

With Middle East Tour, Trump Reshapes US Foreign Policy

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Yousif al-Obaidli (R), director-general of the Sheikh Zayed Grand Mosque, accompanies U.S. President Donald Trump on a tour of the mosque in Abu Dhabi on May 15, 2025. Brendan Smialowski/AFP via Getty Images



By Emel Akan

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News Analysis

WASHINGTON—President Donald Trump’s recent tour of the Middle East sent a clear message that economic interests and deal-making lie at the heart of his foreign policy vision.

Trump spent four days in the Gulf from May 13 to 16, visiting Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, where he secured investment commitments worth trillions of dollars that will benefit U.S. businesses and jobs.

Though questions remain over how much of the pledged investment will materialize, the trip marked a strategic shift in Washington’s engagement with the Middle East. Trump drew a sharp contrast with past U.S. administrations, rejecting the interventionist foreign policy approach embraced by both Republican and Democratic parties for decades.

Speaking at an investment summit in Riyadh on May 13, Trump openly criticized previous U.S. policies toward Iraq, Afghanistan, and other parts of the region.

“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 said.

He lauded the achievements of the Gulf countries, stating that their transformation wasn’t the result of “Western interventionists flying people in beautiful planes, giving you lectures on how to live and how to govern your own affairs.”

“No. The gleaming marvels of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were not created by the so-called nation-builders, neocons, or liberal nonprofits.”

The speech received warm applause from Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the audience, emerging as one of the most talked-about events of his trip.

“It is not a secret that President Trump understands the political language of the Middle East more than any of his predecessors,” Dalia Ziada, senior fellow at the Jerusalem Center for Security and Foreign Affairs, told The Epoch Times.

Ziada, an Egyptian political analyst based in Washington, noted that Trump prioritized “building personal bonds of trust” with these leaders, rather than pressuring them on issues of democratization and human rights.

In the blistering heat of the Qatari desert, Trump addressed American troops at Al Udeid Air Base, reaffirming his commitment to “peace

through strength” in the region.

“As president, my priority is to end conflicts, not start them,” Trump said.

The moment was rich in symbolism. Over 20 years earlier, President George W. Bush had [spoken](#) to U.S. forces in Qatar just months after the invasion of Iraq. He pledged that the United States would stand with Iraqi people “as they build a stable democracy and a peaceful future.”

Trump’s visit and message marked a deliberate departure from that era of intervention.

Al Udeid Air Base, located just southwest of Doha, Qatar, is the largest U.S. military installation in the Middle East. It played a significant role during the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, serving as the primary logistical and operational hub for evacuating tens of thousands of people.

What was very striking during the Middle East trip was Trump’s “distancing himself completely from long standing American foreign policy and national security goals,” according to Joel Rubin, Middle East expert and former State Department official under President Barack Obama.

“The president’s arguments were much more tailored to the ears of two audiences: one, the very elite leaders of these countries, and two, the domestic audience at home,” Rubin told The Epoch Times.

Lavish Welcomes Across the Gulf

Throughout his four-day visit to the Gulf, Trump was met with extravagant pageantry and abundant praise. Each leader appeared to compete in staging the most generous reception for the 47th U.S. president.

In Saudi Arabia, fighter jets escorted his Air Force One as it landed in Riyadh, where lavender carpets were rolled out in a grand reception. In Qatar, Trump was welcomed with dozens of camels and traditional sword dances, while many buildings in Doha lit up with American flags in a dazzling display.

In Abu Dhabi, a traditional “Al-Ayyala” dance performance stole the spotlight, after the videos of hair flipping girls went viral. In addition, the Burj Khalifa in Dubai, the tallest building in the world, was lit up with the Stars and Stripes.

These receptions stood in contrast to the greetings given to President Joe Biden during his 2022 visit to Saudi Arabia, or to then-Vice President Dick Cheney during his 2002 trip to the Gulf.

