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Trump's Overtures to the Islamic World: Implications for the Middle East and South Asia

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If United States President Donald Trump had hoped to reboot his faltering presidency by going to Saudi Arabia at the beginning of his first foreign tour, he seems unlikely to achieve that goal. By starting his nine-day trip with Riyadh as the first port of call, he expected to divert the attention of the growing number of his critics at home who were focusing on the almost daily revelations about and from a dysfunctional White House. He thought that he would bring back good economic news from his foreign trip. He wanted to shift the attention of the American people towards economic issues, in particular, employment. He was of the view that the political base he had built to gain the presidency would continue to give him support if he could bring jobs to the economically-devastated areas in the country. Even with several memoranda of understanding signed with the Saudi government – and with the companies in the kingdom – it is arguably unlikely that he will succeed in creating many new jobs in America. On the other hand, by taking the positions he did in the much-anticipated speech he made in front of scores of heads of state from the Islamic world, he has only complicated his relations with that

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part of the globe. His approach to the Middle East will have consequences that will go beyond the region; they will also affect South Asia. His first foreign visit cannot be viewed as a success.

Two Countries in Stress

United States (US) President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh, capital of Saudi Arabia, on 21 and 22 May 2017 was aimed at preparing the ground to achieve stability in two countries – the US and Saudi Arabia – that faced difficult situations. In the US, the election of non-politician Trump to the world's most-political job had created a stressful situation. It was caused almost entirely by the way Trump had won the election in the first place and by the way he began conducting himself when he was given the reins of the presidency. His soft relations with Russia and the possible dealings with Moscow by some of the people closely associated with him created an atmosphere of suspicion that needed to be cleared. There was leaking of information from his own White House that placed him in poor light. Ultimately the Department of Justice appointed a Special Counsel to investigate what the president described as the "Russia thing". The almost daily "breaking news" about the way the new president was conducting himself led to a discussion of the possibility of his impeachment. The White House wanted this negative news cycle to be broken. It believed that a successful foreign visit might provide some positive news which the new administration badly needed.

Saudi Arabia also needed to bring about a change in the environment in which it was functioning and its young people looked upon their future. Along with most other Muslim countries – Iran being a noticeable exception – Saudi Arabia has a very young population. Its median age is only 27 years which means that one-half of the country's population is below that age. Most of the services sector jobs and many in the government are performed by immigrants, largely from South Asia. The Saudi youth generally stay away from these sectors of the economy; instead aspiring for better-paying jobs. At the time of Trump's visit, the Saudi monarchy was, therefore, of the view that the structure of the country's economy had to be changed significantly in order to satisfy the aspirations of its youth. Also, a large number of people were not happy with the quality of governance in the kingdom. The extensive royal family had served itself well, leaving the non-royal youth largely unattended. The younger members of the ruling circles were conscious of the fact that of the 19 young men who were

involved in the history-changing terrorist attack on the US on 11 September 2001, as many as 15 were from Saudi Arabia. They attacked America because of Washington's support for what they believed was a self-serving monarchy.

Conscious of the demands on the state, Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman, the son of the current monarch, developed a plan to transform the Saudi economy. The main focus of the effort, titled Vision 2030, was to diversify the economy away from petroleum and provide jobs for the kingdom's young but restless population. Petroleum and petroleum-based industries are capital-intensive. They do not create much employment. The Vision 2030 plan is aimed at building the share of non-oil exports from the current level of 16 per cent to 50 per cent in the next two decades. This was an ambitious target but it was not clear whether, by realising it, the kingdom would be able to meet the aspirations of its youth who, in addition to better jobs, were eager to participate in the political system that was dominated by the members of the large royal family. The ruling family was eager to re-engage the US that had distanced itself from the kingdom during the presidency of Barack Obama, Trump's predecessor, who had focused on the relatively more-representative political systems in the Muslim world. He had worked hard to bring Iran, Saudi Arabia's archrival, out of isolation with the expectation that it would become a major player in the Middle East.² That approach was resented by the rulers in Riyadh. The kingdom, in order to draw Washington back to the side of the Middle Eastern equation, went out of its way to welcome the American president this time. According to one newspaper account, the Saudis treated him like royalty indeed, with red carpets, lavish meals and the American flags flying everywhere. They repeatedly used the word 'historic' to describe Trump's visit, gave him a medal, projected a multistory image of his face on the side of the Ritz-Carlton hotel where he stayed, and treated him to a colorful dance in which he and some senior members of his entourage even participated. Trump himself was effusive in describing the significance of his trip. Upon returning to the US, he noted that the meeting he addressed in the Saudi capital had the largest number of Muslim heads of state ever assembled. This was not likely to happen again, he maintained.³

