

Remarks by President Obama in Q&A with the Press -- Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

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4:16 P.M. DST

PRESIDENT OBAMA: (In progress.) -- the entire Kingdom of Saudi Arabia for their hospitality and their generosity, and all my counterparts in the GCC who devoted the time and the energy to make sure that this was a successful summit.

You already heard my statement, so I'm going to take a couple of question, starting with Kathleen Hennessey of AP. Where's Kathleen? Where are you? There you are.

Q Thanks for doing this, Mr. President. In the lead-up to this trip, there was a lot of talk about strains in the relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, some of it stemming from your comments about Gulf partners being "free riders," and specifically that Iran and Saudi Arabia should "share the neighborhood." I'm wondering if after your meeting you feel like you've eased any of those tensions, if that was your goal. And if you can point to any evidence of greater cooperation or engagement in the campaign against ISIL. Do you feel now that the Gulf partners are carrying their weight?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Well, I think that a lot of the strain was always overblown. The fact of the matter is, is that the friendship and cooperation that exist between the United States and the Gulf countries has been consistent for decades. During the course of our administration, the GCC countries have extensively cooperated with us on counterterrorism, on curbing the financing of terrorist activities. They are part of the counter-ISIL coalition that has made progress both in Syria and in Iraq.

If you think about last year, when we had the Camp David meeting, you were already seeing the onset of conflict in Libya as well as in Yemen. And as we come to this meeting in part because of the collective efforts of members of the GCC, we have a new government in Libya that is very nascent, but has the opportunity finally to organize itself in a way that we haven't seen in a couple of years. That would not have happened had it not been for the effective diplomatic pressure that was applied by all the GCC countries, as well as the United States and the United Nations.

In Yemen, we now have a cessation of hostilities that allows us to build a peace process that can relieve the suffering of the people inside of Yemen. That would not have happened had it not been for the GCC-U.S. cooperation. We would not have gotten an Iran deal to get their nuclear weapons had not the GCC been supportive of it.

So what is true between the United States and the GCC, as is true with all of our allies and friends, is that at any point in time, there are going to be differences in tactics. And part of the goal here, as well as the meeting at Camp David, is to make sure that not only do we share a broad common vision of how prosperity and stability and peace are achieved in this region and how we counter extremist activity, but that we have knowledge of what each party is doing on an ongoing basis.

I think it is no doubt true that when we entered into the negotiations with Iran around the nuclear deal, there was concern that in the interest of getting the deal done, we would somehow look the other way with respect to their other destabilizing activities. And in fact, what we are able to report is not only have we seen Iran do what it was supposed to do under the deal and the threat of an Iranian nuclear weapon is greatly reduced, but what we've also seen, what the GCC has seen, is our continued cooperation in, for example, interdicting Iranian efforts to arm the Houthi militias inside of Yemen. That, I think, has created some confidence.

But one of the things, at a time when the region is so fraught with so many different problems and challenges, is the need for more consistent institutionalized communication at every level of government. And that's part of what we've been able to achieve through these two summits. And my hope is, is that it will continue into the next administration. I think it has been highly useful, because the possibilities of misunderstanding increase when there's so much activity taking place.

I'll give you one last example. Inside of Iraq, there are understandable concerns about Iranian influence in the Iraqi government at a time when the Iraqi government is also critical for us fighting ISIL. It was very important I think for us to describe our assessment that Prime Minister Abadi is in fact effectively fighting against ISIL and trying to reach out to Sunnis inside of Iraq, while acknowledging that there are significant problems in terms of government stability inside of Baghdad. And that's a reason for us not to withdraw, but rather to get more involved in helping to stabilize areas like Anbar, where we've not cleared out ISIL but the towns that they were governing have been left devastated. If we want Sunni communities to be able to rebuild themselves and to get back into the lives they were leading before ISIL took over, then we're going to have to help the Iraqi government respond.

The same is true with respect to Syria. Right now, the cessation of hostilities is very fragile and may be breaking down in part because of the Assad regime's continuing attacks on areas where they perceive they have an advantage. This is part of the reason why I called Mr. Putin on Monday, indicating to him that in the same way that we are continually urging the moderate opposition inside of Syria to abide by the cessation of hostilities, he needs to be holding the regime into account.

For us to be able to describe the specifics of that conversation in a setting like this to give the opportunity for the other heads of state to ask questions about Russian intentions I think was extremely useful.

Q Were you able to secure any new commitments on the stabilization effort? I mean, you were asking for aid. Did you get any?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: We've been able to secure additional commitments with respect to the counter-ISIL campaign more broadly. With respect to direct help to the Iraqi government, what I recommended was that we wait to assess how the current government turmoil in Iraq plays itself out over the next couple of weeks before we make final decisions about how useful particular offers of assistance will be. Although, already what we've seen is, for example, the government of Kuwait over the last year has deferred payments that were required under the U.N. resolution between Iraq and Kuwait. That's worth a couple of billion dollars to the Iraqi government. And we described our efforts to make sure that in addition to the military assistance that we're providing Iraq, that we're also focusing on these stabilization functions.

