

## Trump's Gulf Tour: Trillions in Deals and Regime Interests — Who Stands to Gain?



U.S. President Donald Trump arrived in Saudi Arabia on the morning of Tuesday, May 13, kicking off a four-day Gulf tour that will also take him to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. He was welcomed at King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

From the purple carpet rolled out at the airport to Al-Yamamah Palace in the Saudi capital, Trump and the Crown Prince held a brief meeting before heading to the Saudi-U.S. Investment Forum, which coincided with Trump's arrival and was attended by Saudi ministers and prominent business leaders from both countries.

Though not Trump's first overseas trip during his second term—he previously made a brief visit to Rome to attend Pope Francis's funeral at the Vatican—this Gulf tour has drawn significant attention. It comes amid a flurry of geopolitical shifts that have ignited regional and global tensions, and is seen by some as a potential move to de-escalate the situation.

While key political issues are expected to surface during Trump's meetings with Gulf leaders, the primary focus of this tour is economic. Strengthening

investment partnerships between Washington and the three Gulf capitals—Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi—is central. As the American outlet Axios described it in a striking headline: “Trump’s Trillion-Dollar Tour.”

Boarding Air Force One with a briefcase full of strategic goals, Trump embarked on the trip with ambitious objectives. On the other side, the Gulf states—and arguably the broader Arab and Middle Eastern region—have their own set of expectations. So, what gains might this tour deliver?



### What Does Trump Want From This Tour?

Trump is accompanied by a delegation of American business magnates, led by Tesla CEO and Trump advisor Elon Musk. Several executives, including BlackRock CEO Larry Fink and Blackstone CEO Stephen Schwarzman, had already arrived in the Kingdom ahead of the president.

As Trump’s plane touched down in Riyadh, the U.S.–Saudi Investment Forum was already underway, featuring a lineup of major business figures and investors. In an early session, Larry Fink remarked that he had visited Saudi Arabia more than 65 times over the past 20 years. He noted that while the Kingdom was once “following,” it is now “leading” and expanding economically beyond oil.

According to Reuters, the U.S. and Saudi Arabia have long maintained a robust relationship based on a simple formula: oil for security. This tacit agreement has

endured across successive governments in both countries.

Though Trump's visit comes amid heightened geopolitical tensions—with hotspots in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and Iran—and the potential for him to travel to Turkey on Thursday to join direct talks between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, the focus of this Gulf tour remains economic.

Based on pre-tour announcements, a wave of investment deals is expected between the U.S. and the three Gulf states, with a combined value nearing \$3 trillion over the next decade:

**Saudi Arabia:** The Kingdom announced \$600 billion in U.S. investments, with expectations of reaching \$1 trillion at Trump's urging. This includes an arms deal exceeding \$100 billion, featuring advanced military equipment such as C-130 transport aircraft.

**Qatar:** Qatari investments are estimated between \$200–300 billion, including a significant purchase of Boeing aircraft and a \$2 billion deal for MQ-9 Reaper drones. Reports also suggest that Qatar gifted Trump a luxurious Boeing 747-8—worth around \$400 million—as a potential replacement for Air Force One.

**United Arab Emirates:** The UAE pledged up to \$1.4 trillion in investments over the next decade, targeting sectors such as artificial intelligence, energy, defense, and manufacturing.

Beyond economic gains, Trump is aiming to bolster U.S. influence in the Gulf—politically and militarily—especially as the region becomes a pivotal player in global affairs. Most recently, the Gulf has taken on a mediating role in the war in Ukraine, attracting the attention of America's traditional rivals, China and Russia.

Trump's agenda also includes the volatile landscape in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Iran, Yemen, and Sudan—areas where Saudi Arabia and the UAE are deeply involved and where their foreign policies often diverge from Washington's. Deepening ties with the Gulf is therefore a strategic imperative for the U.S.

