

## President Trump's Visit to the Gulf: A Shifting Regional Order and the Challenge for Israel

Eldad Shavit and Yoel Guzansky | No. 1984 | May 19, 2025

President Donald Trump completed his first diplomatic visit of his second term in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, signaling that these countries hold personal significance for him—not just for the United States. The outcomes of the visit provided the leaders of these states with an opportunity to showcase a broad convergence of interests, particularly those that are visible. This visit, along with recent moves by the US administration in the Middle East, has contributed to a growing sense that Israel is being sidelined from major regional developments. It is increasingly evident that the president and his administration are signaling Washington's intention to reshape the framework of regional alliances, potentially by reducing its reliance on Israel. The Gulf leaders, for their part, pressured Trump to lift sanctions on Syria—which he did—and to promote a nuclear agreement with Iran that would reduce the threat of war. They also urged Trump to pressure Israel to end the war in the Gaza Strip, with Saudi Arabia specifically requesting that the issue of normalization with Israel be put on hold for the time being.

The central focus of the high-profile visit—Trump's first since returning to the White House—held from May 13–16 in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, and included the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit he attended, was a series of joint declarations about intentions to promote economic deals, primarily in the defense and technology sectors, totaling an unprecedented amount of approximately [\\$2 trillion](#). These deals, which have yet to be formally signed, were outlined in cooperation with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE.

- **Saudi Arabia:** [On the table](#) are arms deals, Saudi investments in the United States, collaboration in the oil market and in AI technology, a defense pact, and also nuclear cooperation. In this context, and contrary to earlier reports, Saudi Arabia has not yet received approval for a nuclear program, and no significant agreement on this issue was signed during the visit. Trump stated that he expects approximately \$1 trillion in Saudi investments in the United States. The total volume of deals announced between the United States and Saudi Arabia is about \$600 billion, including \$142 billion in military and defense contracts.
- **Qatar:** Discussions centered on expanding defense cooperation and investments in the United States, including a mega-deal to purchase aircraft from Boeing valued at about \$100 billion. According to [the White House statement](#), President Trump signed an agreement with Qatar to promote mutual trade worth at least \$1.2 trillion.
- **United Arab Emirates:** Deals worth \$200 billion were advanced, mainly involving cooperation in the AI field. Efforts were also made to promote a security agreement,

alongside US expectations for massive investments amounting to \$1.4 trillion from the UAE in American technology over several years.

Throughout the visit, the Gulf monarchs' desire to bestow Trump with royal honors was especially prominent, and it appeared that a competition was underway among them for the president's favor, with each striving to outdo the others in the respect and benefits it offered to him. Trump, for his part, did not hold back in showering praise on his hosts, emphasizing his deep appreciation for their leadership and accomplishments. All sides presented the visit as an exceptional success, with both Trump and the Arab leaders highlighting achievements.

It is evident that President Trump views close relations with the Gulf states as a significant contribution to US interests, a view shared by the Gulf countries themselves, which are eager to open a new chapter and deepen ties with the United States. The main beneficiary of this development—alongside President Trump—is Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who gained recognition for both himself and his country as having an upgraded status and as being a central pillar for the United States in the Arab world and the region as a whole.

The visit helped both sides advance their goals on the diplomatic front as well:

- Mutual influence on regional policy—In order to tighten their relations with the United States, the Gulf states are also required to reduce to some extent their ties with China, thereby addressing key American interests.
- The struggle for regional status vis-à-vis Iran—The visit allowed the Gulf states to leverage their ties with the United States to showcase their ability to set the regional agenda concerning Iran—at least during President Trump's term. In return for the mega-deals, they expect the United States to take steps to guarantee their security.
- Willingness to coordinate energy policy as much as possible—Trump places great importance on oil prices, while for the Gulf states, a key goal is to influence oil prices in exchange for security guarantees.

