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Donald of Arabia: Trump in the Middle East

By Robert Fisk
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Not since Ibn Batuta, travelled the Middle East in the 14th century has anyone set out with higher ambitions than Donald Trump. Batuta, a Moroccan Muslim traveller and scholar, had a few things in common with Trump. He reached what is now Saudi Arabia. He went to Jerusalem. He even had a keen eye for nubile ladies – there were a few wives, not to mention a Greek slave girl to be groped. But there the parallels end. For Ibn Batuta was sane.

Yet now we know that Trump thinks he's touching the three monotheistic religions because he's going to Riyadh, Jerusalem and then the Vatican (not quite in the Middle East but what's a hundred miles for a guy like Trump). A few problems, of course. He can't go to Holy Mecca because Christians are banned and the old king of Saudi Arabia represents a head-chopping Wahabi autocracy some of whose citizens have paid for – and fought alongside – the dreaded Isis which Trump thinks he is fighting.

Then when he goes to Jerusalem, he will meet Benjamin Netanyahu who hardly represents world Jewry and plans to go on thieving Arab lands in the West Bank for Jews, and Jews only, whatever Trump thinks. Then he'll turn up at the Vatican to confront a man who – great guy though he may be – only represents Roman Catholics and doesn't much like Trump anyway. Ibn Batuta was away from home for around a quarter of a century. Thank heavens Trump's cutting that back to three days.

Of course, he's no more going to be talking to "Islam" in Saudi Arabia than he is "Judaism" in Jerusalem. The Sunni Saudis are going to talk about crushing the "snake" of Shia Iran – and we must remember that Trump is the crackpot who shed crocodile tears over the Sunni babies killed in Syria last month but none for the Shia babies killed in Syria a few days later – and hope they can re-establish real relations between their execution-happy kingdom with the execution-happy US. Trump might just try to read UN rapporteur Ben Emmerson's latest report on the imprisonment of human rights defenders and the torture of "terror" suspects in Saudi Arabia. No. Forget it.

Anyway, the king is no imam. Any more than Netanyahu is a rabbi. But Jerusalem will be a great gig because Trump will be able to ask Netanyahu for help against Isis without – presumably – realising that Israel bombs only the Syrian army and the Shia Hezbollah in Syria but has never – ever – bombed Isis in Syria. In fact, the Israelis have given medical aid to fighters from Jabhat al-Nusra, which is part of al-Qaeda which (maybe Trump has heard of this) attacked the United States on 9/11. So maybe the Vatican will be a relief.

Of course, Trump might have dropped by Lebanon to meet Patriarch Beshara Rai, a Christian prelate who at least lives in the Middle East and who might have been able to tell Trump a few home truths about Syria. Or, since Trump would be "honoured" to meet the Great Leader of North Korea, he might even have shocked the world by dropping by for a couple of hours with Bashar al-Assad. At least Ibn Batuta got to Damascus.

But no, Trump is searching for "friends and partners" to fight "terrorism" – something which has never, of course, been inflicted on Yemen by Saudi Arabia or on Lebanon and the Palestinians by Israel. Nor will it be mentioned by the boys and girls of CNN, ABC and all the US media titans who will – in the interest of promoting their importance by pretending that their President is not mad – grovellingly follow their crackpot President around the region with all the usual nonsense about "policies" and "key players" and "moderates" (as in "moderate Saudi Arabia") and all the other fantastical creatures which they inject into their reports.

Oh yes, and Trump also wants to bring "peace" to the Holy Land. And so he will move from the king of head choppers to the thief of Palestinian lands and end up with the poor old Holy Father who is wisely giving the President only a few early-morning minutes before his weekly general audience. Since the Pope described Trump's views as "not Christian" – an unsaintly thing for Pope Francis to say of a mentally ill man – and Trump called the Pope's words "disgraceful", this is not going to be a barrel of laughs.

But then again, the Pope shook the hand of the Sultan of Egypt only a week ago, the equally saintly Field Marshal President Abdel-Fattah al-Sisi, whose coup overthrew an elected president and who now "disappears" his enemies. Trump should be a piece of cake after that. Ibn Batuta, by the way, got as far as Beijing in his travels but was never "honoured" to meet the "smart cookie" who was ruling in Korea (which did actually exist in the 14th century).

But being a verbose chap, Ibn Batuta did record his homecoming in these words: "I have indeed ... attained my desire in this world, which was to travel through the Earth, and I have attained

this honour, which no ordinary person has attained.” That’s a real “honour” by the way. But you couldn’t fit Ibn Batuta into a tweet.