Trump's message was clear: the era of costly foreign interventions is over, replaced by a focus on strategic partnerships rooted in mutual economic benefit.

Gulf leaders responded with praise and warmth.

At a state dinner held at Lusail Palace, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Tamim Al Thani expressed how much he worried for Trump during last year's assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania.

"I prayed for your recovery and your safety," he told Trump.

Deals Totaling \$2 Trillion

Dozens of U.S. business leaders accompanied the president on the trip, underscoring the economic nature of the Gulf tour. The deals the United States secured with Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have totaled \$2 trillion, according to the White House.

However, some of these deals are memorandums of understanding that may take years to materialize.

Saudi Arabia pledged a total of **\$600 billion** in investments across various U.S. sectors, with nearly \$142 billion of that dedicated to purchasing advanced warfighting equipment and services from U.S. defense companies.

Qatar announced nearly **\$243.5 billion** in economic deals, with a large share going to Boeing, which secured a \$96 billion agreement to supply jets to Qatar Airways. Parsons, a defense-sector technology provider, also received 30 projects worth up to \$97 billion. The White House said agreements signed with Qatar would "generate an economic exchange worth at least \$1.2 trillion."

In the UAE, more than **\$200 billion** in commercial deals were announced, including a \$14.5 billion commitment from Etihad Airways to Boeing and GE Aerospace. The UAE earlier committed to a \$1.4 trillion investment framework in the United States over the next decade, targeting AI infrastructure, semiconductors, energy, quantum computing, biotechnology, and manufacturing. The UAE has also committed to invest in, build, or finance U.S. data centers.

"The numbers are eye popping," Rubin said, but warned that not all may come to fruition.

During Trump's first term, Saudi Arabia agreed to buy \$450 billion in American products. Actual trade and investment flow was less than \$300 billion from 2017 to 2020, [according](#) to the Arab Gulf States Institute.

While it was an important diplomatic visit, Rubin said he wished the president had focused more on the tougher conflicts, bringing the Israelis, and possibly even the Iranians, directly into the talks.

"There are concerns in the pro-Israel community about his decision to not visit Israel and to take some positions that publicly seem to distance himself somewhat from the Israeli government," Rubin said.

Nonetheless, analysts say the deals struck on this trip could strengthen America's position in the Middle East against China and Russia.

"It will outbalance the growing influence of Russia and China" in the region, Ziada said.

A Surprise Move on Syria

A key development during Trump's Middle East tour was his announcement on May 13 to lift all U.S. sanctions on Syria. The next day, he met with Syrian leader Ahmed al-Sharaa in Riyadh.

Syria is one of the most heavily [sanctioned](#) countries in the world. Initially imposed on the Assad regime, these sanctions have severely hindered the nation's reconstruction efforts.

Trump may see lifting sanctions as a strategic move to open Syria to U.S. and Gulf investment, as well as to push back against Iran and Russia's influence in the region.

"Iran and Russia, both adversaries of the United States, have been pushed out by this new leadership in Syria," Rubin said, noting that this gives Washington a chance to build stronger ties with the country and counter China's growing economic influence in the region.

Still, concerns persist over the Syrian government's ties to al-Qaeda and its treatment of ethnic and religious minorities.

"It remains to be seen whether they will respond positively and act better on protecting ethnic and religious minorities," Ziada said.

While some in Congress voiced concern over Syria, Trump struck an optimistic tone.

“It’s their time to shine,” Trump said during his remarks in Riyadh.
“Good luck, Syria. Show something very special.”

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Emel Akan

Reporter

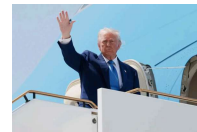
Emel Akan is a senior White House correspondent for The Epoch Times, where she covers the policies of the Trump administration. Previously, she reported on the Biden administration and the first term of President Trump. Before her journalism career, she worked in investment banking at JPMorgan. She holds an MBA from Georgetown University.



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