² The role Iran could play in a rapidly changing world was discussed by me in a chapter titled "Iran's Reentry into the World," in my recent book, *Rising Powers and Global Governance: Changes and Challenges for the World's Nations*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 119-138.

³ Michael D. Shear and Peter Baker, "Saudis welcome Trump's rebuff of Obama views," *The New York Times*, 21 May 2017, pp. A1 and A10.

A day before Trump spoke at the opulent hall of a conference centre in the Saudi capital, his government signed a number of memoranda of understanding for the supply of US\$110 billion (S\$152.77 billion) worth of sophisticated military equipment. Riyadh is trying to build its military might in the region to match Tehran by allocating a record US\$51 billion (S\$70.38 billion) for defence in 2017. It is likely to maintain this level of expenditure in the years to come. According to John Sfakianakis, an economist at the Gulf Research Center, this was a unique opportunity for the US to be part of Saudi Arabia's transformation, something that few others will be able to enjoy, given the US prowess in the areas that Saudi Arabia wants to excel in. The Saudis want to capture the moment by offering a front seat to the US, which is showing a renewed commitment and has the weight to support the kingdom's geo-economic aspirations.⁴

Most of the agreements promised the transfer of technology to those Saudi enterprises that would partner American suppliers. For instance, Saudi Aramco, the national oil firm, announced arrangements with several US firms, each designed to create hundreds of local jobs. Blackrock, a giant American investment firm, announced a plan to create a US\$40 billion (S\$55.2 billion) infrastructure investment fund, with one half of the seed money coming from the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia. Stephen A Schwarzman, Blackstone's chief executive, one of Trump's leading economic advisers, believes that some of this money would be used to build infrastructure in the US. During the campaign for the presidency, Trump had promised to spend as much as US\$1 trillion (S\$1.38 trillion) on improving the country's physical infrastructure. Blackstone expects to raise up to US\$100 billion (S\$138 billion) for this activity. The Saudis are looking to invest in the areas that would provide them with a steady flow of income. Investments in projects like bridges and roads – either by taking stakes in the existing infrastructure or by putting up money to build something new – are by nature, often longer-term than the corporate buyouts and real estate deals that are typically associated with private equity funds. Yet, they have also the benefit of being less volatile investments that produce steady returns.⁵

⁴ Quoted in Katrina Manson, Simeone Kerr, and Arash Massoudi, "Arms sales draws Trump closer to Saudis," *Financial Times*, 20 May 2017, p. 2.

⁵ Kate Kelly and Landon Thomas Jr., "Blackstone Group joins forces with Saudis on U.S. infrastructure investments," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2017, pp. B1 and B3.

