the strongholds of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], but it has done so in a very public fashion.

“Saudi Arabia’s public support for the campaign added a crucial air of international legitimacy to the US effort.” In February, Saudi Arabia sent jets to Turkey to take part in the US-led air campaign against ISIS in Syria. The planes were among US, British and French war planes taking part.

Counter-terrorism

Since Al-Qaeda’s bombing of the USS Cole in 2000 off the coast of Yemen, the United States has been carrying out counter-terrorism operations in the country.

A congressional report on US relations with Yemen, published in 2015, says counter-terrorism cooperation continues and American special forces remain in the country, but the civil war has affected overall US counter-terrorism capabilities.

Salisbury said: “Washington is pretty worried about the expansion of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula [AQAP] since the beginning of the war, and counter-terrorism will be the main US priority in Yemen post-war.” Western powers want a stable government that can keep AQAP under control, he added.

“The Americans need to be in the region, are still focused on counter-terrorism, and still see the GCC states as the only game in town.”