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The president visits the Gulf : Middle Eastern states compete to wow Donald Trump

America has money to invest. Securing peace is another matter



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Full text:

WHEN DONALD TRUMP visited Riyadh in 2017, his trip was more spectacle than substance. There was a ceremonial sword dance, a gold medal and a bizarre moment when he laid hands on a glowing orb. But a proposed \$110bn arms deal with [the Saudis](#) largely failed to materialise—just \$14.5bn had been finalised by late 2018—and a joint summit of dozens of Arab and Muslim leaders ended with a hollow communique.

This time, three Gulf states will vie to put on the most lavish spectacle. Mr Trump will arrive in [Saudi Arabia](#) on May 13th, the first stop in a four-day tour that will also take him to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The Saudis plan to fete him with a drone-art show in Diriyah, the ancestral home of the ruling family. Qatar will offer him a Boeing 747 jumbo jet as a temporary replacement for the aging Air Force One, a scheme that smacks of bribery (the White House says that any foreign gifts it accepts will be done in full compliance with the law). Even Mr Trump's sleeping arrangements have been a subject of competition (he will spend one night in each country, the better not to offend anyone).

But there is a chance this trip will deliver some substance as well. In public, the focus will be on business deals. Muhammad bin Salman, the Saudi crown prince, has already proposed \$600bn in trade and investment over the next four years. That is an implausibly high figure, but it reflects an understanding of what makes Mr Trump tick. Gulf rulers will give him big promises to tout at home; in the process, they hope to make their own countries look more attractive to would-be American investors.

In private, they will press Mr Trump on two issues. One is ending the [war in Gaza](#), which requires him to strong-arm Binyamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister. On May 11th Mr Trump announced that Edan Alexander, a dual citizen of America and Israel, would be freed from Hamas captivity in Gaza. The announcement came after weeks of negotiations with the Palestinian militant group.

Officially, Hamas receives nothing in return: it describes Mr Alexander's release as a goodwill gesture to Mr Trump. Yet it is hard to imagine Hamas would give away an American hostage, a valuable bit of leverage, without a promise that America would try to end the war. Mr Trump called the deal "the first of those final steps necessary to end this brutal conflict".

The other big issue is negotiating a nuclear deal with Iran. Gulf states support the effort—unlike in Mr Trump's first term, when they urged him to abandon the pact Barack Obama signed in 2015. But the talks, which began last month, seemed to hit a bump last week. On May 7th Mr Trump said he had not decided whether a new agreement should allow Iran to continue enriching uranium. In an interview taped the next day with Breitbart, a right-wing outlet, his Middle East envoy contradicted him. "An enrichment programme can never exist in the

state of Iran ever again. That's our red line," said Steve Witkoff. That would probably doom the effort: Iran refuses to give up its right to enrich.

Yet a fourth round of talks, in the Omani capital, Muscat, on May 11th, went reasonably well. America said they were "encouraging". Iran called them "difficult but useful". A fifth round is planned. There was no breakthrough—but neither was there a breakdown, suggesting that Mr Witkoff's red line is drawn in pencil rather than ink. Some observers in Washington believe that his public comments do not reflect what he has told the Iranians in private.

Mr Trump may have side meetings in Riyadh with other Arab leaders. The most consequential would be a rumoured tête-à-tête with Ahmed al-Sharaa, the Syrian president. His government, which took power after Bashar al-Assad's overthrow in December, is desperate for America to lift sanctions on Syria. Some of Mr Trump's aides advocate a tough line on the Syrian leader, a former jihadi.

Mr Sharaa has been on a charm offensive of late, trying to woo Mr Trump by promising peace with Israel and oil and gas concessions for American energy firms. The American president has not yet agreed to the meeting, but his Saudi hosts are urging him to accept. On May 12th Mr Trump said he was debating whether to ease the sanctions at the request of Turkey, a supporter of Mr Sharaa. "We may take them off of Syria, because we want to give them a fresh start," he said.

For weeks diplomats had wondered if the Russian president might make a surprise appearance as well. Saudi Arabia has already hosted several rounds of talks with American, Russian and Ukrainian officials aimed at reaching a ceasefire. But Mr Trump seems to be discovering that [Vladimir Putin is still Vladimir Putin](#): stubborn and unwilling to make concessions. He sounds increasingly frustrated with the Russian leader. On May 9th Karoline Leavitt, the White House press secretary, said a meeting in Riyadh was "not gonna happen".

One other world leader may be left out in the cold: Mr Netanyahu. Though Saudi Arabia does not have diplomatic ties with Israel, the Israeli prime minister has visited the kingdom in the past, and hoped to come again this week to discuss the prospect of normalisation. But the ongoing war in Gaza means no one in the Gulf wants to host him. Even the UAE, which established formal relations with Israel in 2020, treats him as persona non grata. Nor does Mr Trump plan to stop in Israel on his way back to Washington.

For five years Israeli-Saudi normalisation has been the lodestar of America's Middle East policy. Both Mr Trump and Joe Biden sought to entice the Saudis with a package of incentives, including a defence pact and a civil nuclear deal. At least for now, though, that effort seems dead. The Saudis are fed up with Mr Netanyahu's government. Mr Trump seems to be as well: his hostage deal with Hamas, his talks with Iran and his recent truce with the Houthis, a rebel group in Yemen, all caught Israel unaware. Normalisation is no longer a prerequisite for nuclear co-operation with Saudi Arabia. A deal between the kingdom and America could be announced as early as this week.

Mr Trump will head home on May 16th with his investment deals, and perhaps his new plane. Big breakthroughs on Gaza, Iran and Syria may be more elusive. But his visit to the Gulf may nonetheless signal a shift in America's approach to the region—one in which its interests are no longer so closely aligned with those of Israel. ■