The Riyadh Speech

The highpoint of Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia was the speech he delivered on 21 May 2017 in front of a large audience of leaders from dozens of Muslim-majority countries in Asia and Africa. The address was prepared by Stephen Miller, a close Trump adviser, known for his dislike of Islam as a religion. The 31-year old Trump assistant is an associate of Stephen Bannon, another Trump adviser from the extreme right of the political spectrum. Both Bannon and Miller are known for their nationalist and populist views, particularly their opposition to the increased immigration from Muslim countries. For them, Trump's "make America great again" slogan, which contributed to his winning the presidency, translates as "making America white and Christian again." Graeme Wood in his profile of Richard Spencer who has emerged as the leader of the "alt-right" movement in the US, to which Miller and possibly Bannon belong, believes that spreading democracy and freedom are false ideas, distracting America from what really matters namely, a consciousness of their identity as white and shared Christian heritage.⁶

According to George Packer, a writer who specialises on America's current affairs, this narrative resonated with many voters in the 2016 election. "America First" is the conviction that the country has lost its traditional identity because of contamination and weakness – the contamination of others, foreigners, immigrants and Muslims; the weakness of elites who have no allegiance to the country because they have been globalised. This narrative has contempt for democracy, democratic norms and liberal values, and it has an autocratic character. It personalises power, routinises corruption and destabilises the very idea of objective truth.⁷

Bannon and Miller had collaborated to write the executive order that banned the entry into the US of people from seven Muslim-majority countries. The order was challenged in the courts, was declared unconstitutional by the 9th Circuit and was redrafted to take account of the judiciary's misgivings. This did not work with the courts. A different appellate court turned it down. An exacerbad President Trump took the matter to the Supreme Court. With history, the White House showed an extraordinary lack of sensitivity to the growing and negative Muslim sentiment towards the new presidency by entrusting to Miller the task of preparing the

⁶ Graeme Wood, "His Kamph," *The Atlantic*, June 2017, p. 44.

⁷ George Packer, "Hillary Clinton and the populist revolt," *The New Yorker*, 31 October 2016, pp.45-47.

draft of the Riyadh speech. According to a story in the *Los Angeles Times*, the initial Miller draft was revised on the basis of an input from Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law and senior adviser.⁸

In the address, Trump pivoted away from his assessment in numerous campaign speeches that labelled Islam as a religion of hatred. However, intended or not, he made a connection between one sect of Islam – the Shiites – and terrorism. He challenged the Muslim leaders – not just those assembled in the hall where he spoke but across the Muslim world with 1.6 billion adherents – to counter a “wicked ideology” and “purge the foot soldiers of evil from their societies.” He falsely implied that most of the terrorist activities were sponsored by Iran. “This is not a battle between different faiths, different sects or different civilisations. This is a battle between barbaric criminals who seek to obliterate human life and decent people, all in the name of religion, people that want to protect life and want to protect their religion. This is a battle between good and evil,” he proclaimed. Reversing the approach he had adopted during the campaign, he described Islam “as one of the world’s great faiths” and pleaded for “tolerance and respect for each other.” As *The New York Times* noted, while Trump had repeatedly criticised Obama and others for not using the phrase ‘radical Islamic terrorism’, his advisers now sought to ensure that he would not use it before his Muslim audience. The final draft of the speech had him embracing, instead, a subtle but significant switch, using the term ‘Islamist extremism.’ Islamist is often defined to mean someone who advocates Islamic fundamentalism, and some prefer its use to avoid tarring the entire religion.⁹ This caution notwithstanding, he often slipped and used the term “Islamic extremism” rather than “Islamist terrorism.”

It was inevitable that the Trump address would be compared with the one given by Obama eight years earlier. The then-American president addressed the students and faculty of Al Azhar University, the Cairo-based centre of Islamic learning. Obama recognised that there had been differences – sometimes they were sharp – between Islam and the West but pleaded for a better understanding on the part of both. “We meet at a time of tension between the US and Muslims around the world – tension rooted in historical forces that go beyond and current policy debate”, Obama told his audience made up mostly of students. “The relationship between Islam and the

⁸ Lisa Mascoro, “Trump speechwriter Stephen Miller, a Santa Monica High grad, pens address for president’s Middle East visit,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 May 2017, p. A1.

⁹ Peter Baker, Michael D. Shear, “Shifting tone, President saves dark words for faith’s fringe,” *The New York Times*, 22 May 2017, pp. A1 and A8.

