Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Money talks as Trump prepares for first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia

Donald Trump's first foreign trip will be to the same country he first visited during his last presidential term: Saudi Arabia.

The prospect of billions of investment dollars from the Gulf's sheikhdoms has again helped to lure Trump, who also has his eyes on garnering regional backing as he aims for a peacemaking crown and persuade Tehran to drop its nuclear ambitions.

Who now remembers Jamal Khashoggi, the Washington Post columnist brutally killed and dismembered inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018? To be fair, his erasure began under President Joseph Biden, who visited Saudi Arabia in 2022 after forgetting his vow to make the country a "pariah".

But money talks even louder under Trump as traditional allies Europe and even Israel are discovering under Trump Term II. Israel is not on Trump's itinerary, but he has said other stops may be added during his 13-16 May trip, which does include the UAE and Qatar.

When Trump announced the start of nuclear negotiations with Tehran earlier this month, Benjamin (Bibi) Netanyahu was by his side in the White House, and the Israeli prime minister had to grin and temper his threats to bomb Iran.

It seemed Netanyahu remembered "when another Jewish foreign leader had sat in the White House and failed to grovel", wrote a Jerusalem Post columnist, referring to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, who endured a dramatic slapdown by Trump in the White House in February.

Nuclear co-operation with Saudi Arabia

Not only has Trump not dropped his trade tariffs on Israel, but the "betrayal" of Bibi is also compounded by signs that Trump is preparing to sign a nuclear co-operation agreement with Saudi Arabia that is not tied to the normalisation of relations with Israel.

Since the Hamas attacks of 7 October, Riyadh has made clear that any deal with Israel is conditional on moves towards Palestinian statehood.

US Secretary of Energy Chris Wright visited Riyadh earlier this month. He announced the two countries had agreed to work together on energy infrastructure, including "mining co-operation, civilian nuclear technology and energy production."

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But any US deal that included permission to Saudi Arabia to enrich uranium for civilian purposes would find it difficult to pass Congress as well as meet stiff Israeli opposition.

Sweeteners for the US include Saudi Arabia's promise to increase investment over the next four years to the amount of at least $600 billion. The UAE, meanwhile, has talked about investing $1.4 trillion in US-based AI infrastructure, semiconductors, manufacturing and natural gas production over the next decade.

Meanwhile, the Trump administration has approved $100 million worth of air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia, among other moves.

Potential hurdles

There are many potential hurdles to this rosy vision of US-Gulf concord beyond Iran and Gaza. Gulf ambitions are often at odds with US policy and may continue to complicate other conflicts such as Yemen, Syria and Sudan.

For now, Saudi Arabia can rest easy without fear of US criticism of its autocracy, which last year committed the highest number of recorded executions of 345 people, according

to the human rights group Reprieve.

Analysts are also watching to see if Saudi Arabia launches a fresh crackdown on opponents after Trump's trip as it did after Biden's 2022 visit.

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A third round of talks between Steve Witkoff, US envoy, and Abbas Araghchi, Iranian foreign minister, will take place in Oman this weekend on what is looking to be a very similar nuclear accord to that reached under President Barack Obama in 2015.

However, in keeping with the confusion common across US policy announcements, Witkoff has sent mixed messages about what Washington wants from Iran.

Iran has enriched uranium to 60%, on the way to the 90% level needed to make nuclear weapons, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency. Under the Obama-era nuclear accord that Trump ripped up, the level was restricted to 3.67%, the same needed for civilian power.

At first, Witkoff said Tehran needed to reduce enrichment to the 3.67% limit but then later said the US wants Iran to end its enrichment programme. There has been similar confusion over US demands to Iran over its weapons capabilities.

"Iran plays a long game"

Amid all this, Riyadh is seeking to ensure it does not become a target of an Iranian backlash should the US-Iran talks fail and the US fulfils its threat to bomb Iran.

Iran has threatened to attack Gulf states if the US hits Iran's nuclear infrastructure. According to reports, Gulf states have told Trump officials they would not permit the US the use of its bases to strike Iran nor Israel to use their air space.

The US is already targeting Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen with air strikes while Israel continues to pound Gaza with apparent US consent, further angering Tehran. Saudi officials, meanwhile, have stressed that it is not involved in nor supports the US attacks on the Houthis.

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As part of its efforts to avert regional war, Riyadh deepened its rapprochement with Tehran earlier this month with a visit by Prince Khalid bin Mohammad, brother of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman and defence minister.

The two countries conducted their first-ever joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman last October, according to Iranian media reports.

Trump may be aiming for a big win and announce an accord with Iran next month, but the best he may get is further detail on the billions in investment promised by Gulf states as the talks with Tehran get bogged down in the detail. As the Jerusalem Post put it: "Iran plays a long game; Trump is in a hurry to tweet."