

## **Institute for Policy Reforms**

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### **Implications for Pakistan of Trump's Visit to Riyadh**

Will US President Trump's recent visit to Saudi Arabia help achieve peace? How should Pakistan look at the visit and the new alignments in the region? These are questions raised in a Brief issued today by the Institute for Policy Reforms. The Brief is written by eminent diplomat Riaz Mohammad Khan, former Foreign Secretary.

Two developments are cause for concern. First, emerging realities in the Middle East 'pose a deep dilemma for Pakistan.' USA and Saudi Arabia, along with Israel, have taken a position that "Islamist Terrorism" is the principal threat to the Middle East, with Iran its fountainhead. On the one hand, Pakistan has high stakes in our relations with Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, Pakistan shares a border with Iran and has historical ties with it. There are also sectarian realities within the country.

The second concern is that the US President omitted any reference to Pakistan in a speech devoted to terrorism.

With respect to Gulf rivalries, neutrality is possible, but has not been appreciated before. Iraq was openly critical of Pakistan during the Iran-Iraq war. In 2014, Pakistan's reluctance to send troops to Yemen caused resentment in the Gulf, though Pakistan has pledged to defend Saudi Arabia from external threats.

New developments will test Pakistan's leadership. Pakistan is part of a thirty-nation coalition created by Saudi Arabia. A former Chief of the Pakistan Army heads this force. What will happen when the coalition is pushed onto conflicts fueled by Saudi-Iranian rivalry?

Pakistan cannot be a mediator in Gulf rivalries. There is a history of failures in this regard. "Our angst for the Muslim Ummah has roots in popular sentiment, but our policy should have a realistic framework."

Pakistanis were surprised to see their PM on the sidelines in Riyadh. However, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's attendance was essentially a gesture to the Saudis. What should be of greater concern is that the US President's speech, which was devoted to fighting terrorism, omitted any mention of Pakistan or its sacrifices.

It shows the influence over US position by critics of Pakistan's Afghan policy. Our critics include well placed academics, senior officials, and political representatives on the Hill. This is the time to reassess our long history of backing the Afghan Taliban. It entails heavy costs for

Pakistan with no benefit in sight. “There is need for an honest hard look at our policy with a view to re-engaging Kabul and Washington for positive cooperation.”

The Brief also recommends Pakistan to tread cautiously with respect to the thirty-nation alliance. It is unclear if it will bring peace to the region. The US President exhorted Muslim leaders to expel terrorism from their countries. The issue though is not lack of resolve. Muslim societies lack the capacity to thwart this challenge. Extremism is a complex phenomenon. It is rooted in economic, political, and psychological factors. In fact, the Saudi creed has inspired Al-Qaeda-ISIS ideology. The linear military response that the Riyadh gathering focused on cannot be enough.

Likewise, whether the large Saudi order for US arms of up to USD 350 Billion would help, is moot. Arab Gulf states have received arms worth hundreds of billions before, including when extremism was on the rise and ISIS was emerging. The Islamic State will collapse soon, but its ideology will linger. These weapons will not quell civil wars in areas where extremists find havens.

The large arm purchases are like tributes to USA. Their goal is to continue with the alliance forged between King Abdul Aziz and President Roosevelt under which America guarantees Saudi security.

In this imbroglio Israel is the clear winner. Trump’s address to Muslim leaders in Riyadh fully echoes Israeli assertion. He said that Arabs must focus on Iran and not on Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. The US President’s address made only a token reference to the Palestinian issue and glossed over the Israeli occupation.

The 1979 Iranian revolution, the long Iraq-Iran war, and later involvement of foreign powers have heightened the Sunni-Shia divide in the region. A complex set of relations has led to a destabilized Middle East. The civilian population has suffered grievously with millions forced to emigrate. Peace efforts are at a standstill and left to an understanding to be reached among a host of foreign powers. While peace is a distant possibility, the world’s focus is on alleviating the humanitarian crisis.