West includes centuries of coexistence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations. Moreover, the sweeping change brought about by modernity and globalization led many Muslims to view the West as hostile to the traditions of Islam.”¹⁰

Ever since the 9/11 attacks on the US, there has been a serious effort to understand the hatred for the West – in particular for the US – on the part of an admittedly small segment of the Muslim population. This feeling is more pronounced among the Muslim youth resident in the West. This became the subject of considerable academic and policy inquiry. One recent explanation came from Souad Mekhennet in her book, *I Was Told to Come Alone*. She had the credentials to work in this area: she was born to a Moroccan Sunni father and Turkish Shiite mother. Born in Germany, she spoke several European languages. The root cause of hate was not Islam, she argued. “Religion doesn’t radicalize people; people radicalize religion”, she wrote. There were many reasons why many chose violence as the mode of expressing their resentment.¹¹ She was of the view that some more serious research is needed before the question raised by the Islamic State’s magazine *Dabiq* – “Why We Fight and Why We Hate You” – can be authoritatively answered. However, it was poor public policy to single out one country as the promoter of terrorist violence. This was what Trump did at Riyadh. The issue was much more complex.

Some prominent political leaders in the US were thrilled at the way Trump conducted himself in Saudi Arabia. Among those who applauded the president was Republican Newt Gingrich, a former Speaker of the House of Representatives in the US Congress, whose wife was appointed by Trump as the American Ambassador to the Vatican. In a newspaper article, Gingrich called Trump’s approach to the Muslim world a “titanic foreign policy shift”. He effected this “in a way that no American president had ever done before. While extending a hand of friendship to

¹⁰ See <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>. Accessed on 13 June 2017.

¹¹ Souad Mekhennet, *I Was Told to Come Alone: My Journey Behind the Lines of Jihad*, New York, Holt, 2017. The author contributed a long article to the pages of *The Washington Post* where she worked as a reporter. The long article, excerpted from her book, told the story of the death of her 15-year-old cousin in a shoot-out in Munich. The killer was an Iranian-German whose parents had migrated from Iran and were given asylum in Germany. Among those who were killed in the rampage were two young men, a Sunni and a Shiite from immigrant families. Souad Mekhennet, “I covered terrorism on 3 continents. Then my family was victimized,” *The Washington Post*, 12 June 2017, pp. A1 and A6-A7.

Muslim nations, he also issued them a clear challenge: to take the lead in solving the crisis that has engulfed their region and spread across the planet.”¹²

While Trump softened his view of Islam – during the campaign he had described it as a religion that spread hatred, especially towards the US – he has, in his Riyadh speech, trained his anger on Iran and by implication on the Shiite sect of Islam which is the dominant religion in that country. This will be problematic for a number of reasons.

Designation of Iran as the ‘Enemy’

An important outcome of Trump’s evolving approach towards the Muslim world concerns Iran. While Obama had worked hard to bring the Shiite nation out of isolation and out of its Islamic shell, Trump has shown unmasked hostility towards Iran and, by implication, towards the Shiite sect. Trump’s reading of the Iranian situation could not have been more off the mark. The Shiite nation is opening its political system and its society which had been tightly closed since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. However, most – but not all – the Sunni leaders who heard Trump – are ignoring most of the political aspirations of their citizens. In these countries, there is often a disconnection between the rulers and their people. In his remarks, the American president signalled his intention to end the US engagement with Iran, suggesting that it does not encourage change from within the country. This was a strange argument to make since, at about the time Trump spoke, the Iranians, in a fair and open election, re-elected the reform-minded Hasan Rouhani for another presidential term. The election outcome was seen as an indication that the country’s society was changing. Most Iranians now adhere to middle-class values and are closer in their thinking to the West than the people in the Arabian Peninsula where women are treated as second class citizens and are not allowed to drive.¹³ Non-Muslims are not permitted to practise their religion or visit Islam’s holy places in Mecca and Medina.