During the visit, President Trump's emphasis on reshaping the regional alliance structure became evident, particularly through his calls for conflict resolution and the promotion of stability, which he sees as vital to achieving his administration's economic goals. In this context, one of the most striking developments was Trump's dramatic decision—encouraged by Saudi Arabia and Turkey—to meet with Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa and his announcement lifting all of the US sanctions imposed on Syria since 2019. Trump described the move as giving Syria a chance to prosper and clarified that it marked a first step toward normalization between the United States and the new Syrian regime.

In parallel, the visit included extensive discussions on Iran and the war between Israel and Hamas. In both cases, Trump expressed a desire to pursue novel and unconventional solutions, favoring negotiation over military action:

- **Iran**—The Gulf states urged Trump to reach a nuclear agreement with Iran to reduce the threat of war, which could undermine their economies and stability. Trump made it clear that he is not interested in military action against Iran and expressed optimism about the ongoing negotiations between the United States and Iran. However, he

stressed that if the talks fail, the alternative would be increased economic and military pressure on Iran (although he refrained from specifying the nature of any military action).

- **The war in the Gaza Strip**—Throughout the visit, the Trump administration's efforts to advance a hostage deal between Israel and Hamas—including a ceasefire and planning for a post-war phase—were unsuccessful. The Gulf states, for their part, emphasized the need to pressure Israel to end the war, with Saudi Arabia requesting that the issue of normalization with Israel be postponed for the time being. Although Trump reiterated his hope that more countries—especially Saudi Arabia—would join the Abraham Accords, the administration appears to assess that such prospects remain limited without a major shift in the situation in Gaza.

From the leaders' statements during the visit, it is evident that both the US administration and the Gulf states that Trump visited were pleased with their alignment on a wide range of visible issues. However, the practical implications of this alignment will be tested over time. Several potential areas of friction can already be identified:

- **Oil production and pricing**—The US administration expects increased oil output and a subsequent drop in prices. The Gulf states, led by Saudi Arabia, responded to the demand and acted to increase production. However, due to economic pressures—especially in Saudi Arabia—and low oil prices, sustaining this level of output may prove difficult. The Saudi oil company Aramco has reported poor performance due to declining prices and is evidently struggling to implement planned projects. Thus, low oil prices and economic stress may hinder the kingdom's ability to fulfill its commitments to the United States. Furthermore, the Gulf states expect the administration to reduce the 10% tariffs imposed on them, even though their exports to the United States remain relatively minor.
- **Policy toward Iran**—All Gulf states wish to avoid escalation with Iran and, for their own reasons, maintain a good relationship with it. Saudi Arabia seems to have learned a lesson from Trump's first term, during which it participated in the "maximum pressure" strategy against Iran and suffered for it. From Riyadh's perspective, that strategy was ineffective, and, in addition, Saudi Arabia was the target of an Iranian missile attack, with no American defense forthcoming. Therefore, a US decision to attack Iran using bases in the Gulf (e.g., expectations that Qatar will host American strategic bombers at Al Udeid Air Base) could provoke conflict between regional states and the administration.
- **The war in Gaza and the desire to bring Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords**—The prolonged conflict, and especially the worsening humanitarian situation in Gaza, could generate domestic pressure on Arab regimes. As a result, they used the visit to press President Trump on the issue. Indeed, he voiced criticism of the humanitarian situation, including his statement that "a lot of people are starving" in Gaza, and that the situation needs to be "taken care of." In any case, Trump's ambition to convince Saudi Arabia to join the Abraham Accords will not be realized as long as Riyadh is

uncomfortable with the situation in Gaza and Israel remains reluctant to commit to a political resolution of the Palestinian issue.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Israel**

Although Trump's visit to the Gulf focused on strengthening alliances between the United States and the regional states—within which Israel is a significant player—he did not include Israel in his itinerary. While he emphasized the importance of comprehensive regional normalization, Israel's absence contributed to a sense of exclusion from the dramatic diplomatic processes unfolding without its involvement. This omission created the impression that the president and his administration may be signaling to the Israeli government that Washington aims to reshape regional alliances—possibly even by reducing its reliance on Israel.

It is worth noting that Israel was not the only party left out. Other key Arab leaders—most notably from Egypt and Jordan—who had been invited to Gulf summits during Trump's 2017 visit were also excluded this time.