Moreover, Trump seeks to expand the Abraham Accords and bring Saudi Arabia into the normalization fold alongside Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Achieving this would bolster Trump's bid for the Nobel Peace Prize, a prize he is openly coveting.

### What Do the Gulf States Want?

From a strictly pragmatic perspective—and setting aside the controversies surrounding Trump's persona and provocative rhetoric—the Gulf states are aiming to secure five key gains from hosting the U.S. president:

**Political and Regional Clout:** Gulf leaders recognize that their influence hinges largely on relations with the sitting U.S. administration. Building strong ties with someone like Trump could provide them with strategic and diplomatic leverage in a region marked by intense rivalries.

**Deepening Economic Ties:** Major investment deals in critical sectors such as AI, infrastructure, defense, and energy are vital. Gulf states hope to attract more American corporations and foster a pro-business environment. Saudi investments in the U.S. now exceed \$800 billion, most via sovereign and indirect channels; the UAE's are estimated at \$250–300 billion; and Qatar's investments reached over \$45 billion by 2023.

**Military Empowerment:** With mounting regional threats, particularly from Iran and the Houthis, the Gulf states view advanced U.S. weaponry as essential. Moreover, Saudi ambitions to join the nuclear club—albeit for peaceful purposes—are likely to be raised, though they face expected Israeli opposition.

**Neutralizing U.S. Criticism:** Gulf regimes are looking to mute American pressure on sensitive issues such as human rights and internal reforms—areas Washington has long used as leverage. By tying economic cooperation to political silence, Gulf leaders seek greater autonomy in domestic governance.

**Support for Grand Ambitions:** As the Gulf launches sweeping national initiatives—like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, Qatar's National Vision 2030, and futuristic projects such as NEOM—U.S. support is seen as critical to attracting global partnerships and legitimacy.

### Gains Beyond Trump's First Visit

All signs suggest this tour could yield more significant returns than Trump's first Gulf visit in May 2017, for several reasons:

That visit was limited to Saudi Arabia; this time, the tour includes three Gulf states.

Total deals from the 2017 visit capped at \$460 billion, compared to a projected \$3 trillion now—nearly six times more.

The earlier tour involved broader Arab participation at a Gulf-Arab summit, whereas the current visit is narrowly focused on Gulf nations, making it more targeted and strategic.

In 2017, Trump's combative rhetoric toward Iran appealed to Gulf states amid escalating tensions. Today, the landscape is more conciliatory. Iran's Foreign Minister visited Riyadh and Doha ahead of Trump's arrival, and multiple rounds of U.S.–Iran nuclear talks are ongoing in Muscat and Rome.

Trump's 2017 visit was followed by the Gulf rift and blockade of Qatar, led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. Today, intra-Gulf relations are far more cooperative.

### Realpolitik at the Helm

Trump and the Gulf states operate under the logic of political realism. Each side knows what it wants and lays its cards on the table with rare candor. Trump's unapologetic transparency—free of political nuance—facilitates this dynamic.

He's made no secret of his transactional approach: during his first term, he bluntly linked the survival of Gulf regimes to his protection, which, he insisted, comes at a price. That price is now spelled out in trillion-dollar investment packages.

Though often crude and unvarnished, Trump's brand of politics is, for Gulf rulers, more palatable than the veiled moralism of Democrats. As long as the deal remains "money for protection, silence, and support," they are content to engage. As the Egyptian proverb goes, "If you know the ransom, go ahead and kill him."

Through economic channels, Gulf leaders hope to break into sensitive regional files—especially Gaza, where signs of a possible ceasefire are emerging. They also seek to ease Western sanctions on Syria and de-escalate tensions in Lebanon to protect their own economic aspirations.

In the end, regardless of how the region's crises play out—or how Trump's second tour compares with his first—the defining factor remains the same: the overwhelming dominance of the economic agenda, and the unprecedented trillions he aims to bring home in exchange for the Gulf's hopes of power, protection, and prestige.