Iran was accused both by Washington and the Sunni leaders allied with it of using non-state actors to destabilise the established but authoritarian political systems in the Sunni world.

¹² Newt Gingrich, “Trump’s titanic foreign policy shift,” *The Washington Post*, 25 May 2017, p. A19.

¹³ This restriction was challenged by a Saudi woman who took to the wheel; she was arrested, took a video of her arrest and posted it on a social media site. The video went viral and she was released. She left Saudi Arabia and took up residence in Sydney, Australia, and wrote a book on her experience of defiance. See Manal Al-Sharif, *Daring to Drive: A Saudi Woman’s Awakening*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 2017.

However, it is not always understood in the Sunni capitals under the control of authoritarian regimes that those who have risen against them have the solid backing of most of their compatriots. This is the case in Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, Egypt and Yemen. The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is not entirely because of sectarianism. Iran is on the side of its citizenry. By siding with the rulers of the Arabian Peninsula, Trump is making a choice that will sow serious discord in the world of Islam. If the conflict with Iran gets sharper, it will have consequences for the rest of the Muslim world, including South Asia, which has as many people following the Shiite faith as does Iran.

One well-reasoned reaction to Trump's Riyadh speech came in the form of a newspaper article penned by Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister. It was Zarif who had negotiated the nuclear deal with the then US Secretary of State John Kerry in 2015. "As President Trump was being feted in the palaces of the Saudi royal family after concluding a historic arms deal, Iranians were celebrating the outcome of a hard-fought election," he wrote in the article titled "Arms deals won't bring peace". He suggested that the presidential election in Iran was the outcome of a process of political change and development which his country had set its sights on and which "would bring moderation and constructive engagement based on mutual respect and [had] brought the world the nuclear deal in 2015." America's renewed involvement with the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula will be seen by them as "carte blanche to stamp out peaceful dissent." What will really bring peace to this troubled area is "a genuine effort to forge inclusive engagement among the regional powers based on a policy of coexistence and acceptance that military solutions are futile. While Saudi Arabia spends countless millions promoting fear of Iran to distract from its global export of Wahabism – which inspires the extremist ideology of Al Qaeda, the so-called Islamic State and many other terrorist groups wreaking havoc from Karachi to Manchester – Iran has been aiding the victims of extremism in Iraq and Syria." He concluded the article with a warning, "If we don't break this cycle, we will leave only the same momentous task to our children and grandchildren. We must be the generation that learns from history rather than be condemned to repeat it."¹⁴

Trump's approach towards Iran and his coddling of the Arab monarchs began to have consequences soon after his visit to the Middle East. On 7 June 2017, gunmen and suicide bombers launched coordinated attacks on the parliament in Tehran and the nearby mausoleum

¹⁴ Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Arms deals won't bring peace," *The New York Times*, 26 May 2017, p. A27.

of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Although the responsibility for the attacks was claimed by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), a statement by the Revolutionary Guards linked them to Trump's Riyadh visit. In a video released by the ISIS, the attackers spoke in Arabic. Adel Al-Jubeir, Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, denied his country's involvement in the attacks.¹⁵

Trump's Riyadh statement will likely stoke the increasingly bitter enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran. One immediate diplomatic consequence was felt in the Gulf, involving Qatar with which Iran has had strong ties. On 4 June 2017, three days before the Tehran attacks that left at least 12 people dead and more than 40 injured, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt severed diplomatic ties with Qatar after accusing the tiny but rich country of supporting terrorism. The showdown with Qatar created what is arguably the most serious crisis since Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. This action by the Arab quartet pulled in other countries in the area, notably Turkey. "It will not contribute to solving any problem to try to isolate in this way Qatar, which we know for sure has fought very effectively against terrorist groups," said Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's President.¹⁶ The country's parliament adopted a law to allow Turkish troops to be stationed on Qatari soil. Iran and Turkey had signed an agreement in 2014 to build a base for estimated 3,000 troops. About 150 Turkish troops were already stationed there and there were indications that more were headed in that direction.

