

Trump pulls sanctions on Syria, extends olive branch to Iran

President Donald Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia marks a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East.

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RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — President Donald Trump announced plans Tuesday to lift sanctions against the Syrian government and expressed in his strongest terms yet a willingness to negotiate with Iran, signaling a reordering of U.S. foreign policy in which there are no “permanent enemies.”

Trump's speech at an investment forum, which kicked off the first major foreign trip of his second term, offered a sweeping but at times contradictory vision of the role of U.S. military force in the world. He declared his opposition to past U.S. interventions in the Middle East but also a willingness to use force to defend the United States and its allies.

“In fact, some of the closest friends of the United States of America are nations we fought wars against in generations past,” the president said. “And now they're our friends and our allies.”

Trump made the announcements as he sought to pump money from this oil-rich region into the American economy, spending a day on pomp and ceremony as he signed a sheaf of investment agreements.

From the moment he got off Air Force One, pumping his fist and warmly greeting Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, he seemed focused on securing a range of deals for the technology titans and business executives he brought with him.

But in a speech with elements of a campaign rally — one that began with an audience of Saudi leaders and investors standing and taking photos of Trump as he swayed to Lee Greenwood's “God Bless the USA” and that concluded with “Y.M.C.A.” — he addressed the host of security challenges plaguing the Middle East, as well as a renewed willingness for the United States to have a role in addressing them.

He said he would never allow Iran to obtain a nuclear weapon. But with talks underway on limiting Iran's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief, he said he was ready for a deal and pushed Tehran to take the olive branch he was offering. He also said he would remove sanctions on Syria, something that he said was requested by the Saudi crown prince, delivering a significant boost to Syria's new government.

"Oh, what I do for the crown prince," Trump said.

The Syrian sanctions date to the long, brutal reign of President Bashar al-Assad, who was ousted in December, and were intended to inflict major pain on his regime but led to devastating economic fallout for Syrian civilians. They were left in place because of uncertainty about the intentions of Syria's new leaders, who renounced a past affiliation with al-Qaeda.

Critics inside and outside the United States said maintaining the sanctions for too long risked alienating new leaders who might be open to cooperating with Washington and could increase Syria's dependence on other backers, including Turkey. Trump plans to "say hello" to Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa on Wednesday, a White House official said.

Trump also said the modern Middle East was created "by the people of the region themselves," suggesting he will pursue a far more restrained approach than his predecessors, including Joe Biden, who repeatedly slammed the Saudi crown prince for his human rights record.

"It's really incredible what you've done," Trump told the crowd, which included Saudi and U.S. leaders. "In the end, the so-called nation builders wrecked far more nations than they built, and the interventionists were intervening in complex societies that they did not even understand themselves."

Trump has often expressed skepticism about alliances, saying too many U.S. allies take advantage of Washington's military umbrella while doing little in exchange.

But on Tuesday, even as he said Middle Eastern nations have done best when they have stood on their own, he vowed: "I will never hesitate to wield American power if it's necessary to defend the United

States or to help defend our allies. And there will be no mercy for any foe who tries to do us or them harm.”

Throughout the day, Trump frequently lavished praise on the crown prince, extolling him from the stage.

“He’s an incredible man,” Trump said of Mohammed. “Known him a long time now. There’s nobody like him. Thank you very much. Appreciate it, my friend.”

Both the overture to Iran and the end of sanctions on Syria were blows to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who was already smarting from Trump’s decision to skip a visit to Israel despite being in the region. The Israeli leader has pushed a hard line on both issues.

But it was a remarkable show of unity between the Saudi and U.S. leaders, and it had a far different tenor from the visit that Biden made as president nearly three years earlier. Biden once vowed to make the kingdom a “pariah” for its human rights abuses, and on his visit he confronted Mohammed about the 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, saying he told the Saudi leader in a “straightforward and direct” way that the killing was unacceptable. The crown prince did not greet Biden at the airport during that visit, instead meeting him at the royal palace, where the two exchanged a fist bump.

It has been eight years since Trump first visited the kingdom as president, and in that time, his personal relationship with the Saudi crown prince has withstood significant trials. It was during Trump’s first term that U.S. intelligence agencies determined that Mohammed was complicit in the killing of Khashoggi, a Washington Post contributing columnist.

