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Obama should give Gulf states no special favors

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Washington's determination to defend much of the globe has made the United States an international sucker, especially vulnerable to manipulation by supposed friends. Today the Gulf states are upset.

The basic "problem" in their view is that Washington is pursuing the interests of America, not Saudi Arabia & Co., which is seeking hegemony over the Gulf. The administration organized a summit to assuage their concerns, at which he promised to defend them.

They complain that Washington negotiated to prevent Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon rather than demanded Tehran's surrender when that country said no, as it almost certainly would have. Even though forestalling development of an Iranian nuke would dramatically improve the region's security environment, the Gulf nations worry that eliminating sanctions would increase Iranian revenues.

They insist on overthrowing Syria's President Bashar Assad, even though he has not threatened the U.S. Finally, they want Washington to issue security guarantees to protect corrupt gerontocracies and monarchies.

However, American foreign policy should be about promoting America's security. As a global superpower which stands supreme militarily, the U.S. actually does not much need alliances to protect itself, especially in the Middle East.

Washington's interests in the region are far more limited than commonly assumed. The energy market is global and expanding. The Gulf states would sell their oil even if Washington did not act as monarchical bodyguard on call.

Democratic and humanitarian concerns have been hopelessly compromised by decades of support for dictatorships like in the Gulf. First do no harm would be the best humanitarian prescription.

Israel's safety is of concern to many Americans. However, it is a regional superpower well able to defend itself.

Instability is endemic to the region and beyond America's control. Indeed, in recent years Washington has demonstrated that intervention promotes instability.

America's most important interest is terrorism. Yet U.S. support for authoritarian monarchies angered the likes of Osama bin Laden, making America a target of violence, including 9/11. At the same time the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, were underwriting Islamic fundamentalism and violent extremism. The Riyadh-led attacks on Yemen have empowered al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula.

A "new equilibrium" is desperately required, as President Barack Obama suggested. But not the one he favors.

Before the summit the Gulf states pushed for a formal defense treaty, but likely congressional opposition killed that option. So, explained Secretary of State John Kerry earlier this month: "We are fleshing out a series of new commitments that will create, between the United States and the GCC, a new security understanding, a new set of security initiatives that will take us beyond anything that we have had before."

It is hard to imagine a worse idea than committing America to directly intervene in conflicts irrelevant to American security on behalf of nations which share none of America's most cherished values and which are able to defend themselves. The conference attendees already have an institutional frameworks for common defense, the Gulf Cooperation Council and 22-member League of Arab States. Saudi Arabia ranks fourth in the world in military outlays.

The U.S. probably is best served if no single state dominates the Mideast. Certainly not Riyadh. The kingdom tolerates no religious or political liberty at home; Riyadh has radicalized Islamic children around the world through construction of fundamentalist madrassahs. Saudi Arabia may have done more than any other country to promote terrorism.

In contrast, Iran's supposed drive to "dominate" the region looks largely defensive, as in Syria. Moreover, Tehran's few "victories" yielded only dubious, costly and frustrating entanglements.

Iran plays a major role in Iraq as the latter disintegrates. Iran may have the most important outside influence in Lebanon, but the latter is a geopolitical nullity with no impact on America.

Aid from Tehran helps keep the Assad regime afloat, but Iran thereby influences little outside of Damascus. The Houthis in Yemen are fighting for themselves, not Iran.

In the midst of this miasma the Obama administration organized an elaborate hand-holding exercise for the monarchies. It probably is good that little substantive came out of the meeting.

Instead of offering long-term dependents enhanced protection, Washington should indicate that it is turning regional affairs over to those in the region. The Middle East likely would be an

unstable, chaotic mess—rather like today. Conflict would continue, and it would be better for Americans to be out, not in, the unending bloodletting.

The administration did not need the summit to better communicate with the Gulf states. Washington should just say no.

It doesn't need to reassure already pampered clients. It doesn't need to start or enter additional wars. It needs a new policy.

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