Long-term Consequences of the New Trump Approach

The dynamics at work in the seeming confrontation between the West and a segment of the Muslim population is well illustrated by the case of Salman Abedi, a British-born citizen of Libyan descent, who blew himself up outside Manchester Arena where Ariana Grande, a popular American singer, was performing. The attack on 22 May 2017 killed 22 people, mostly young women who were part of the 22,000-strong crowd attracted to the singer's concert. According to newspaper reports, Abedi's parents had moved from Libya to Manchester during the reign of Muammar el Qaddafi. They resented the authoritarian ways of the Libyan leader

¹⁵ Monavar Khalaj and Erika Solomon, "Iran revolutionary guards claim Riyadh linked to Tehran attacks," *Financial Times*, 8 June 2017, p. 4.

¹⁶ Simeon Kerr and Laura Pitel, "Turkey backs isolated Qatar and risks angering Saudi Arabia," *Financial Times*, 8 June 2017, p. 4.

and left their country for Britain in 1993. Abedi was born in Manchester in 1994. The killer's parents moved back to Libya after the fall of the dictator, leaving their children behind. Many Libyan expatriates are clustered in Manchester, creating one of the largest Libyan communities outside Libya. Like so many other Muslim communities in Europe, Manchester's Libyans did not get fully integrated with their host populations. A number of Libyans from Manchester have waged jihad abroad, according to Raffaello Pantucci, a terrorism expert at the Royal United Services Institute in London. The Qaeda-linked Libyan Islamic Fighting Group had a contingent in Manchester, Pantucci said. And in 2010 and 2011, as the anti-Qaddafi uprising in Libya intensified, a number of Libyan Britons left Manchester for Libya as foreign fighters, he said. More recently, he said, a cluster left for Syria.¹⁷

The episode in Manchester tells us a number of things about the presence of Muslim-associated terrorist activities in the West. The perpetrators are usually citizens of the countries in which the terrorist acts are committed. They are resentful of the host countries since they *perceive* their governments are treating the Muslim communities poorly. They find that several European governments support authoritarianism in the countries from which they had come and which severely limit the rights of citizens. A significant number of them have opted to support the ISIS, accepting its propaganda that it is fighting to establish the system first created by the Prophet Muhammad and the four caliphs who followed him. People such as Abedi are prepared to kill themselves so that their fellow Muslims can live in the system of governance adopted under early Islam. For them, Trump's rhetoric and the way he has positioned his country with respect to the Muslim world are reasons enough to oppose the West, in particular the US.

The approach that Trump is adopting towards the Muslim world will have serious consequences for years to come. The American president seems to have abandoned the earlier efforts of his country to encourage the Muslim youth to adopt western liberalism as their guiding ideology. This was the reason why the Obama administration did not support Egypt's Hosni Mubarak as he came under pressure from the street during the Arab Spring of January 2011. Mubarak's political demise was preceded and followed by the fall of other dictators. Tunisia saw the departure of the leader who had governed his country for decades with a heavy

¹⁷ Karin Bennhold, Stephen Castle, and Suliman Ali Zway, "Hunt for bomber's accomplices extends to Libya," *The New York Times*, 25 May 2015, pp. A1 and A10.

hand. The same fate visited the Yemeni president. This was political cleansing of major proportions. It held out hope for the Middle East's restive youth. However, it also resulted in a prolonged civil war in Syria that has already taken more than half a million lives, with half of the country's population of 27 million displaced. More than a million Syrians have already headed to Europe as refugees.

