

Persian Gulf states wary of return to 'maximum pressure'

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Journalists

OPINION

Saudi Arabia and the UAE have signalled they remain committed to de-escalation with Iran as they prepare for the return of Donald Trump, hoping he can end a year of war in the Middle East but wary his unpredictability could inflame tensions further. Leaders like Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman were among Trump's most enthusiastic Arab backers during his first term as US president, welcoming both his adversarial approach to Iran and his transactional style after years of Persian Gulf frustration with American policy. But in the years since, the Persian Gulf's two powerhouses — Saudi Arabia and the UAE — have changed tack, seeking to engage with Tehran amid doubts about the US's commitment to their security. This became more urgent after Hamas's October 7 attack against Israel triggered a wave of regional hostilities and heightened tensions between the US and Iran, with both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi seeking to remain on the sidelines.



Then-US president Donald Trump (4th-R) is greeted by Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (2nd-R) after arriving in the Kingdom in May 2017.
● STEPHEN CROWLEY/NYT

Persian Gulf leaders, who traditionally prefer a Republican presidency, have welcomed Trump's re-election and hope the self-styled dealmaker fulfils his campaign pledge to bring peace to the region. But diplomats and people close to regional governments say they are also wary he could give Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu more licence to escalate against Israel's foes and to raise tensions with Iran, risking an all-out conflict that could spill over into the Persian Gulf states. "If Trump puts you in a situation where you have to decide [which side to take] because he's going against Iran, it's a big problem," a senior Arab diplomat said. "Trump is not the kind of guy who takes 'no' for an answer." In a sign of Riyadh's desire to maintain its cold peace with Iran, Prince Mohammed on Monday hosted senior Iranian officials at an Arab-Muslim conference in Jeddah, in which he accused Israel of committing genocide in Gaza. He also condemned Israel's strikes on Iran, calling on the international community to stop hostile actions on Iranian territory. Separately, Anwar Gargash, the UAE's presidential adviser, told a conference in Abu Dhabi on November 11 that the incoming

Trump administration must pursue a "comprehensive" approach instead of "reactive and piecemeal" policies. The comments underlined the shift in Saudi and Emirati thinking since they actively courted Trump after he took office in 2017 following years of Arab frustration with US policy swings and a sense of disengagement from the region. Both Riyadh and Abu Dhabi cheered the Trump administration's hawkish stance on Iran, his decision to abandon the 2015 nuclear deal between Tehran and world powers, and to impose crippling sanctions on the republic. But as Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign sent tension soaring across the region, they became aware of their own vulnerability. Persian Gulf rulers' faith in the US's willingness to defend them was particularly shaken after a missile and drone attack on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure in 2019 temporarily knocked out half of the kingdom's crude production. While Washington blamed Iran, Trump chose not to respond beyond imposing more sanctions. Giorgio Cafiero, chief executive of Washington-based Gulf State Analytics, said that by the time Trump's first term ended, re-

gional leaders "realised that in practice [it] had not succeeded in making the Persian Gulf Arab monarchies more secure". With confidence in the US security umbrella undermined, Saudi and the UAE decided de-escalation with Iran was the best bet to protect their states and allow them to focus on economic diversification. This culminated in a China-brokered agreement in March 2023 that re-established diplomatic relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran after a seven-year rift. Persian Gulf leaders' concern now is that an even broader conflagration in the Middle East could undermine their domestic development plans. "The deal supported by China is for the good of the region," said a person familiar with the Saudi government's thinking. "Saudi Arabia will remain committed to it as long as [Iran is] committed." The kingdom "believes the focus should be on economic development and the success of its vision, which ultimately will offer the region a vision for a way forward beyond conflict, a vision that should benefit everybody". Fayyad al-Ruwaili, chief of staff of the Saudi armed forces, was with his Iranian counterpart Mohammad Baqeri in Tehran on

