

Trump resets U.S.-Saudi relations, in Saudi Arabia's favor

By [Josh Rogin](#) March 16, 2017



President Trump's new deal with Saudi Arabia is really good — for the Saudis. After publicly bashing the kingdom for years, Trump completely reversed course Tuesday and rolled out the red carpet for the Saudi royals. He gave them a huge publicity boost and a highly sought-after U.S. commitment to improve and elevate bilateral relations. And what did Trump get in return? Not much at all.

The hastily arranged meetings between Trump and his top White House aides with a high-level delegation from Riyadh, led by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, was hailed by the Saudi side as a [“historical turning point”](#) in U.S.-Saudi relations after eight contentious years with the Obama administration. [A statement](#) from the Saudis said that the prince considers Trump “a true friend of Muslims” and that the meeting marked a “significant shift in relations” across all fields.

[A White House statement](#), issued Wednesday, said that Trump and Salman had directed their teams to find ways “to further strengthen and elevate the United States-Saudi strategic relationship” on the political, military, security, economic, cultural and social fronts. The two sides agreed to cooperate more in the economic, commercial, investment and energy fields and start a new U.S.-Saudi program “worth potentially more than \$200 billion in direct and indirect investments within the next four years,” the statement said. No details were provided.

For the Saudis, cozying up to the Trump White House is an obvious play. Relations with Washington had gotten so bad that at [their final meeting](#) in Riyadh last spring, President Barack Obama got into a contentious argument with King Salman, Prince Salman’s father, according to two sources briefed on the meeting, insisting that Riyadh should [open up more](#) to diplomacy with Iran and rely less on the security and support of the United States.

The Saudi leadership saw Hillary Clinton as more aligned with them on regional issues, but still worried that she would have insisted on Saudi political reform and respect for human rights, even conditioning U.S. military and financial support on progress on those fronts. But with the Trump administration, that’s no longer an issue.

“Saudis have actually expressed marked optimism about the Trump administration and its ‘America first’ approach to foreign policy,” Andrew Bowen, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, wrote [in a paper](#) this week. “Trump’s disdain for meddling in the internal affairs of foreign nations and his tough, no-nonsense approach to ISIS and Iran are music to their ears.”

Trump’s Cabinet picks also are longtime friends of the Saudi government and their Persian Gulf allies. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has worked with Gulf governments for decades on military issues, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has deep ties from his time as an executive at ExxonMobil. Both Mattis and Tillerson are [reportedly agreed](#) that political reform and human rights concerns should be discarded as conditions for U.S. military aid.

By becoming the first Arab leaders to be greeted at the White House, the Saudis have pulled off a diplomatic coup, beating out one of Trump’s [favorite leaders](#), Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi. They also blunted years of criticism by Trump of U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia.

During the campaign, Trump repeatedly railed against Saudi Arabia, one of the countries he described to his supporters at rallies across the nation as freeloaders who were relying on American protection without paying their fair share.

At a rally last April in Wisconsin, Trump [laid out exactly how](#) he would deal with Saudi Arabia if elected president.

“They are loaded with money to the gills. The U.S. protects them. We get practically nothing. Do you know why? Because our leaders don’t have business instinct,” Trump said. “Here’s what’s going to happen. We’ll say to Saudi Arabia, ‘Fellas, you’ve got to help us out.’ They’ll say, ‘No.’ We’ll say, ‘Bye bye.’ About two days later, they’ll call and say, ‘Get back here fast, somebody’s going to make a raid.’ We’ll go back. They’ll pay us so much money. And you know what? That’s fine.”

[In a June rally](#) in Las Vegas, Trump asserted that without U.S. defense support, the Saudi regime would have collapsed a long time ago, [a claim Trump](#) has been making for years.

“We defend Saudi Arabia. They don’t pay us nearly what they should be paying. So essentially we are subsidizing all of these countries,” Trump said at the rally. “How stupid are we? A country like Saudi Arabia wouldn’t exist for a week.”

The White House didn’t respond to requests for comment, but there’s no indication that Trump or any of his aides raised the issue of Saudi reimbursement for American defense in any of this week’s meetings.

The White House is touting Saudi Arabia’s plans to increase U.S. investment, but as with many of the foreign leaders’ promises to Trump about future American jobs, there’s not much detail to be had. Brian Katulis, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, met with Salman in Riyadh in late February and said that the Saudis were enthusiastic about new economic programs to offer Trump, but were light on specifics.

“The Saudis are thinking about how to scratch itches in terms of infrastructure and job creation issues,” he said. “The question for team Trump is, do the Saudis have a clear plan? That’s where the devil is in the details. I was left with a lack of clarity.”

On the security side, the White House touted increasing collaboration on counterterrorism, military cooperation in Yemen and [increasing pressure](#) on Iran. But on the thorny issue of Saudi

Arabia's own complicity in spreading radical Islamic ideology, the Trump administration has said exactly nothing, and the Saudis have promised the same.

"Politically, this is very tough for the Trump administration. If the president is talking about his fundamental opposition to radical Islam, for many of his supporters radical Islam has a return address, and it's Saudi Arabia," said Jon Alterman, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "How does Steve Bannon explain this to his base?"

In the end, Trump is not wedded to any particular foreign policy ideology and has no set policy for any bilateral relationship, other than that he wants to make sure America gets a good deal. From what we know about this visit so far, the Saudis got the better end of the bargain this time.