Most observers of political development in the Muslim world have recognised that its well-educated youth, with the help of social media, were well-connected with the world outside their own region. They recognised – and were pained by the fact – that the Middle East had seriously lagged behind most other regions in terms of political development. To remedy the situation, they wanted serious political change. One way of doing that was to have the youth participate more fully in the political and economic systems of the countries in which they lived. They did not like to be excluded as had been done by the authoritarian regimes that had dominated the western part of the Islamic world, defined as the geographic area that stretches from Morocco to Bangladesh. It houses a billion people, more than half of whom live in three South Asian states – Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

Trump's Approach to the Middle East and How it Might Affect South Asia

How would this spreading crisis in parts of the world of Islam affect South Asia, home to nearly 500 million Muslims out of the global total of 1.6 billion? With the exception of Pakistan, most Muslim-majority countries in the western segment of the Islamic world have weak political systems, tending towards authoritarianism or semi-authoritarianism. Even Bangladesh, which initially developed competitive democracy with vibrant political parties, has tended towards a system dominated by one political party. A well-functioning democracy must have parties that are competitive so that there is a choice for the citizenry. Turkey was a flourishing democracy until recently. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has pushed the country towards authoritarian rule. Trump has warmly embraced the Middle East's authoritarian rulers, including President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the Egyptian President who is presiding over a regime much more authoritarian than the one headed by Mubarak.

Not only has South Asia the largest Muslim community in the world, there is also a large Shiite presence in the region. Of the estimated 225 million followers of this sect of Islam, 60 million

or more than a quarter of the total live in Pakistan, India and Afghanistan. If the type of politics Trump's America is encouraging – perhaps unwittingly – endures, there can be no doubt that it would exacerbate the Sunni-Shiite divide in the Muslim world. The rise of Shiite political Islam following the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 sharpened the sense of identity of this community in Pakistan and India. This was the thesis of Vali Nasr's well-argued book, *The Shia Revival*.¹⁸ The reaction to the rise of self-consciousness on the part of the Shiites was violence aimed at some of the easy-to-identify members of the community. The Hazaras, a Persian-speaking community with distinct physical features who reside mainly in central Afghanistan, and Hazara Town in the Pakistani province of Baluchistan and Karachi, are overwhelmingly "Twelver Shiite" Muslims. Of the estimated seven million to eight million people belonging to this sect, 2.5 million are in Afghanistan and close to a million in Pakistan. They have been targeted by Sunni extremists in both countries. There were a number of Hazara deaths in acts of terrorism in Quetta and Karachi in Pakistan.

However, a sharpening of the Sunni-Shiite divide is not the only likely consequence of the way Trump is approaching the Middle East. There has been a palpable increase in the influence in South Asia of Wahabi Islam in recent years. This is for a number of reasons all of which can be traced to Saudi Arabia. First, the large-scale migration of young men from South Asia became a conduit for the arrival of Wahabism into the region. Since most labour-importing countries in the Middle East allowed only males to come for work for limited periods of times (three years to five years), there was a fast turnover among the migrants. For more than four decades now, nearly 15 million people from Pakistan have moved in and out of the Middle East. About the same number of Muslims from India (in particular from the state of Kerala) were similarly involved. While returning home, they brought conservative Islam to their countries, challenging the more liberal traditions of the areas to which they belonged.

Second, Saudi Arabia, in particular, but well-to-do individuals in the other oil-rich countries as well, have contributed large amounts of finance to the establishment of madrassas or religious schools in South Asia, particularly in Afghanistan and the tribal belt of Pakistan. The first generation of the Taliban were mostly graduates from these seminaries. Third, the flow of official development assistance from Saudi Arabia to Pakistan, as well private direct investment in all parts of South Asia, produced the leverage which the kingdom was able to

¹⁸ Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, New York, W.W. Norton, 2016.

exploit. Not only has Pakistan benefited from these flows, India, in particular under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, has also been active in bringing in Arab capital to his country.

Fourth, Saudi Arabia has strong military ties with Pakistan. Although the Pakistan National Assembly turned down the Saudi request to send troops to the country to bolster the ability for the kingdom to defend itself from foreign aggression, it is clear that there is an understanding between Riyadh and Islamabad that help from Pakistan will be forthcoming in case there is a violation of Saudi sovereignty. Earlier this year, retired General Raheel Sharif, who had headed the Pakistani army for three years, was appointed to a new position as the head of the multinational force the Saudis were assembling, drawn from two-score Muslim countries. Dealing with terrorism was the declared objective of this move. However, at least on the part of the Saudi kingdom, the fear of possible aggression by the more powerful Iran was also a reason for the creation of this military alliance.

