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Saudi visit a personal victory for PM

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King Salman's visit gives the sense that this powerful Arab kingdom is committed to helping Datuk Seri Najib's govt succeed.

FIVE kisses. That was the number of times that King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud and Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak kissed each other on the cheek as they said goodbye.

The first two kisses came when the Prime Minister greeted the Saudi Arabia King as he stepped out of his limousine on the tarmac of KLIA.

Then the two men embraced and kissed three more times at the foot of the royal jumbo jet that is emblazoned with the words, "God bless you".

The minister who had been counting the kisses also heard the King tell Najib how pleased he was with the visit as he clasped both his hands over that of the Prime Minister.

Then, as his gold-trimmed robe fluttered in the wind, the King sort of floated up into his jetliner on that fabulous escalator that people are still talking about.

Datuk Rahman Dahlan summed up the four-day state visit in two words: "Beyond successful".

The Minister in the Prime Minister's Department said the nature and content of the visit signals that Saudi Arabia regards Malaysia as a special friend.

"The Arabs value friendship more than anything else," said Rahman.

It was also a rather "profitable" visit. Aramco, which owns all the oil wells in Saudi Arabia, is investing RM31bil in the Refinery and Petrochemical Integrated Development (Rapid) project in Pengerang, Johor.

The deal signed with Petronas makes Aramco the single biggest investor in Malaysia to date and gives it a footing in the region which it did not have till now.

The Pengerang project was sabotaged after the opposition parties campaigned against it during the 2013 general election, resulting in the original investor pulling out. The Prime Minister has been trying to revive it and everything came together with the Saudi input.

The Saudi investment in Malaysia was a contrast to that in Indonesia, the second stop of their Asian tour. The Jakarta media lamented that the Saudi visit brought only RM1bil to Indonesia.

Gerakan politician Ivanpal S. Grewal said the Saudi investment is more than just dollars and cents.

"It's significant that the world's biggest oil company recognises Malaysia as a place to invest in. It means that the Saudi government supports Malaysia and they want the government to succeed," said Ivanpal.

King Salman also enjoys an unparalleled command as the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques and the Saudi government has agreed to consider

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increasing the Haj quota and scholarships for Malaysians.

The Saudi Kingdom has also singled out Malaysia's fight against Islamic terrorism.

"The Saudis are ready to claim a place on the world stage. They want to be a player in world affairs and for the first time, they are taking the lead in counter-terrorism," said Rahman.

The Saudi government feels that the Islamic narrative has been hijacked by the terrorist groups. It wants to take back control of the Islamic agenda and it sees Malaysia as a brother nation in pursuing counter-terrorism.

There was a high comfort level between the King and Najib despite their difference in age and the fact that one is the head of state and the other is the head of the government.

King Salman and Najib are not exactly strangers. They had met before the Saudi royal ascended the throne two years ago.

According to Rahman, Najib had sent a video greeting to the King on the anniversary of his ascension to the throne, detailing his respect for the Saudi royal house and acknowledging the achievements of the kingdom.

The King has apparently not forgotten that personal gesture.

No other foreign state visit in recent years has carried as much leverage as the Saudi visit.

"Watchers of international affairs are probably watching closely.

"They can see that Najib is adept at international relations and can forge relationships from east to west and without poking anyone," said Ivanpal.

For the last one year, the opposition led by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had gone around saying that Malaysia is a failed state and will become bankrupt under Najib's leadership.

But Najib has brought back billions of ringgit in investments from China, he has strengthened relations with Saudi Arabia, one of the richest economies in the world and his government is seen as a reliable business partner by the Saudis.

"From the business deals to the Islamic agenda, it shows the Saudi kingdom has confidence in Najib's leadership.

"They see him as a fellow Muslim leader and a deal-maker, someone they can work and do business with," said Ivanpal.

It has been a week of personal victory for the Prime Minister.