

Nixon's trip: ancient pomp, new suspicion

ANALYSIS

By Peter Lisagor
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WASHINGTON—President Nixon's hejira to the Middle East next week will be marked by ancient pomp, modern symbolism and abiding suspicion.

The word hejira is used advisedly. It first described Muhammad's flight from Mecca to Medina to escape persecution and usher in the Moslem era. Random House's modern dictionary defines it as "any flight or journey to a more desirable or congenial place than where one is."

Nobody in the President's entourage will quarrel with the fact that his visit among the presidents, prime ministers, and potentates of the region will prove more desirable and congenial than life in a White House under siege by prosecutors and impeachment sleuths.

Despite the suspicion that Nixon seeks to divert public attention from his domestic woes, his foreign policy advisers insist the trip is purposeful and opportune, coming on the heels of Secretary of State Kissinger's successful mediation of a Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement.

But Kissinger implicitly acknowledged at a news conference Thursday that the quotient of symbolism was high in the President's journey.

Conditions have been created in which "the long-term relationship between the United States and these Arab countries, as well as Israel, can be put on a new basis," Kissinger said.

To Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, a prime mover in the trip, Nixon's presence in Cairo and Alexandria will reinforce his own policy of disengaging from a long-time reliance upon the Soviet Union for military and economic aid.

The Saudis have emphasized their desire to cement relations with Washington with a series of agreements to cooperate in economic, scientific, technological and cultural fields. Jordan's King Hussein has maintained steady links with the United States, and is an annual recipient of American aid.

The Syrian opening is new, and the expectation is that diplomatic relations will be re-established with the Damascus government, possibly before the President arrives as a guest of President Hafez Assad.

The Israelis, aware of their client-state relationship with the United States, have viewed Nixon as one in a long line of sympathetic American presidents. The American visitor will want to get a feel for the new regime of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, who served in Washington as the Israeli ambassador for several years.

Notwithstanding these factors and concerns, diplomatic officials concede that the journey will be mainly ceremonial, with little or no serious business to be transacted.