The Trump administration is likely to add fuel to the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East and parts of South Asia. Bangladesh and Pakistan are busy developing participatory and inclusive political institutions. Such institutions must provide space to religious and ethnic minorities. That is the only way sectarian divergences will not get translated into violence and killing. Pakistan was once a more tolerant society in which differences among different sects of Islam did not result in violence. Political evolution, with an emphasis on inclusion, will help to revert the country towards tolerance. This should also be the policy that the US should be supporting. Unfortunately, it is not the policy that is high on the list of Trump's priorities.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Trump has, by openly supporting an anti-Islam approach, churned up the already-troubled waters of the Middle East. It is unlikely that there will be a state-to-state confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. What is probable is a fight involving proxies, with the restive Shiite minorities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia rebelling against the established order. This is already happening in Yemen where the Houthis, officially called Ansar Allah, resorted to the use of violence to assert what they believed were their political and economic rights. Riyadh accuses Tehran of supporting the rebellion by the Shiite Houthis.

The already-unsettled Middle East became even more so after Trump's visit to the region. What he said in a speech delivered before an audience of 50 Muslim heads of state, most of them non-Arab, has torn apart some of the alliances that had brought some stability to the perennially disturbed area. Soon after he left the place, things began to happen, some of which were probably the direct consequence of his visit.

There were two terrorist attacks in Tehran, a city that had been largely spared by those who want to bring chaos to the Muslim world. A quartet of nations – Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Yemen – severed relations with the tiny but oil-and-gas-rich nation of Qatar. This action by the authoritarian rulers in the Middle East drew other nations, in particular Turkey that came out openly in support of the tiny sheikhdom. Although some of the senior members of the Trump administration – Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, for instance – urged the Middle East nations to step back and normalise their relations – Trump took great pride in the fact that it was his discussion in Riyadh with the Saudi monarch that had resulted in the rift. In a joint press conference with the visiting Romanian president on 9 June 2017, he spent considerable time in lambasting the Qataris for their alleged support of terrorism.

Trump's hostility towards Islam and also towards the followers of the faith was in full display during his long campaign for the US presidency. Although he softened his tone during his visit to Saudi Arabia, that there would be consequences for the Muslim community in the US became evident. There were many reported incidents of harassment of Muslims in the US by white extremists. One such case involved a person who shouted abuses at two Muslim women who were travelling in a commuter train in Portland, Oregon. When three fellow travellers intervened to protect the women, that man attacked them with a knife, killing two of them and wounding the third. According to a local police spokesman, the men who tried to calm the man down “were attacked viciously by the suspect.”¹⁹

Three days after the attack, a tweet from President Trump said that the man's behaviour was “unacceptable” and recognised the victims for “standing up to hate and intolerance.” In reporting on the president's tweet, the press noted that it came from his official account which is run by his staff and not from his personal account. “Trump has faced criticism for staying

¹⁹ See http://www.oregonlive.com/portland/index.ssf/2017/05/police_responding_to_ne_portla.html. Accessed on 14 June 2017.

quiet about the attack for so many days, even though he is quick to react to violent acts carried out by Muslim extremists,” wrote Jenna Johnson of *The Washington Post*.²⁰ What we have seen in first few months of the Trump presidency is a seeming pattern of behaviour that will have serious consequences for the large Muslim minority in the US as well as America’s relations with the members of the 1.6-billion strong Muslim community across the world. That he chose to befriend the Muslim world’s authoritarian rulers rather than its people as was done by Obama, his predecessor, does not provide much comfort about the future.

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²⁰ Jenna Johnson, “Trump, in tweet, hails Oregon attack victims for ‘standing up to hate,’” *The Washington Post*, 30 May 2017, p. A3.