

As President Barack Obama and the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) sit down at Camp David this week, the White House's goal is clear: reassure America's Middle Eastern partners that it remains committed to their security. But the summit is clearly not off to a good start, with only two of the six GCC monarchs planning to attend — and King Salman of Saudi Arabia waiting until the last moment to announce he is not coming.

According to media reports, the Obama administration is preparing to assuage skepticism toward the potential nuclear agreement with Iran by focusing on new security arrangements and billions of dollars in weapons that the United States may offer to sell to the Gulf states. Arms sales and security guarantees may be a piece of the equation — but they won't be enough. The most effective way for the Obama administration to make headway with the Gulf is by signaling a more comprehensive approach to countering Iranian influence in the Middle East.

What the Gulf states fear most is that in the aftermath of a nuclear agreement, the United States will cut a deal with Tehran to divide the region and abandon its Arab partners. Saudi Arabia has been the most vocal in expressing concerns that the United States is so interested in achieving an agreement on the nuclear question that it is willing to tolerate Iran's unchecked influence throughout the region. To many of America's partners, Iranian nuclear ambitions are inextricably linked to Tehran's aggressive support of its proxies through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), which provides training, funding, and support for Hezbollah, Iraqi Shiite militias, the Houthis in Yemen, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, among other groups.

So far, America's allies have a poor record of responding to Iranian interventionism in the Arab world. In Syria, where the IRGC is operating overtly and covertly, the response of U.S. Gulf partners has been reactive — favoring support for militant Sunni Islamist forces to counter Iranian influence. Fighting the fire of Iranian proxies with the fire of radical Sunni fighters may be expedient, but it is unhelpful in realizing the longer-term goal of greater regional stability.

But it's going to take more than ever-larger arms sales to convince the Gulf states that Iran isn't on the march in the Middle East. In 2014, U.S. allies in the GCC outspent the Iranians by a margin of more than seven-to-one, investing over \$113.7 billion in their militaries compared to Iran's \$15.7 billion. The United States has long given its Gulf allies some of its most advanced military equipment, such as the F-15 and F-16 fighter jets that it sold to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Riyadh alone spent more than \$80 billion on defense in 2014. And Saudi air defenses — bolstered by advanced F-15 fighters, top-of-the-line intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR), and missile defense capabilities — are more than capable of defending the kingdom from Iran's conventional military attacks. Yet, anxiety in the region is still high.

There are a number of steps Obama can take this week beyond arms sales to reassure his Gulf partners. He can start by putting the regional challenges caused by Iran at the top of the agenda at Camp David: If the president and his team start the discussion with a focus on what the Gulf states view as their top priority, instead of focusing on the Iranian

nuclear challenge, it would send a strong message that the United States is listening to its partners' concerns.

As part of this effort, the United States might also consider increasing interdictions of Iranian weapons shipments, improving intelligence cooperation, pursuing more aggressive joint covert actions against Iranian-supported terrorism, and finding ways to expose Iranian operatives and embarrass Iran when it pursues irresponsible destabilizing policies in the Middle East. The United States has already started to increase its support for such efforts by providing intelligence for the Saudi military operations against the Houthis in Yemen, and increasing its naval presence to deter Iranian arms shipments in the Gulf. The United States also sent a strong signal in the aftermath of the Iranian seizure of the container ship Maersk Tigris, beginning military escorts of U.S. and British commercial vessels throughout the Gulf, which likely played a role in the ship's release.

The Obama administration should also embark on a long-term effort to train these U.S. allies how to more effectively counter Iran. There is already a potential model in Jordan, which is particularly focused on building the capacity of partners on the ground to defeat jihadists such as the Islamic State. The Jordanians are set to take the lead in a mission to train Iraqi Sunni Arab National Guard units, and Amman is expressing public intent to recruit and train Syrian fighters from tribal groups that live in Islamic State-controlled areas of eastern Syria. Other U.S. allies — including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey — are scheduled to provide training sites and support for the U.S.-led program to train and equip Syrian rebels, which has already reportedly begun in Jordan.

The United States can also send a message to both its partners and to Iran that it is not abandoning the region by enhancing the current U.S. force posture in the Middle East. Obama should tell his GCC allies that the approximately 40,000 U.S. military personnel, and the robust U.S. naval and air capabilities, are not only in the Middle East to stay but will be enhanced. Forward stationing more advanced manned and unmanned aircraft and missile defense assets in the region, for instance, would help assure America's wary partners.

Of course, all of these steps do not preclude increased arms sales to the Gulf States. But ideally, those should focus on defensive capabilities such as minesweepers and ballistic missile defense. They should also include the types of capabilities that would make our Arab partners more effective at countering the unconventional Iranian challenge, such as tactical tools like night vision goggles and weapons optics, and also more strategic capabilities such as advanced unmanned aerial vehicles and the networking architecture to enhance air and maritime domain awareness.

In the end, it will not be possible for President Obama to fully reassure America's regional allies in the aftermath of a nuclear deal with Iran. Their concerns about a "Persian pivot" will remain, and their distrust of the president will make U.S. relations with the Gulf states difficult. But if Obama is able to begin to implement an effective reassurance strategy, he can hand off a better situation to his successor — who will have

to do the bulk of the work in repairing some of America's relations with the Gulf states in the aftermath of a nuclear deal with Iran.