November 10 to discuss defence co-operation as part of the Beijing agreement, the kingdom's Ministry of Defense said. But while vowing to bring peace to the Middle East, Trump has also expressed support for Israel's military offensives and appears set to appoint Iran hawks to his administration. Elise Stefanik, Trump's pick for US ambassador to the UN, wrote on X that "the US is ready for a return to President Trump's MAXIMUM PRESSURE campaign against Iran". Persian Gulf leaders fear the president-elect, who implemented a string of pro-Israeli policies in his first term, could embolden Netanyahu rather than rein him in. "We'll stand on the sideline, we are protected," the diplomat said but added: "Any defence system can be exhausted. It's not a joke." Still, both Prince Mohammed and Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, the UAE's president, will look forward to having closer personal relationships with Trump than they had with President Joe Biden. The relationship with Trump and his entourage continued after he left the White House, with his son-in-law Jared Kushner and former Treasury secretary Steven Mnuchin receiving billions of dol-

lars from Persian Gulf sovereign wealth funds for investment firms run by the two former officials. Biden was initially critical of Saudi Arabia and Prince Mohammed after he entered office, vowing to reassess Washington's relations with the kingdom after the 2018 murder of Jamal Khashoggi. But ties improved as Biden pushed for a three-way deal that would have led to the US agreeing to a defence treaty with Saudi Arabia in return for the kingdom normalising relations with Israel. Those plans were upended by the war in Gaza. Trump, who counted the 2020 Abraham Accords normalisation between Israel, the UAE, and three other Arab states as one of his biggest foreign policy successes, may seek his own grand bargain. But that would require both ending Israel's wars against Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon and getting it to make concessions towards the establishment of a Palestinian state. "The sense we get [is that] President Trump wants a deal to end the war in Gaza," another Arab diplomat said. "Will it be what everyone wants? Maybe not. But it would end the war."

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regional settlement to the crisis. Riyadh has, however, hardened its criticism of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's far-right cabinet as the Palestinian death toll has soared. In October, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said normalisation with Israel was "off the table until there's a resolution to Palestinian statehood". And Prince Mohammed two weeks ago used an Arab and Islamic summit in Riyadh to accuse Israel of committing "genocide" in Gaza, while condemning its war against Hezbollah in Lebanon and its strikes against Iran. Diplomats and analysts interpreted his speech as a message to Washington and Netanyahu that the Muslim world was united in its condemnation of Israel's military offensives and their support for the establishment of a Palestinian state. On Tuesday, Riyadh decried what it described "as extremist Israeli statements about imposing sovereignty over the West Bank". During his campaign, Trump promised

to bring peace to the Middle East and end the war. But many of his nominees are ardently pro-Israel, including Mike Huckabee, his pick for ambassador to Israel, and Steven Witkoff, a real estate magnate he has appointed Middle East envoy. Trump has said, however, that he wants to expand the Abraham Accords, telling al-Arabiya that "the framework is there, all they have to do is reinsert it, and that will happen very quickly". "If I win, that will be an absolute priority... just getting everyone in peace in the Middle East," Trump said. "It will happen." Saudi Arabia would be important to unlocking any expansion of the Abraham Accords, but Arab officials believe Trump will succeed only by pressuring Netanyahu to make concessions to the Palestinians on the establishment of a Palestinian state, something the Israeli PM vociferously rejects. A second Arab diplomat argued this meant "Trump is not in need of any other player in the Middle East right now

more than Saudi Arabia." "Trump is somebody who likes to be handed ready-deals he can take credit for," the diplomat said. "So, if MBS presents him with a deal... it's a possibility, but it might be the only possibility." Arab officials also hope it will be harder for Trump to sideline the Palestinians as the level of outrage caused by the devastation in Gaza has put their cause back at the top of the regional agenda. Leaders worry about the conflict radicalising segments of their own populations, particularly among the youth, Prince Mohammed's main constituency. "Trump will need to end the war in Gaza, and to do that, you need to address the day after," said the first Arab diplomat. "He will need some focus on the Palestinian track, or the regional element won't work. Saudi Arabia has said bluntly that unless there's a Palestinian state, normalisation is not an option." This has provided Prince Mohammed with an opportunity to project himself, and his kingdom, as the regional leader. But the role comes with pitfalls given



Trump's unpredictability and Netanyahu's refusal to countenance any concessions to the Palestinians. "The only issue that unites the Arab world is the Palestinian issue," the second diplomat said. "The question is

how much Saudi Arabia can invest in this... and how much Netanyahu will have the ability to torpedo it."

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