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President Trump in Riyadh: A New Start for US-Saudi Relations?

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During President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh, the United States and Saudi Arabia strove to publicly display their shared interests in promoting bilateral strategic cooperation, and demonstrate that the "thorns" in the relations under President Obama no longer exist. The focus of the visit was the announcement of agreement on a long range of military and economic deals, worth hundreds of billions of dollars. Some of the military deals (worth about \$110 billion) are expected to be implemented shortly, while the others (worth up to about \$350 billion) will be implemented over the coming decade, subject to Congressional approval. Clearly President Trump was eager to prove that he was fulfilling his promise to strengthen the American economy with the emphasis on creating "jobs, jobs, jobs."

So far the details of these deals have not been reported in full, which in the military context include ships, tanks, and advance anti-missile defense systems (THAAD), in addition to systems that will help improve Saudi Arabia's cyber, communications, marine security, and intelligence capabilities. In addition, a series of economic agreements were signed, including infrastructure development, professional training, and energy and technology to encourage the "2030 Vision." The Saudi national oil company, Aramco, is expected to sign deals worth about \$50 billion dollars with American companies; Blackstone, the largest private investment fund in the world, has reached agreement in principle with the Saudi Investment Fund on investment in infrastructures in the United States worth about \$40 billion; American companies are expected to help Saudi Arabia reduce its economic dependence on oil; and a deal with Lockheed Martin for 150 Black Hawk helicopters to be assembled in Saudi Arabia is expected.

In some cases these are memoranda of understanding rather than agreements, and some are not new, but rather the realization of earlier understandings from the time of the Obama administration. Moreover, it is not certain how the Kingdom, in its current economic condition, can finance these huge purchases, which above all are intended to demonstrate US commitment to Saudi security. Senior American officials who joined the visit presented this reinforcement of the Kingdom's military capabilities as a way of helping it deal with

threats, partly on its own, and fight terror – and in this context also relieve the economic and military burden on the United States.

At the political level, the Saudis highlighted their importance in the Muslim world and the Arab arena by organizing an Arab Islamic Summit with the participation of over fifty leaders. The summit enabled Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries to present a united front in the struggle against the Islamic State and other extremist terror organizations, and toward Iran. At the same time, the many meetings arranged for Trump enabled him to display his status as an accomplished leader of a powerful nation, and the intention to base American policy in the Middle East on rehabilitation of relations with traditional US allies.

Trump's speech at the summit had a clear message: contrary to his Islamophobic image, he sees Islam – as did Obama – as a tolerant religion, and therefore, the struggle is not between faiths but against "barbaric criminals" acting in the name of religion. Trump repeated his strong desire to strengthen the strategic alliance between the United States and the Sunni countries, whose belief in the willingness of the United States to support them and their leaders was undermined during the Obama presidency. The shared objectives of the US and all other participants in the summit, particularly the Sunni Arab states, are to defeat Islamic terror and isolate Iran – even if it is not clear if all the leaders attending the meeting the opposition to Iran to the same degree. Saudi King Salman told the dozens of Muslim leaders that the regime in Tehran "represents the spearhead of global terror," and Trump insisted that "all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran." The summit ended with the inauguration in Riyadh of a Center for Strategic Coordination, evidence of the intention to strengthen strategic ties between the countries.

America's forceful attitude toward Iran encourages Saudi Arabia to speak more harshly against Tehran. The Saudi Defense Minister and Deputy Crown Prince stated recently that Saudi Arabia will conduct its war against Iran inside Iran, hinting at support for regime change in Tehran. The nuclear agreement was not mentioned by either King Salman or President Trump in their speeches, reinforcing the impression that although both countries maintain that the agreement is a bad one, at this stage it serves their interests and they do not seek to cancel it. In addition, they fear that any steps against the agreement will encourage extremists in Iran and could provoke Tehran to accelerate its nuclear program and harden its regional policy.

To back up his goal of improving relations with Saudi Arabia, Trump was careful to turn a blind eye to significant sources of disagreement between the countries, particularly those involving breaches of human rights. Trump stressed, "We are not here to lecture – we are not here to tell other people how to live, what to do, who to be, or how to worship....Instead, we are here to offer partnership -- based on shared interests and values -- to pursue a better future for us all." Trump also avoided repeating the harsh criticism he

expressed in the past regarding Saudi ineffectiveness at dealing with terrorism, and the fact that the Kingdom is not bearing the burden of protecting its own security.

The parties did not specify how their declarations of intent will be translated into a working program, but Trump did impose on all the Arab leaders the responsibility for dealing with "the wicked ideology" and for cleansing their societies of "evil." Even before the visit, the United States saw Saudi Arabia as a key element in the struggle against Islamic extremism, and therefore has asked the Kingdom to play a more significant role in this fight, especially with regard to the financing of terror. For its part, Saudi Arabia declared that it is prepared to allocate forces to fight the Islamic State, although it is doubtful whether this promise will be translated into action, given that Riyadh failed to implement earlier commitments. Moreover, it is questionable if the parties discussed many essential issues, such as a political settlement in Syria, Russian involvement in the fighting, and the day after the defeat of the Islamic State. Nor was the issue of the war waged by Saudi Arabia against the Houthis, Iran's allies in Yemen, publicly addressed, although it was likely discussed. The administration, which has been careful not to be drawn into direct involvement in the conflict with the Houthis, wishes to underplay their achievements diplomatically, and thus give Saudi Arabia an honorable way out after two years of fighting with no decisive victory. However, the Houthis' loss could be a gain for al-Qaeda – the target of American attacks in Yemen. Therefore, even before the visit it was reported that the administration intends to respond to some extent to Saudi Arabia's military requests regarding the campaign in Yemen, including precision guided munitions systems, which the US had so far refused to sell to them, partly because of the extensive collateral damage caused by Saudi air attacks.

Another central question that remained without a clear answer is whether Riyadh intends to increase its coordination with Washington over regional moves, and will it display a more positive approach on issues of importance to the United States, such as involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian political process. Trump, who repeated that the Saudi government is interested in a settlement between Israel and the Palestinians, hopes that this will help him to achieve a "deal" that will promote negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

It is not yet clear that the (even in view of statements from senior officials during and after the visit) that the American government has adopted the Israeli formula of progress "from the outside inward," in other words, improvements of Israel's relations with Arab countries before progress in the process with the Palestinians. In any case, it is highly doubtful that Riyadh would agree: the expectation that the Kingdom start to normalize relations with Israel before any real progress in the process is evident is not in line with the stated Saudi position.

The lavish praise that the American delegation and its Saudi hosts heaped on each other during the visit, and the expected gains for the two countries from the agreements signed, indicate a good chance that in the coming months they will examine whether they can

indeed realize the achievements of the visit. However, there are still issues that could challenge their relations, and above all the failure of Saudi Arabia to prevent ratification of the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA), which allows US citizens affected by the attacks of September 11, 2001 or their families to file claims against Saudi Arabia on its alleged involvement.

Thus beyond the effort of the two countries to demonstrate success, the practical outcomes of the visit are yet to be proven. The central testing point, at least for the United States, will be the ability of Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries to translate their declarations of commitment into concrete steps that will prove their seriousness on involvement in the planned actions.