While the kingdom was shunned by the international community and business leaders for a time following Khashoggi’s killing, the investors and brands are now back.

The investment forum that Trump addressed in Riyadh was also attended by CEOs from Uber, Amazon, BlackRock and SpaceX.

“We reaffirm this important bond, and we take the next steps to make our relationship closer, stronger,” Trump told the forum. He pledged that the alliance would endure. “It is more powerful than ever before. And by the way, it will remain that way. We don’t go in and out like other people,” he said to roars of applause.

As Trump arrived here for the first extended foreign trip of his second term, the start of his four-day tour of three Middle Eastern countries was filled with the kind of lavish display he craves.

Ahead of Trump's landing in Riyadh on Tuesday morning, workers scurried to ready a lavender-colored carpet that lined the steps from the plane and guided the path to an opulent room near the tarmac.

In the morning, Air Force One was escorted by six Saudi F-15s, flying close to the presidential aircraft as it made its final approach. In the afternoon, the presidential car, nicknamed the Beast, was escorted by Arabian horses walking in formation around the armored limousine as a band and an honor guard awaited.

As he arrived at the Saudi royal court, Trump and the crown prince walked down a purple carpet before arriving in a massive, gilded hall, where top U.S. and Saudi officials were sitting in a ring around the edge. Trump and his Saudi counterpart settled in large, upholstered purple chairs at the head of the room.

The encounter also featured a parade of the richest and most prominent American and Saudi business and tech titans, all walking through marble hallways to join a receiving line to speak briefly with the countries' two leaders. There was an extended conversation with Elon Musk, who eschewed his often-casual dress of T-shirts and hats, and instead wore a suit and tie. Trump spent time introducing Susie Wiles, his chief of staff, to the Saudi leader.

OpenAI co-founder Sam Altman gestured with his hands in animated discussion. (The Post has a content partnership with OpenAI.) One person brought several printouts to deliver a brief presentation to the two leaders. Patrick Soon-Shiong, the owner of the Los Angeles Times and a billionaire medical researcher and investor, held forth in a warm conversation.

Some 250 people were on the guest list, showcasing the priority that Trump has placed on securing business deals and more cooperation between U.S. and Saudi leaders. It included Stephen A. Schwarzman, the CEO of the Blackstone Group; Larry Fink, the CEO of BlackRock; and Andy Jassy, the CEO of Amazon. There were high-ranking executives of Citigroup, Google, Northrop Grumman, Uber, Coca-Cola and Boeing.

“As you know, we have the biggest business leaders in the world here,” Trump said during an afternoon meeting with the Saudi crown prince, who was at his side throughout the day. “They’re going to walk away with a lot of checks for a lot of things that you’re going to provide.”

He suggested that some 2 million jobs would be created by his 24-hour visit to Saudi Arabia.

Trump claimed to have attained \$600 billion in investment commitments. Although details were vague, some investments had already been announced, and the public tally didn’t add up to \$600 billion, much less the \$1 trillion the president had previously hoped to secure from the Saudis.

Part of the commitments came in the form of a \$142 billion arms deal that will provide Saudi Arabia with military equipment from more than a dozen U.S. defense firms, according to a White House summary. It also includes enhanced training to build the capacity of the Saudi armed forces, which could further align the United States with a key ally in a volatile region.

The announcement marked an extension of robust military sales to Saudi Arabia stretching back through numerous presidential administrations. Between 2010 and 2020, Washington proposed foreign military sales of more than \$100 billion, according to a 2023 report from the independent Congressional Research Service.

On the first stop of his trip, there was no visible presence of any of Trump’s family members, who have spent the past several weeks drumming up business in the Middle East for the Trump Organization in ways that presidential historians and government watchdogs say mark a new test for White House ethics.

Trump is scheduled to participate in a meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council on Wednesday morning before departing for Qatar in the afternoon. The trip comes as current and former U.S. military, defense and Secret Service officials are raising security concerns over a luxury jet the Qatari government is proposing as a gift to the United States for Trump’s use.

Trump is scheduled to conclude his trip Friday with a visit to the United Arab Emirates. While he previously held out the possibility that he could travel to Turkey should talks emerge between Russian

President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, he said Tuesday that Secretary of State Marco Rubio would be attending talks later this week in Turkey. Special envoys Steve Witkoff and Keith Kellogg are also planning to attend, according to a White House official.

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