



מרכז עזרי לחקר איראן והמפרץ הפרסי
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The Ezri Center for Iran & Persian Gulf Studies

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Perspectives on Iran and the Persian Gulf



The American President visits and meets Arabia

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להלן הגיליון ה- 23 ובו מאמר מאת ד"ר גלן סגל בנושא The American President visits and meets Arabia

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The American President visits and meets Arabia

By: Dr. Glen Segell

President Trump in his first 100 days of office showed that the United States and his Presidency intend to have influence on foreign affairs from the White House. There was and will be symbolism and action. From the onset, there were frequent visits from foreign leaders. However welcoming others is not the same as visiting others.

So, this week President Donald Trump left his country for the first time after entering office as President of the United States of America. It was not to his neighbors Canada and Mexico; the first stops were not to his alliance partners in NATO or to major trading partners in Europe and the Far East.

The first stops were countries that host the three major Abrahamic (belief in one G-d) religions. Judaism (Israel), Christianity (Vatican) and Islam (Saudi Arabia). The intent of the visits show the strong beliefs of the President seen in his election campaign, the diverse religions in his family, and his intended foreign policy agenda

The visits to the Abrahamic religion countries starting with Saudi Arabia (May 20) highlight his close contacts with King Salman bin Abd Al-Aziz of Saudi Arabia, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority who all extended invites to Trump. Trump will also meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican to boost his domestic Christian support base. Only after these and not before will he attend a NATO meeting in Brussels on May 25 and a G7 meeting in Italy on May 26.

The first stop was to Saudi Arabia that is the custodian of the two holiest sites in Sunni Islam (Mecca and Medina). In addition to the large business deals cut and signed Trump went there in the hope of constructing a new foundation of cooperation and support with Muslim states aimed at combatting extremism, terrorism and violence both to fight ISIS and to further isolate Iran. During his visit, he made no mention of 9/11 or "Who blew up the World Trade Center – it was the Saudi", human rights or democracy, but did condemn the oppression of women.

His message was clear after cutting deals of weapons of \$110 billion aimed at providing Saudi Arabia with the full spectrum of capabilities and in supporting tens of thousands of jobs in the US defense industries. In his message Trump blamed Iran, Saudi Arabia's rival in the region, for instability.

The weapons deal is directly aimed at Iran, as well as Sunni extremism such as ISIS and al-Qaeda and in combatting radicalism. Saudi Arabia is involved directly against Shia radicalism in Yemen and in Syria. In the larger picture the weapons are also aimed at Iranian activities in the region that include the arming and training of Shia militias in Iraq, the influence that Teheran exerts over the Iraqi government in Baghdad, the expansion of Hezbollah's activities outside of Lebanon, and Iranian support of Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia was not just to meet the Saudi King because he also convened leaders from 55 Muslim-majority countries to match them with Trump's objectives. Trump's message to them was clear "Drive out the terrorists"; that means striving to achieve Trump's "America First" motto as being compatible with American leadership in the world.

In addressing the summit of the leaders from 55 Muslim-majority countries Trump was also given the opportunity to placate Muslims about his ban of Muslims entering the United States. He refrained from using his usual inflammatory language that usually includes "I think Islam hates us".

However, he did emphasize the need to honestly confront the crises of Islamic extremism and the Islamists and the Islamic terror of all kinds.

Saudi Arabia welcomed the visit because it realizes the challenges it has; and there is a similar feeling throughout the region. One of the important feelings stems from the former President Obama's administration's nuclear deal with Iran. Both Trump and the Saudi monarchy view this as providing a path to a nuclear weapon for Iran, as well as providing an umbrella for Iran's continued funding of terrorism throughout the region.

Trump stressed that countries shouldn't wait for American power to act; and was clearly referring to Iran for fueling sectarian conflict and in supporting President Assad in Syria. This repeated condemnation of Iran pleased other Persian Gulf leaders. Bahrain and the UAE especially see Iran as a major threat. At the back of American minds is also the Iranian supported group Hezbollah that bombed the US Marine barracks in Beirut (1983). During Trump's visit America and six Gulf states announced a deal to coordinate efforts at cutting off sources of funding for extremist groups including ISIS.

It must also be said that accomplishing Middle East peace between Israel and the Palestinians cannot be achieved without Saudi Arabia and the other 55 Muslim-majority countries and this is also one of the things that Trump will try to do during his presidency. So, after Saudi Arabia his next stop is to Israel, a visit that coincides with the 50th anniversary of the unification of Jerusalem during the 1967 Six Day War.