But frankly, right now in Baghdad, there's some big challenges in terms of Prime Minister Abadi forming a new government -- or a new cabinet. Until that's settled, I think it's important for us to make sure that any additional stabilization dollars that are put in are going to be effectively spent.

Greg Jaffe.

Q I was going to ask, since you just spoke about Prime Minister Abadi, how concerned are you about his hold on power? Are there things that the GCC partners can do to help solidify his government? And then, did you guys talk about a plan B in Syria if the cessation of hostilities falters? And then lastly, I was just going to ask, have you contemplated adding additional Special Forces in Syria to bolster the counter-ISIL fight? And what might it take for you to make that decision?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: Good. On the first item, I'm concerned. I think Prime Minister Abadi has been a good partner for us. But interestingly enough, right now in Baghdad, the challenges within the government don't fall along the usual lines of Kurdish-Sunni-Shia. There's actually significant dissension and disputes even among the Shia power blocks.

Obviously, ultimately it's up to the Iraqis to make these decisions. It's not up to us, it's not up to the Iranians, it's not up to GCC countries. It's up to the Iraqi people to determine the government that they form.

We do think, however, that it is vital for the health and stability of Iraq that the cabinet and the makeup of government is finalized and stabilized. And we've been urging them to get the job done. And we have contacts with all the various factions and parties, saying to them they have to take the long view and think about the well-being of the country at a time when they're still fighting Daesh, Mosul is still under ISIL control; at a time when, because of low oil prices, they've got challenges with respect to their budget. There's a dam that needs to be fixed. They've got a lot on their plate. Now is not the time for government gridlock or bickering.

With respect to Syria, we had discussions about what options are available to us should the current cessation of hostilities break down. None of the options are good. It has been my view consistently that we have to get a political solution inside of Syria and that all the external actors involved have to be committed to that as well as the actors inside of Syria.

Certainly that's what the Syrian people want -- they want an end to the bombing. They want to be able to go back to their homes. They want to be able to farm their lands and run their businesses and send their kids to school.

And the problem with any plan B that does not involve a political settlement is that it means more fighting, potentially for years. And whoever comes out on top will be standing on top of a country that's been devastated and that will then take years to rebuild. So the sooner we can end fighting and resolve this in a political fashion, the better.

The primary reasons that we have been emphasizing the need for Assad to go is not just because he's killed his people and barrel-bombed women and children; it's that it is hard to conceive of him being at the head of a government that would end the fighting because it was perceived as legitimate. That's what we have to emphasize, that's what we have to work on.

I'm going to take one last question. I assume this is Arab press, not just you. Go ahead, but there are other people here.

Q What, Mr. President, do you think the main issue or case that you have a different opinion between GCC and the United States and this -- something you think there is different?

PRESIDENT OBAMA: I think that, overall, there's a broad consensus in assisting each other in our collective security. The GCC hosts the United States, and we could not operate effectively militarily in the region if it weren't for GCC countries. Our intelligence-sharing is vital in fighting against terrorism, and has consistently improved.

We're starting to see the need to cooperate on new threats like cyberattacks, for example. Our efforts as a consequence of these summits to form a unified ballistic missile defense is very important. Our belief that the prosperity and stability of the region depends on countries treating all their citizens fairly and that sectarianism is an enemy of peace and prosperity -- that if people are seeing themselves not as a citizen of a country but as a member of a particular branch of Islam, that that is a recipe for countries falling apart. I think there's broad agreement there.

Probably the biggest area where there's been tactical differences has been with respect to Iran. And the issue is not the need for shared cooperation to deter against Iranian provocations -- on that, we're all agreed. I think that there has been concern, even when we were working on the Iran nuclear deal, that if we were in discussions with them about these issues, that somehow Iran would feel emboldened to act more provocatively in the region.

And what I've said to them is we have to have a dual track. We have to be effective in our defenses and hold Iran to account where it is acting in ways that are contrary to international rules and norms. But we also have to have the capacity to enter into a dialogue to reduce tensions and to identify ways in which the more reasonable forces inside of Iran can negotiate with the countries in the region, with its neighbors, so that we don't see an escalation of proxy fights across the region.

And I think that that view is one that is consistent with how many in the GCC view it, but because there's been so much mistrust that's been built up -- in part because of Iranian provocations -- that people are cautious and want to make sure that nobody is naïve about what Iran may be doing to stir up problems in other countries.

And what we've consistently shown them is we're not naïve. But as I pointed out, during the height of the Cold War, both Democratic Presidents like John F. Kennedy and Republican Presidents like Ronald Reagan still negotiated with the Soviet Union. Even when the Soviet Union was threatening the destruction of the United States, there was still dialogue so that we could find ways to reduce tensions and the dangers of war and chaos. And that's the same approach that we have to take. Even as Iran is calling us "The Great Satan," we were able to get a deal done where they got rid of their nuclear stockpiles, and that makes us safer. That's not a sign of weakness, that's a sign of strength.

Thank you very much, everybody.

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4:34 P.M. DST