



Trump's Riyadh Visit

Riaz Mohammad Khan

About the Author

The writer is former foreign secretary of Pakistan. He served for forty years in the Pakistan Foreign Service. He was Ambassador to China and the EU, and was envoy for back channel diplomacy with India. His two books on Afghanistan have earned critical acclaim.

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The Trump visit to Riyadh had a touch of irony. The leader who did the most to rake up Islamophobia during the American presidential campaign was accorded a reception fit for an emperor in Riyadh where he also witnessed the signing of a Dollar 350 billion Mother-of-All-Deals with Dollars 110 billion in defense purchases by the Kingdom. Trump addressed leaders of over thirty Muslim countries gathered in the Saudi capital and forcefully reaffirmed the new American narrative that “Islamist” terrorism and extremism were the principal threats to the Middle East and Iran was the fountainhead trouble and instability in the region. This was music to the ears of most of the Gulf Arab potentates who have long been nervous about expanding Iranian influence and activities in the Arab region. Their concern had been aggravated by hints of a positive turn in US-Iran relations under Obama exemplified by the success of the negotiations for a nuclear deal which upset in almost equal measure the Saudi and Israeli leadership. Trump’s choice of Riyadh to be the first foreign destination as President may turn out to be the first “true (not fake) win” of his presidency; but will it help peace? What does it portend for the region, what about Palestine which was long regarded as the issue at the heart of the Middle East conflict, and how should Pakistan look at the visit and new alignments in the region?

Combating Terrorism, Saudi Security, and New US Priorities

Trump exhorted Muslim leaders to “expel” the evil of terrorism and extremism from “their countries and their societies,” as if the problem persists because of lack of resolve on their part. Extremism which morphs into terrorism is a complex phenomenon and cannot be addressed by a linear (military) approach. It has roots in the contemporary experience of Muslim societies in political, economic, and ideological/ intellectual dimensions. Paradoxically, the Saudi theological creed has been the principal inspiration for the violent Al Qaeda-ISIS ideology. Leaders and institutions of the Muslim world

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lack the capacity to address the enormity of the challenge especially at the ideological/intellectual level. Trump's exhortation cannot energize these leaders to do more than what they are already doing, nor will it generate any resonance among Muslim societies to reinforce further their growing, albeit at a slow pace, concern and commitment to combat the phenomenon which poses to them, and not to the West, an existential threat.

Similarly, to the question whether the 110 billion dollar arms purchase by Saudi Arabia would destroy ISIS (the Islamic State) or snuff out violent extremism, the answer is no. The Islamic State is on the retreat. Its territorial hold is bound to collapse under the enormous military pressure backed by powerful players in the region. Demise of ISIS as a state may be slow but it is certain. On the other hand, ISIS ideology and inspiration will survive in new Al Qaeda-like forms. Similarly, infusion of state-of-the-art armament into Saudi Arabia may be effective against Houthis in Yemen, but this weaponry will do little to contain the savage civil wars in Somalia or Libya or Syria or Iraq where extremist elements have found space. There are also big question marks about the Saudi initiated Sunni coalition of thirty odd Muslim states to fight the scourge of terrorism. Some commentators have alluded to it as "Sunni Muslim NATO." Nothing could be more far-fetched. NATO had clarity of purpose in the post-World War II environment and its main stay was the military prowess of the United States. The Saudi led coalition has neither of those attributes.

Saudi Arabia and the Arab Gulf States received hundreds of billions worth of arms during the Obama, George Bush, and earlier U.S. administrations when extremism was on the rise and ISIS was emerging from the wreckage of Iraqi and Syrian civil wars. On the face of it, Saudi Arabian arms purchases, almost entirely from the United States, are meant for its defense and to bolster its role against the perceived expansion of Iranian influence and Iran backed uprisings in the region. However, like foreign-built skylines in the Arab Gulf states do not transform them into modern societies, similarly purchases alone of military equipment, regardless of scale, cannot build them into real military powers.

