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MIDDLE EAST

## Esper Tours Saudi Military Site as U.S. Readies Troop Buildup

Defense secretary's trip comes amid strained U.S.-Saudi relations and growing Russian influence in the region



A handout picture provided by the Saudi Press Agency on Tuesday shows King Salman, right, meeting with U.S. Defense Secretary Mark Esper in Riyadh. PHOTO: SAUDI PRESS AGENCY/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Nancy A. Youssef*

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PRINCE SULTAN AIR BASE, Saudi Arabia—Defense Secretary Mark Esper met Tuesday with the king of Saudi Arabia during a tour of the kingdom's military facilities as the U.S. pursues its biggest Middle East troop buildup of the Trump administration.

Mr. Esper arrived in Saudi Arabia Monday as the U.S. steps up support for Riyadh against a recent series of attacks on Saudi oil industry facilities and tankers blamed on Iran. The trip also comes amid strained U.S.-Saudi relations and growing Russian influence in the region,

Earlier this month, the U.S. military announced that it would deploy 2,000 troops, three new antimissile systems, two squadrons of jet fighters and other equipment to Saudi Arabia in an accelerating U.S. buildup meant to counter Iranian hostilities in the region.

The additional 2,000 troops are joining approximately 700 service members that had been deployed in previous rounds, including some to Prince Sultan Air Base, about 80 miles southeast of Riyadh.

The bulk of additional troops being deployed are headed to this Saudi base, Mr. Esper said Tuesday. Standing near one of the Patriot missile batteries sent by the U.S., he rejected charges that the American troops were being used as mercenaries after President Trump said that Saudi Arabia would be paying for their deployment to the kingdom. Instead, Mr. Esper said the Saudis were engaging in burden sharing.

“The Saudis have agreed to help underwrite the operation and what we’re doing here, which is not unusual and we welcome it and think that’s the right thing to do,” Mr. Esper said. “We’re not a mercenary force.”

Mr. Esper met Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman later Tuesday.



Mr. Esper rejected charges that U.S. troops were being used as mercenaries after President Trump said that Saudi Arabia would be paying for their deployment to the kingdom PHOTO: LOLITA BALDOR/ASSOCIATED PRESS

The U.S. deployments to Saudi Arabia began in July, in the wake of a string of tanker seizures and attacks, and accelerated after U.S., Saudi Arabia and allies accused Iran of the Sept. 14 airstrikes against Saudi oil facilities.

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia have long had close relations, but ties have frayed, particularly over Riyadh’s pursuit of its four-year war against Iranian-backed Houthi insurgents in neighboring Yemen as well as the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi at a Saudi consulate in Turkey.

Mr. Khashoggi’s slaying fueled concerns in the U.S. over human rights abuses in the conservative kingdom. Earlier this year, Congress approved a measure blocking arms sales to Saudi Arabia, but

Mr. Trump vetoed it.

Mr. Esper's visit came one week after Russian President Vladimir Putin made his first trip to Saudi Arabia since 2007. The two countries announced expanded economic cooperation.

Just before Mr. Putin's arrival, the U.S. announced it was moving its roughly 1,000 troops out of northeastern Syria. Since then, Russian troops have taken over several bases that U.S. troops abandoned and has expanded its aerial reach.

Russia has backed Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and has accompanied Syrian troops as they have moved eastward toward a part of the country not under regime control for years.

Mr. Esper was greeted Monday night at King Salman Air Base by Khalid bin Salman, the king's son and the crown prince's younger brother. He also met with Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for military operations in the Middle East, and , a retired Army general who now serves as U.S. ambassador to Saudi Arabia.

—*John Abizaid*

**Write to** Nancy A. Youssef at [nancy.youssef@wsj.com](mailto:nancy.youssef@wsj.com)

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