

Donald Trump receives highest civilian honour in Saudi Arabia, inks USD 110-billion arms deal

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Riyadh: President Donald Trump, who often ridiculed Muslims during his campaign last year, was on Saturday given a royal welcome by Saudi Arabia, one of the richest and most powerful Islamic nations. Trump left behind the snowballing controversies dogging him in Washington and basked in the glory of over a USD 100-billion arms package aimed at bolstering Saudi security.

Photo: AP.Â Donald Trump receives highest civilian honour in Saudi Arabia

The visit to the kingdom's capital kicked off Trump's first foreign trip as president, an ambitious, five-stop swing that will take him through the Middle East and into Europe. He is the only American president to make Saudi Arabia "or any Muslim-majority nation" his first overseas trip.

Trump, who was awarded the kingdom's highest civilian honour, rewarded his hosts with a \$110 billion arms package and a slew of business agreements.

"That was a tremendous day, tremendous investments in the United States," Trump said during a meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef.

Trump arrived in Riyadh besieged by the fallout from his firing of FBI Director James Comey and more revelations about the federal investigations into his election campaign's possible ties to Russia.

After an overnight flight, the president was greeted at the airport by King Salman, which was notable given that the monarch did not show up last year to welcome President Barack Obama on his final visit to Saudi Arabia.

Trump receives royal welcome, awarded kingdom's highest civilian honour

Trump descended the steps alongside first lady Melania Trump, who wore a black pantsuit and gold belt, but did not cover her hair in the ultra-conservative kingdom, in keeping with the traditions of Western delegations.

As Trump and the 81-year-old king, who was aided by a cane, walked along the red carpet, military jets swept the sky, leaving a red, white and blue trail.

During a ceremony at the grand Saudi Royal Court, Salman awarded Trump the Collar of Abdulaziz al Saud, the kingdom's highest civilian honour.

Trump bent down so the king could place the gold medal around his neck. Saudi Arabia has previously bestowed the honour on Russian President Vladimir Putin, British Prime Minister Theresa May, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Obama.

Arms deal to support tens of thousands of new jobs in United States

Trump made no substantial remarks on his first day abroad and spent most of his time shuttling between opulent palace ballrooms with the king. The two were overheard discussing natural resources and arms, and Salman bemoaned the

destruction caused by Syria's civil war.

The most tangible agreement between the two leaders was the \$110 billion sale of military equipment to Saudi Arabia that is effective immediately and could expand up to \$350 billion over 10 years. The deal includes tanks, combat ships, missile defense systems, radar and communications, and cybersecurity technology. The State Department said the agreement could support tens of thousands of new jobs in the United States.

Trump was joined on the trip by the CEOs of several major U.S. companies, which announced their own agreements with the Saudis. Among them was a \$15 billion arrangement with GE focused on power, oil and gas, and health care.

The president was trailed on the trip by a large number of advisers, including his Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, chief of staff Reince Priebus and chief strategist Steve Bannon. Trump's son-in law, Jared Kushner, and daughter Ivanka, both senior advisers, were also part of the official delegation.

Later Saturday, Trump was greeted by a traditional troupe of Saudi drummers and sword-waving dancers. Trump smirked and bopped to the beat as he made his way through the crowd.

Speech on Islam, meeting with regional leaders today

On Sunday, Trump and the king were to join more than 50 regional leaders for meetings focused on combating the Islamic State group and other extremists. The president was to give the signature speech of his trip, an address that aides view as counter to Obama's 2009 speech in Egypt to the Muslim world. Trump has criticized Obama's remarks as too apologetic for U.S. actions in the region.

Trump planned to urge unity in the fight against radicalism in the Muslim world, casting the challenge as a battle between good and evil and appealing to Arab leaders to drive out the terrorists from their places of worship, according to a draft of the speech obtained by The Associated Press.

The draft also notably did not contain the words "radical Islamic terror," a phrase Trump repeatedly criticized his 2016 president rival, Democrat Hillary Clinton, for not using during last year's campaign.

After two days of meetings in Saudi Arabia, Trump was scheduled to travel to Israel, meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican, attend a NATO summit in Brussels and join the world's major industrial nations at a Group of Seven gathering in Sicily.

Melania Trump keeps her head bare during Saudi Arabia visit

Ignoring Trump's past admonition, U.S. first lady Melania Trump did not cover her head Saturday when they arrived in Saudi Arabia on the opening leg of his first international tour since taking office.

Two years ago, then-citizen Trump criticized then-first lady Michelle Obama's decision to go bare-headed on a January 2015 visit with her husband.

"Many people are saying it was wonderful that Mrs. Obama refused to wear a scarf in Saudi Arabia, but they were insulted. We have enough enemies," Trump tweeted at the time, including a short-hand spelling for "enough."

Under the kingdom's strict dress code for women, Saudi women and most female visitors are required to wear a

loose, black robe known as an abaya, in public. Most women in Saudi Arabia also cover their hair and face with a veil known as the niqab.

But head coverings aren't required for foreigners and most Western women go without.

While Mrs. Trump dressed conservatively Saturday in a long-sleeved, black pantsuit accented with a wide, gold-colored belt, her below-the-shoulder brown hair blew in the breeze at King Khalid International Airport in the capital city of Riyadh.

She followed the example set by other, high-profile Western women, including Mrs. Obama.

On visits earlier this year, British Prime Minister Theresa May and German Chancellor Angela Merkel also shunned head coverings. Then-first lady Laura Bush generally went without covering her head, though she once briefly donned a headscarf that she received as a gift.

Hillary Clinton, on trips to Saudi Arabia as Obama's secretary of state, also did not cover her head.

Trump's daughter, Ivanka, a senior White House adviser who is also accompanying her father, also left her head uncovered.

Saudi Arabia adheres to an ultraconservative interpretation of Islamic Shariah law where unrelated men and women are segregated in most public places. Women are banned from driving, although rights advocates have campaigned to lift that ban.

- (With AP inputs)