

DailyTimes | Reformist Rouhani, regressive Trump

Instead of securing the Middle East — the new American push through Saudi Arabia may further destabilise the region and cause South Asia to again serve as the collateral



What a week it has been for the Middle East! People of Iran came out in droves to re-elect Rouhani as president for another term. With this outcome, it is expected that Iran will continue along its moderate and reformist path — both inside and vis-à-vis the world. United States President Donald Trump, meanwhile, visited Saudi Arabia and Israel with what has predominantly been discussed as a single point agenda of alienating Tehran and supporting an anti-Iran coalition — politically and militarily.

Implications of these two contradicting developments will reshape Middle East's security landscape. Instead of securing the region, the new American push through Saudi Arabia may further destabilise it, with South Asia serving as the collateral. Both Pakistan and India will separately have to analyse these two developments with their own security prism and get prepared for the worse, for there is nothing better to hope for with Trump's new Middle East push.

First, let us look at the presidential election in Iran and its larger message.

Rouhani was re-elected with a substantial majority (57 percent) in an election seeing more than 70 percent turnout.

However, the re-election does not mean that the new term is likely to be smooth sailing for Rouhani. There is still a 35-plus percentage that voted for a conservative Ebrahim Raisi. Besides those who had

voted for Raisi, Rouhani's internal challenges will feature a domestic state structure led by Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei, the Council and the Revolutionary Guards. Though a section considers that the supreme leader is ageing and not keeping well, the conservative challenge for Rouhani within Iran gets no less significant. Even the not-so-conservative section that had voted Rouhani has a high expectation — especially on the economic front. The rising middle class is bound to have an increased demand on better standard of life.

Externally — Rouhani's challenges are twofold. Within the region, his government will need to deal with Saudi Arabia and Israel. There has been a regional cold war in the Middle East, led by Saudi Arabia on political and religious fronts. Besides the struggle for a regional supremacy, Iran is also in the middle of an intra-Islamic conflict with a deep Sunni-Shia divide in the region. The on-going war in Yemen and conflict in Syria and Iraq have become the fertile grounds for this regional cold war. Besides, there has been a long standing divide between Iran and Israel.

None of the recent terrorist attacks in Europe, including the latest one in UK, originate from Iran.

These are linked to ISIS as previous such attacks were associated with Al Qaeda

The second external challenge for Rouhani is bigger and likely to become a game changer even for his domestic calculations — it features Donald Trump's administration.

Trump's new Middle East initiative is likely to create more political and military instability for the region. The USD 100 billion deal between the US and Saudi Arabia on military purchase by the latter is not only likely to change the military equation in the region, but also give a new political fillip to a Saudi Arabian hegemony. Trump's support to new military coalition assures an American nod against Iran, besides ensuring an umbrella support in the international forums such as the UN on any military offensive led by the alleged Arab Nato. If the new push by Trump in the Middle East goes unchecked by other actors — Russia and the EU — it would ensure an unstable region in the immediate future.

This strategy of the Trump administration would undo three recent positive developments in the region. Firstly, it would undo America's measured approach towards the region under Obama administration. Obama was clearly side-lining Saudi Arabia and building an informal coalition to fight the ISIS. His second term was consistent with building a rapprochement with Iran, with the nuclear deal being the highlight. Secondly, it would also undermine the impact of the Arab Spring; there was a demand for political rights and better human rights situation in the Middle East. Thirdly, with an 'Isolate Iran agenda Trump's Middle East strategy would undo the moderate success of the liberals within Iran — at leadership and civil society levels.

It would be ironic if actions of the rest of the world end up undoing the gains reflected for Iranians in the recent elections. Unlike those countries that Trump seems to be mobilising, democratic process in Iran has been getting stronger with every election. The Iranian society would be closer to the American values than any of Trump's new found Middle Eastern allies. The 'Isolate Iran' strategy would not only undermine

moderate sections within Iran, but also strengthen the conservative elements led by Raisi. With Ali Khameni allegedly not in great health, a moderate Iran in majority would help choose the next supreme leader who could further consolidate positive developments and place the country in an irrevocable progressive route. Consider this situation — the new found enthusiasm to corner Iran results in Rouhani and his reformist brigade losing popular appeal, and the conservative section completely taking over Iran. This may be even more disastrous than what had happened in 1979. In all likelihood, Trump's Middle East approach is likely to undermine positive developments in Iran. Equally disastrous would be an increased Shia-Sunni divide in the Middle East. It is the ISIS and the radical ideology it represents (with its base in Saudi Arabia) that remains a clear and present danger — none of the recent terrorist attacks in Europe including the latest one in Manchester originate from Iran. These attacks are linked to ISIS and previous such attacks were associated with al-Qaeda. For Pakistan, its participation in the military alliance would surely upset bilateral relations with Iran. Isn't there already enough pressure on Islamabad to take sides, even if Pakistan is reluctant? For India, these developments would be tied to its larger strategic calculations of working with Iran.

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