The US policy in the Middle East and growing cooperation between the United States and the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia, present both challenges and opportunities for Israel:

### **Risks and Challenges**

- **Feeling of exclusion**—The impression left by Trump regarding the importance and esteem he attributes to the leaders of the Gulf states raises concerns about shifting US perceptions of Israel's role in the region. This could reinforce the impression among regional actors that Israel is losing its central status as a key ally—particularly in favor of Saudi Arabia. Such a perception could directly undermine Israel's ability to attract regional partners and deter adversaries.
- **Erosion of Israel's qualitative military edge (QME)**—The possible sale of advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia and Qatar—even if no concrete deals have been finalized—poses a serious threat to Israel's long-standing QME, a principle the United States has safeguarded for years. Of particular concern is the possible sale of an advanced F-35 fighter jet, sought by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE (which they were promised in exchange for signing the Abraham Accords).
- **Increased coordination between the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey**—The trilateral alignment demonstrated during the visit, without Israeli involvement, could marginalize Israel in future regional dialogues on shaping the Middle East and threaten its interests.
- **Adoption of the Arab/Gulf narrative**—President Trump's remarks during the visit suggest he has largely embraced the Arab perspective regarding developments in Gaza and other regional arenas. This narrative, promoted by Gulf allies who have gained significant influence over the US administration, may now guide American regional policy.

- **Agreement with Iran**—The Trump administration and Gulf states share an interest in reaching an agreement with Iran—even at the cost of disregarding Israel’s demands. In the event of negotiation failure, the Arab states will likely leverage their strengthened ties with the Trump administration to press for restraint toward Iran, including efforts to influence Israel’s operational considerations.

### Opportunities

- **Advancing normalization with Saudi Arabia**—Trump’s determination to expand the Abraham Accords and his goal of building a Sunni anti-Iran axis could lead to greater US pressure on Saudi Arabia to offer gestures toward Israel. In the event of a decision to strike Iran, the administration may press Gulf states to allow Israeli freedom of action, or at the very least to expand covert coordination with Israel.
- **Economic-technological integration through regional partnerships**—Israel could integrate into the US effort to advance joint economic-technological projects (such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor—IMEC), given that the United States and Gulf states intend to invest vast sums in turning regional players into powers in these fields.
- **Growing US recognition of Israel’s security needs**—Against the backdrop of concerns about the erosion of Israel’s military advantage, the Trump administration may offer expanded military aid or formal security guarantees.
- **Inclusion in formal regional mechanisms**—The expansion of security cooperation between the United States and the Gulf states may allow Israel to join regional security forums, which are expected to grow.

### Recommendations for Israel

- **Israel must act at all levels to ensure the strategic bond with the White House is preserved**, and that decisions relevant to Israel are made only after consultation with the Israeli government. As part of this, Israel should firmly seek a commitment from Washington that no regional security, diplomatic, or economic process will take place without prior coordination with Israel.
- **Israel should work to deepen its ties with Saudi Arabia, even in the absence of formal normalization**, by strengthening covert channels and, among other things, promoting a permanent US-regional forum in which Israel would have an active role.
- **Preserve Israel’s strategic military superiority**—It is essential that, alongside major deals with the Gulf states, the United States continues to uphold Israel’s qualitative military edge, including the provision of advanced systems and public security assurances. Particular emphasis should be placed on the need for enhanced coordination regarding the US plan to cooperate with Saudi Arabia on nuclear matters, especially concerning the issue of uranium enrichment on Saudi soil.

- **To safeguard all of these interests, Israel must ensure that its strategy aligns with the priorities of the Trump administration.** Above all, it must carefully consider its actions to leverage the growing ties between the United States and the Gulf states in ways that advance its own interests. Israel must act to seize opportunities to solidify its regional standing, enhance its position vis-à-vis the US administration, and elevate its status on the international stage.

---

Editors of the series: Anat Kurtz, Eldad Shavit and Ela Greenberg