Since the alliance forged between King Abdul Aziz and Franklin D Roosevelt, Saudi Kingdom has essentially relied for its security on American military intercession and direct intervention. This was evident when in 1990 Saddam Husain annexed Kuwait and posed a direct threat to the Kingdom, which did not look to the Arab-Muslim world or Europe, but to the U.S. for protection. In a sense,

the regular arms purchases, on a vast scale, are forms of tribute that Riyadh pays to the powerful American oil-military industrial complex for guaranteeing its security. The latest 350 billion dollar deal also serves as apparent bright spot for Trump in his otherwise bleak and dismal run of office since inauguration.

In a clear departure from his predecessor, Trump set in Riyadh new US priorities: to defeat Islamist terrorism and roll back Iran's threat. He thus redefined the basis of a new US alignment in the Middle East. A positive corollary is that espousal of this approach is likely to restrain his sweeping criticism of the Islamic faith and disparaging of Muslims. Another distinctive feature is abandonment of emphasis on human rights paired with tolerance of friendly authoritarian regimes especially in the Middle East.

Changing alignments in the Middle East

1979 was a watershed year for the Middle East and a brief recall of salient developments will be useful to set the present context. The Iranian Revolution unsettled the Arab Gulf states. The hostage crisis, unacceptable under age old diplomatic norms, dealt a deep wound to American psyche and provoked lasting hostility (Earlier in the Thirteenth Century Iran suffered devastation for a similar violation of a diplomatic norm when the wrongful execution of two Mongol emissaries triggered a wrathful Mongol invasion). Driven by opportunism to annex the oil bearing largely Shia-Arab Ahwaz Province and with Western abetment, Saddam attacked Iran. The eight-year war proved to be a stalemate and drained vast resources from both countries. But the war consolidated Iran's military capacity with both a battle hardened regular army and religiously infused disciplined militia. Saddam's next misadventure in Kuwait spelt his doom and created conditions for a large and permanent American military footprint in the region. The 2003 US military invasion and the concomitant collapse of the Baathist Iraq had an unintended consequence. They led to the political rise of the long deprived Iraqi Shia population which was susceptible to Iranian influence. Thus, began a new chapter in a characteristically medieval sectarian strife in the region. Iraq and Syria soon fractured along sectarian lines.

Inspired by the Arab Spring and encouraged by the West, the Sunni majority population which (like the Shia majority under Saddam) suffered oppression under the authoritarian Assad regime, revolted in 2013. But the Sunni resistance was fractious. The most fanatical and resilient fighters gravitated to ISIS- an abomination which massacred prisoners, slaughtered Western individuals, reprehensibly treated religious minorities especially the Yezidi sect. Other "moderate Sunni opposition" backed by the West are no match to the government forces under Bashar al Assad who enjoys powerful support from Russia as well as Iranian and Hezbollah militias. To add to the complications, Kurdish fighters who have proved their mettle and are favored by the West are an anathema to Turkey. Meanwhile, the civilian population continues to suffer grievously with millions forced to flee the country. Peace efforts are at a standstill and depend on understanding to be reached primarily between the US and Russia and on acquiescence by Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. This remains a long shot and much of the current international effort is focused on alleviating the humanitarian crisis.

Palestine Eclipsed

In this imbroglio Israel is the clear winner. Trump's address to Muslim leaders in Riyadh literally echoed the Israeli assertion that the Arab concern is Iran and its activities in the region and not Israeli occupation or the plight of the Palestinians. The address glossed over the Palestinian issue with a mere expression of hope to see peace among Israelis and the Palestinians. In contrast to the glitter and spectacle in Riyadh, Trump's visit to Israel carried an aura of intimacy and family reunion (According to The New York Times of May 23, "Mr. Trump sought to showcase his friendship with Mr. Netanyahu as the two shared dinner with their wives and called each other "Donald" and "Bibi"). On Palestine, he spoke in generalities and avoided any specifics for a road map for peace, perhaps being aware of how a public suggestion for halt to settlements to revive the peace process had irretrievably soured Netanyahu's dealings with Obama.

