

Roll Call



Obama Faces a Growing Dilemma Over Saudi Ties

John T. Bennett

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President Barack Obama will land in Saudi Arabia on Wednesday as congressional Republicans and Democrats press for changes that could dramatically alter the U.S. relationship with its Arab ally.

As Obama prepares to meet with the head of the Saudi royal family, King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, he is confronting calls to slap unprecedented restrictions on arms sales to the kingdom.

And even his former secretary of state, Democratic presidential front-runner Hillary Clinton, wants to give U.S. citizens the ability to sue Saudi Arabia and other countries suspected of links to terrorist attacks on American soil.

During Obama's seven-year tenure, the U.S.-Saudi relationship has gone from close to complicated.

One major friction point is Obama's desire for Saudi Arabia to do more in the fight against the Islamic State, also known as ISIS. Salman and other Sunni Muslim leaders in the region remain miffed about the deal Obama and other western leaders reached with Iran over its nuclear program.

Members of Congress are issuing their own demands. Sen. Christopher S. Murphy, D-Conn., a reliable White House ally on foreign policy matters, has major concerns about Saudi military operations in Yemen.

"The Saudi government must give the president assurances that the Saudi military will immediately cease the use of cluster munitions near civilian populated areas, and do far more to address the humanitarian crisis in Yemen," Murphy said in a statement to Roll Call.

A few days earlier, Murphy teamed up with Sen. Rand Paul, R-Ky., on a bill that would place stipulations on U.S. weapons sales to the kingdom.

The two Foreign Relations Committee members believe some Saudi tactics are directly responsible for “a devastating humanitarian crisis and a security vacuum.”

Saudi leaders launched in March 2015 a campaign of air strikes in Yemen aimed at preventing Shiite Houthi rebels from taking power. But Human Rights Watch recently said its investigators found evidence of a U.S.-supplied 2,000-pound bomb made by Boeing and known as a Joint Direct Attack Munition, in a northwestern Yemeni town, where a Saudi-led strike killed more than a hundred civilians.

The Paul-Murphy bill would tie up U.S. military aid to the kingdom until the White House certifies that Saudi officials could prove they have launched “an ongoing effort to target terrorist groups, minimize harm to civilians and facilitate humanitarian assistance before Congress can consider the sale or transfer of air-to-ground munitions to Saudi Arabia,” the duo said in a joint statement.

Paul said in a statement that for too long the Obama administration has not been holding recipients of U.S. military munitions accountable. He added that he and Murphy want to stop selling air-to-ground munitions to the Saudis until Congress has investigated how they are being used.

Obama has been as critical of the Gulf kingdom as perhaps any sitting American president. But many lawmakers and presidential candidates want him to match his rhetoric with actions during his final months in office.

Murphy wants Obama to use the two-day visit to “pressure Saudi leaders to become more engaged in the counter-ISIS campaign, and step up and target terror groups who have gained a lot of ground in Yemen over the last year as a result of the ongoing violence and instability.” He also wants the president to have “a frank discussion” with Salman about his backing for religious and educational institutions that promote sectarianism and intolerance.

White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest said Monday that “we do not agree with everything Saudi Arabia does,” noting there are some major differences between the longtime allies.

Earnest did not say whether Obama plans to bring up the civilian deaths and the conduct of Saudi operations in Yemen. But he did dub a pending cease-fire “a ray of good news,” cautioning “we’ll obviously have to see if that... takes hold.” The goal, he said, “would be to expedite the provision of humanitarian assistance that’s badly needed in a place like Yemen.”

Another Obama ally, Senate Foreign Relations and Armed Services member Tim Kaine, D-Va., said he is sure Obama will bring up the situation in Yemen. Addressing Murphy and Paul’s demands, he said: “I don’t think I have reached the same conclusion that they have reached. But it’s a concern.”

The U.S.-Saudi relationship has become a talking point in the presidential race.

Clinton and her Democratic challenger, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., both voiced support for a bipartisan Senate bill that would make it possible for the families of 9/11 victims to sue the Saudi government.

On Sunday, Clinton's campaign issued a statement saying families and victims of terrorist attacks should be able to legally "hold accountable those responsible." In his own statement, Sanders said the bill should become law so U.S. citizens could "seek restitution for the damages and lives lost" in terrorist attacks on American soil.

The White House opposes the bill and says Obama would not sign it because it would, as a law, put "the whole principle of sovereign immunity ... at risk." Administration officials say countries should resolve differences through diplomacy instead of litigation.

Saudi leaders have threatened to sell \$750 billion in U.S. assets should the 9/11 victims bill by Charles E. Schumer, D-N.Y., and John Cornyn, R-Texas, become law. Earnest, however, seemed to dismiss that threat, saying the Middle East power is a "large economy" and has no interest in destabilizing the global economy.

The Senate Judiciary Committee approved the bill in February with 19 members voting in favor and one, GOP Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, abstaining.

The measure is truly bipartisan, with authors from both parties' leadership teams and almost as many Democrats (10) signing on as Republicans (12).

"If Saudi Arabia participated in terrorism, of course they should be able to be sued," Schumer said Monday. "This bill would allow a suit to go forward and victims of terrorism to go to court to determine if the Saudi government participated in terrorist acts. If the Saudis did, they should pay a price."

There has long been speculation that some members of the kingdom's ruling family provided support to the al-Qaida hijackers who killed over 3,000 Americans on Sept. 11, 2001. Former Senate Intelligence Chairman Bob Graham, D-Fla., told CBS' "60 Minutes" that some Saudi individuals "substantially" gave the hijackers financial and other backing.

Christopher Preble, a foreign policy and defense analyst at the Cato Institute, said Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries "are very worried about their own homegrown extremists — but a lot of these nations export it as a solution."

To that end, Preble said Obama could deliver this kind of message in Riyadh: "This should be more of a problem for you than it is for us."