

King Abdullah's Syria visit opens new chapter

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Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah began his landmark visit to Damascus on Wednesday opening a new era in Saudi-Syrian relations. President Bashar Assad honored the king by conferring on him the country's top medal.

King Abdullah and President Assad held two rounds of talks at Ash-Shaab presidential palace. According to the Saudi Press Agency, the two leaders discussed major regional and international issues and ways of strengthening bilateral ties.

The first meeting attended by top officials from both sides saw Abdullah and Assad exchanging medals as the king received the Umayyad Order, the highest national honor in Syria. He reciprocated by giving King Abdul Aziz Medallion to Assad.

Saudi Arabia and Syria signed an agreement to avoid double taxation and prevent tax evasion. The finance ministers of the two countries signed the accord in the presence of King Abdullah and Assad.

Earlier, King Abdullah and his delegation were given a warm welcome at Damascus International Airport by Assad and top Syrian officials. The king was given a 21-gun salute at Ash-Shaab Palace grounds before inspecting a guard of honor.

This is Abdullah's first visit to Damascus after becoming the king in August 2005. He is accompanied by senior Cabinet members and princes. The delegation includes intelligence chief Prince Muqrin, Labor Minister Ghazi Al-Gosaibi, Finance Minister Ibrahim Al-Assaf, Culture and Information Minister Abdul Aziz Khoja and State Minister for Foreign Affairs Nizar Madani.

Speaking about the taxation accord, Al-Assaf said it would reduce the tax burden on investors and ensure transparency in tax dealings. He urged businessmen in both countries to make use of the benefits offered by the agreement in order to establish more joint ventures. The volume of trade between Saudi Arabia and Syria jumped from SR1.18 billion in 2000 to more than SR4.58 billion in 2007.

Diplomats in Damascus said an understanding between the Saudi and Syrian leaders could help forge a wider Arab stance helpful to boosting Middle East peace, promoting formation of a new government in Lebanon and assuaging Arab fears on Iran, an ally of Syria.

"The two leaders have hot files on their hands. Palestine and the suffering of Gaza; Lebanon and its need for national unity; and Iraq," said Syrian state newspaper Al-Thawra.

GCC Secretary-General Abdul Rahman Al-Attiyah said the Abdullah-Assad talks would strengthen Arab unity and solidarity, which is essential for Arab countries to confront the challenges surrounding them. "The king's visit also reflects the GCC role in boosting joint Arab action."

The Lebanese are looking at the Saudi-Syrian summit talks with great hope. Lebanese politician Ali Hassan Khalil said the Assad-Abdullah meeting would reflect positively in Lebanon, where prime minister-designate Saad Hariri has tried in vain to form a government since a parliamentary election in June.

"The resumption of ties will certainly help in pushing forward a domestic settlement over the (Lebanese) government," Khalil told Reuters in Lebanon.

Political analysts have termed King Abdullah's visit as highly significant as it reflects improving relations between the two major Arab countries.

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Damascus, (SANA) – Talks of the Syrian-Saudi summit between President Bashar al-Assad and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia kicked off on Wednesday afternoon at the People's Palace in Damascus.

Talks between President al-Assad and King Abdullah dealt with the brotherly relations and historic ties which connect Syria and Saudi Arabia and means of consolidating them in all domains.

President al-Assad and King Abdullah underlined keenness to push bilateral relations forwards, depending on what has been achieved during the last period, and to remove all obstacles that hinder development of those relations as well as opening new horizons of cooperation in the interest of the two brotherly countries and peoples in the face of the challenges which obstruct the Arabs in many Arab countries, particularly in the Occupied Palestine and al-Quds.

In this regard, both sides called for the necessity of intensifying the Arab, Islamic and international efforts to lift the inhuman siege imposed on the Palestinians, stop settlement in the occupied territories and put an end to the Israeli occupation continued aggression on the Palestinian people's rights and the Islamic sanctities, lately the attempt of storming al-Aqsa mosque.

King Abdullah and President al-Assad underlined the need to take steps that keep the Arab legitimate rights and hunt all criminal acts and practices against them which violate all international laws and conventions.

During the meeting, the two sides stressed the importance of developing the Arab-Arab relations and continuing the exerted efforts in order to boost the Arab joint action in the interest of the Arab nation and its just issues, particularly because all world countries seek regional blocs to give their position a significance on international arena, whereas the Arabs still suffer from division.

President al-Assad and King Abdullah underlined keenness to continue coordination and cooperation between the two countries in all domains on issues and files that concern the two brotherly countries, particularly because the promotion of the Syrian-Saudi relations will be positively reflected on the Arab issues.

Later, in the presence of President al-Assad and King Abdullah, an agreement on avoiding double taxation and preventing tax evasion for income and capital was signed between Syria and Saudi Arabia.

President al-Assad awarded King Abdullah the Umayya National Medal, which is the highest and most prestigious medal in Syria.

In turn, the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques awarded President al-Assad with King Abdulaziz Medal, which is the highest and most prestigious medal in Saudi Arabia.

Earlier today, King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz began an official visit to Syria upon the invitation of President al-Assad, who received him at Damascus International Airport.

The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the accompanying high-ranking delegation were also received by a number of ministers and accredited Arab ambassadors in Damascus.

Later, King Abdullah was received at the People's Palace with the customary official ceremonies.

King Abdullah then shook hands with Vice President Farouk al-Shara, Prime Minister Mohammad Naji Otri, Minister of Finance Dr. Mohammad al-Hussein, Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem, Presidential Political and Media Advisor Dr. Bouthaina Shaaban, and Minister of Information Dr. Mohsen Bilal.

President al-Assad then shook hands with members of the official delegation accompanying King Abdullah, which consists of Advisor of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Prince Abdul-Ilah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Head of General Intelligence Prince Muqran bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud, Advisors of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques Prince Turki bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prince Abdulaziz bin Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prince Mansour bin Nasser bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, Prince Bandar bin Salman bin Mohammad Al Saud, State Minister and Cabinet Member Dr. Abdulaziz al-Khowaiter, Minister of Labor Dr. Ghazi al-Qusaibati, Minister of Finance Dr. Ibrahim al-Assaf, Minister of Culture and Information Dr. Abdulaziz Khouja, State Minister for Foreign Affairs Dr. Nizar Madani, and Ambassador of Saudi Arabia in Damascus Abdullah al-Ayfan.

Later, President al-Assad and the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud completed their talks in the residence of King Abdullah in Damascus.

President al-Assad held a dinner banquet in honor of the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques.

The banquet was attended by the Syrian and Saudi official delegations, senior government officials and Arab ambassadors in Damascus.

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