

# Trump's Muddle East Fallouts

Published at May 29, 2017 11:01 PM [0Comment\(s\)](#)354views



Middle East is likely to witness new directions, thanks to President Trump's maiden visit. Two issues in particular would have the potential to destabilise this region – building an anti-Iran coalition in the Middle East, and arming Saudi Arabia further. What is Trump's endgame in the Middle East? And how would it affect South Asia?

What was projected as Trump's first visit has turned into an anti-Iran coalition building. "Isolate Iran" stood out clearly amidst the various statements made and agreements signed. Two further issues deserve focus. First, it was Saudi Arabia led, but backed by the US. Second, it is merely not an alliance between two (US and Saudi Arabia), but led by them, with other countries from the Muslim World. Both have serious repercussions – starting from Morocco in Africa to Mindanao in Southeast Asia .

## **The Middle East Muddle**

During the last few decades, there has been an intense Cold War within the Middle East – both directly and through proxies, similar to the one led by the US and the Soviet Union. Iran and Iraq initially in the 1980s and, Iran and Saudi Arabia in the recent years have been fighting this intra-Middle East Cold War. This was and continues to be the struggle for the Arab World over political supremacy. An new facet in the last two decades has been the Sunni vs Shia sectarian dimension led by Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively.

Conflicts and violence within the Middle East in Palestine and Lebanon, and recently in Syria and Yemen are a part of both political and sectarian fault-lines within the region. For example in Syria, though US and Russia were supporting different actors, later there was an understanding between Obama and Putin. Obama towards the end of his second term also distanced US from Saudi Arabia. As a result, there was an increased coordination, though taking place informally, but having far reaching implications in fighting the Islamic State (IS).

## **Enter Trump: Immediate Fallouts on Iran, Iraq, Syria and Yemen**

Since its formation, and occupying substantial territories in Syria and Iraq, the IS for the first time has been at the receiving end – losing territories and influence due to the above coordination. The fist

implication of Trump's revamped Middle East policy may be on the IS. Trump's shifting focus on alienating Iran would divert the fight against the IS.

Second, Trump's statements and agreements may strengthen Saudi Arabia to advance its own objectives in Yemen. Despite supporting its proxies, Saudi Arabia has not succeeded in bringing Yemen under its control. Instead, it has succeeded in destroying the social and economic fabric of Yemen leading to a famine situation and a collapse of civilian administration. With a 100 bn USD arms purchase from the US in pipeline, Saudi Arabia is likely to intensify its Yemen campaign. More than the above arms sale, Saudi Arabia is likely to use the political clout and push forward its own objectives within the region.

### **The Arab-US Summit and the Islamic Military Alliance**

The bigger issue facing the Middle East and rest of the Muslim World is the larger summit that Trump took part in. Led by Saudi Arabia and participated by most of the countries from the Muslim World, the US-Arab-Islamic Summit ended up in providing an institutional framework to isolate Iran (which was not invited for the Summit along with Syria). What would this mean?

The Summit though political in nature, will have to be analysed with the formation of Islamic Military Alliance. Formed in December 2015 and led by Saudi Arabia, the alliance includes 30 plus countries from Africa, Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia. From the region, Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan from South Asia are part of this military alliance. Though in paper, the alliance is aimed at fighting terrorism, the sectarian composition (of not having Shia countries) has caused concerns on the real motives behind the alliance.

At the political level, the above developments will pressurize Iran to respond. Tehran is unlikely to watch and do nothing about the Arab-US summit and the military alliance. For Tehran, it is also a political struggle to have its own influence within the Middle East. Though the recent elections in Iran have highlighted the reformist push by majority, a negative approach by rest of the region and the US could upset this positive development within Iran. If the sanctions regime continues, or the military alliance makes the targets sectarian, then one should expect Iran to respond negatively.

Trump's endgame will have to be interpreted in this context. Is he planning to outsource fighting terrorism to the Islamic Military Alliance? Or he wants to divide the Middle East on sectarian lines, and pitch one against the other?

### **The South Asian Context**

For South Asia, the most worrying part should be Pakistan's response. Though Maldives and Bangladesh are also part of the military alliance, they are unlikely to face immediate fallout. None of the other SAARC countries except Pakistan and Afghanistan share a border with Iran. Excluding Bhutan, rest of the region is tied economically with the Gulf. The Gulf remittance for South Asia is significant; the daily flights between the various cities in the Gulf and South Asia would highlight the labour movement between the two regions.

A section within Pakistan has been arguing to maintain a balance between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The debate inside Pakistan was also divided over Raheel Sharif (former military Chief) taking over as the Commander of Islamic Military Alliance. Pakistan would like to pursue a balanced approach but perhaps its hands are tied. Neither Nawaz Sharif, nor the foreign ministry could ignore Saudi Arabia. Pakistan's military always had special ties with the rulers of Saudi Arabia.

There are two larger concerns for Pakistan relating developments in the Middle East today. First is the bilateral with Iran and the second is domestic in terms of Sunni-Shia relations. Statements from Iran during the recent weeks highlight the growing tensions between the two countries, whose bilateral relations between Iran and Pakistan have been stabilizing. Clearly Tehran is apprehensive that Pakistan is getting into the Saudi Arabian orbit. With Raheel Sharif agreeing to lead the military alliance, Iranian political leadership is convinced of Pakistan's preferences.

The sectarian fault line within Pakistan has been deepening, with the TTP and now the Islamic State going after Ahmediyas and Shias. In the recent years, one could witness a spate of sectarian attacks in Punjab, Karachi, Quetta, Khurram and Orakzai, and in Gilgit-Baltistan. These attacks have been blamed on militant groups and not the State. This may change; any direct State intervention or support to sectarian violence would turn the existing situation ugly.

Outside Pakistan, for rest of South Asian and Southeast Asia, implications are twofold as well. First, if the "isolate Tehran" project gets serious and turns into a struggle for supremacy between Saudi Arabia and Iran over the Muslim World, it could increase sectarian violence across the regions. Second, if the Middle East decides to pursue Iran as a greater threat and ignore the IS, it would become a larger problem for South Asia and Southeast Asia. For both regions IS is the clear and present danger, and not Iran.

*The author is a Professor at the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS) Bangalore. He edits annual titled *Armed Conflicts in South Asia* and runs a portal on Pakistan – [www.pakistanreader.org](http://www.pakistanreader.org).*