His Israeli hosts did not embarrass Trump by raising demands for shifting the US embassy to Jerusalem or for scuttling the nuclear deal with Iran, both of which were Trump campaign promises. The nuclear deal is complex involving six parties with Iran. Practically, it denies Iran the pursuit of nuclear option, and all parties had reached the conclusion that the alternative to the deal was war. The re-election as President of Hassan Rouhani will inhibit the three European parties (France, Germany, and the UK) to the deal from any backtracking, whereas Russia and China will remain firmly opposed to any such move.

As for the peace process, Netanyahu publicly linked peace to changed conditions in the region for which he placed the onus on Arab leaders. Trump did meet Mahmoud Abbas, but it appeared proforma and by some accounts terse. In Riyadh, Trump had already listed Hamas and Hezbollah among terrorist groups. Commenting on Trump's visit to Israel in The New York Times of May 27, Diana Buttu, a former advisor to the PLO negotiating team, lamented the fate of the peace process and recounted "when we spoke of international law and illegality of settlements, Israeli negotiators laughed in our faces. Power is everything, they would say, and you have none." The Palestinians are a victim of their failure to understand the correlation of forces and to losing opportunities to secure what they yearn for now. Nonetheless, the Palestinian issue has potential to explode and it deserves international attention.

Pakistan's Middle East Dilemma

The Saudi-Iran rivalry and sectarian dimension of the conflict in the Middle East pose a deep dilemma for Pakistan. We have high stakes in our close relations with Arab Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, which are home to a large Pakistani Diaspora and the source of the bulk of remittances from abroad. Iran is our neighbor with historical ties. Domestically, no Pakistani political leader can be insensitive to the sectarian realities of the country. Our position of neutrality during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980s was logical, but it did not win us any approbation; indeed, Iraq was openly critical.

The recent challenge came when the Saudis elicited our cooperation for their military operations in Yemen. The Government deftly pushed the matter to the Parliament which reiterated Pakistan's commitment to defend the Saudi Kingdom if attacked but advised against involvement in intra Arab conflicts at the behest of one or the other party. Pakistan's unwillingness to send troops to Yemen caused resentment, but it was the right stand to take. If a sufficiently large military presence is

agreed, Pakistan can effectively help defend Saudi Arabia from external aggression. But for this purpose, the Saudis rely on a different calculus. They want Pakistan to do their bidding to fight in countries on their periphery. Pakistan has now been inveigled into a coalition force of thirty plus countries created by the Saudis under murky circumstances, which is now nominally headed by Pakistan's former Army Chief Gen. Raheel Sharif. The real test will come when this coalition is pushed into conflicts fueled by Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Middle Eastern leaders view Pakistan as an outsider when it comes to initiatives for the resolution of problems in their region. From outside only the US and the Europeans are seen as credible intermediaries. President Musharraf's abortive Middle East initiative in late 2006 is a case in point. Musharraf over-ruled serious reservations expressed by the Foreign Office and, argued that at most the initiative would fail like so many others in the past. He undertook visits to several prominent Muslim capitals with an agenda for the creation of a Foreign Ministers contact group to address troubles in Iraq, growing U.S.-Iran tensions and the resolution of Palestine on the basis of an improved version of 2002 Beirut Arab League proposal. Discussions in the Arab capitals were polite but revealed the futility of the effort which was then given a decent burial with a high sounding but meaningless communiqué adopted by a foreign ministers' conference in Islamabad in February 2007. Our angst for the Muslim Ummah has roots in popular sentiment but our policy should have a realistic framework.

Many Pakistanis feel let down by the manner in which Pakistan appeared to have been kept on the sidelines at the Riyadh Conference. Given the context of the Conference, our expectations should have been modest. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's attendance was essentially a gesture to the Saudis. However, our eagerness for a meeting with Trump, even requesting Saudi intercession as reported by the media, was unwarranted.

Substantively, the omission of any mention of Pakistan in Trump's address devoted to fight against terrorism and extremism, ignoring the country's sacrifices, should be a matter of concern requiring introspection. It clearly shows the influence exerted over US policy by critics of Pakistan's Afghan policy. They are vocal and include well placed academics, senior officials, and political representatives on the Hill. Our perceived backing of the Afghan Taliban has a long history and entails heavy costs with no benefit in sight. There is need for an honest hard look at our policy and its practice with a view to re-engaging Kabul and Washington for positive cooperation.