

# Trump's Agenda in Riyadh

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May 18, 2017

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**The president's visit will likely aim to upgrade the U.S.-Saudi counterterrorism alliance, place Washington firmly in the Sunni-led Gulf camp against Iran, and deepen bilateral economic ties.**

President Trump's choice of Saudi Arabia for his first foreign visit represents a striking departure from past precedent. The only other time the kingdom has been among a new U.S. president's initial few stops abroad was during the Jimmy Carter administration. Even then, the Riyadh trip came after that of the shah's Iran.

The selection of Saudi Arabia speaks to Trump's foreign policy priorities. It also hints at the role he and his advisors envision the kingdom playing to help achieve their goals. Still, despite the drama surrounding the visit, Trump's actual agenda in Riyadh is best viewed as upgrading the U.S.-Saudi alliance rather than as a major course correction.

President Trump's primary goal in the kingdom is to promote the fight against terrorism. This follows from what the White House has described as Trump's "highest" foreign policy objective: defeating ISIS and other terrorist groups. It is clear that Trump has reached the conclusion, with the support of experienced policy advisors, that Saudi Arabia is an important part of the solution to the terrorism problem. The presidential visit also is a de facto acknowledgement that Saudi Arabia currently represents one of America's closest counter-terrorism partners in the world.

While in Riyadh, Trump intends to benefit from the kingdom's formidable convening power. The Saudis have been assembling dozens of leaders throughout the Muslim world from the Middle East, Africa and Asia to meet with the American president in a U.S.-Arab-Islamic summit on May 21. An overarching objective is to help solidify an international counter-terrorism alliance.

The gathering builds on a Saudi effort to construct from the ground up what it has called an Islamic Military Alliance to Fight Terrorism (IMAFT). IMAFT's establishment was announced a year and a half ago. The summit will showcase Riyadh's potential as a conduit for counter-terrorism support beyond its borders.

On the same day as the U.S.-Arab-Islamic summit, a smaller U.S.-GCC summit will also be held, to include Trump and visiting GCC leaders. Although the Iran file is likely to dominate discussion during this gathering, counter-terrorism cooperation is sure to be a key component as well.

One outstanding issue is whether Trump will differentiate between America's Gulf partners when it comes to level of cooperation on the counter-terrorism front. The White House has been explicit about Trump's interest in prioritizing counter-terrorism financing in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have been on the same page as the United States on counter-ISIS and counter-al-Qaeda financing. To date, however, the Trump administration appears to be placing a premium on Gulf military relationships in countering terrorism over other aspects of the fight -- even more so than the Obama administration.

Notably absent from the U.S.-Arab-Islamic summit will be Iran (which is also not a member of IMAFT). This points to a second, less prominent, but equally important goal of the presidential visit: deepening bilateral and multilateral alliances against Tehran. U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis is understood to have helped lay the groundwork for the President's visit in this regard during a trip to the kingdom in April. Mattis is a known quantity when it comes to Iran; "Everywhere you look, if there's trouble in the region, you find Iran," he quipped during his recent trip there.

Trump will be interested in addressing countering Iranian threats to stability in cooperation with allies and partners. The new administration understands and supports Saudi Arabia and other Gulf partners when it comes to the issue of Iranian-supported destabilization efforts in Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Iraq. The presidential visit will place the Trump administration firmly in the Sunni-led Gulf camp, opposite the Iranian regime. Yemen, Syria and Iraq weigh heavily on the Americans not only in terms of Iranian support for armed militias in these theaters, but also vis-a-vis the Sunni extremist threat.

Finally, in addition to the counter-terrorism and counter-Iran priorities, a third major goal of the visit is deepening U.S.-Saudi economic ties. With his high-profile trip to the kingdom, Trump is creating an environment for bilateral investment and business to expand. Currently in the works are new U.S. arms sales to Riyadh, and additional Saudi investment in the United States. An arms package under discussion could total more than several hundred billion dollars over a number of years. The kingdom's huge sovereign wealth fund could invest as much as \$40 billion in U.S. infrastructure. The President's son-in-law and senior advisor, Jared Kushner, is understood to be a key player in discussions over investments. Such deals may or may not be actually announced during the visit, but they will be highlighted as part of Trump's achievements.

On the sidelines of the main summits, formal Saudi efforts will be made to promote U.S.-Saudi business relationships. Top CEOs of U.S. companies will join Saudi officials in discussion, with the promise of more American investment opportunities and jobs.

Even with substantial growth in economic ties, it remains unclear if President Trump has dropped his insistence that the Saudis pay more for their own defense. As recently as April, Trump reiterated that he expects more burden-sharing from the Saudis. Trump's tendency to speak his mind and stray from formal talking points suggests the Saudis and other Gulf partners should be on guard for comments of this nature during the visit.

The presidential visit recognizes Saudi Arabia as the religious but also political center of gravity in the Arab Gulf and Muslim world. At the same time, Trump may recognize the UAE as a special partner on a range of issues, from military cooperation to countering terrorist ideology -- a top concern of Trump's. Abu Dhabi has worked side by side with the United States most recently in Syria against ISIS and in Yemen against al-Qaeda. Mattis made Abu Dhabi his first Middle East stop as defense secretary in February. The President's two adult sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, chose to visit Dubai, also in February, for their first joint business trip abroad since their father's inauguration. Donald Jr. is there again this week speaking at a graduation ceremony at the American University in Dubai (AUD). Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Shaykh Mohammed bin Zayed al Nayan visited the White House on May 15, in effect offering a framework for the president's visit to the region.

Trump will be interested in hearing from the Saudis on other regional challenges. This includes especially a regional approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace and an expansion of Israeli-Gulf security and other cooperation in conjunction with, and beyond, the shared Iran threat. Trump will look forward to learning more about Arab discussions of normalizing ties with Israel in exchange for Israel taking steps to restart the peace process.

*Lori Plotkin Boghardt is the Barbara Kay Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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