



## US President Donald Trump's visit to Riyadh and Jerusalem Reasserting Realpolitik?

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### **Introduction**

United States (US) President Donald J. Trump embarked on his first visit overseas to Saudi Arabia on May 20-21, 2017, since he assumed the office of Presidency on January 20, 2017, followed by a direct trip to Jerusalem and the occupied territories on May 22-23, 2017. During his two-day high profile state visit to Riyadh, President Trump participated in three high-level Summits - Saudi Arabia-US Summit; Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)-US Summit, and Arab-Islamic-American Summit that was attended by representatives of 55 Muslim countries. In all the three Summits, President Trump held talks with the leadership in Saudi Arabia with the aim of deepening bilateral trade ties, driving economic growth and creating jobs, as well as developing significantly increased cooperation in areas of global security.

Marked by crucial economic, political, strategic and security interests and developments, this visit suggests that realpolitik is the actual impetus of the US foreign policy in the West Asian region. The visit to Riyadh, Jerusalem and West Bank can be seen as part of Donald Trump's 'Middle East Strategy' where he struck important deals with the Saudis, engaged with other Arab state leaders as well as the leadership of Israel and Palestine, projecting the reinforcement of mutually benefitting bilateral relations. At this juncture it is crucial to question the rationale behind President Trump's choice for his first official visit overseas to Saudi Arabia. Why did Trump choose Saudi Arabia as its first foreign visit? In an attempt to answer this question the paper will first discuss the outcome of the three Summits in Riyadh independently. The second section will highlight President Trump's visit to Jerusalem, his address to the people of Israel and his meeting with Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem. Each section will discuss and critically assess the major themes that dominated the meetings and its implications on the political, economic and security scenario in the region.

## **SECTION I**

### **President Trump's visit to Riyadh**

As noted above, the Riyadh Summit, which had a series of three Summits, was defined by economic, political and security developments. In order to “further solidify US-Saudi security and economic cooperation,” the two sides signed several agreements. Starting with the bilateral Saudi-US Summit, the Riyadh Summit also included two other multilateral Summits. The deliberations of the three Summits primarily focused on defense modernisation, enhancing business ties, including energy deals and most importantly, addressing and reasserting their conviction to root out terrorism. While the visit bolstered strategic ties between the two countries, it was also significant from the economic and investment dimensions it. Apart from the mutual benefits shared by the two sides, it is important to note that Riyadh as President Trump's first choice for his maiden foreign visit is not short of political and strategic calculations. A discussion of each Summit and visit to Jerusalem will underline the common themes and shared concerns of all the parties gathered at Riyadh.

#### **(1) Saudi Arabia-US Summit**

In cementing their relationship, the two nations built upon economic cooperation based on shared interests and mutual trust. On the first day of President Trump's visit to Riyadh on May 20, 2017, the US and Saudi signed a massive arms deal worth USD 110 billion. The arms deal package is said to “address Saudi Arabia's needs for maritime and coastal security improvements, air force training and support, cyber security and communications upgrades, missile and air defences, and enhanced border security and counterterrorism capabilities.”<sup>2</sup> In addition to this historic arms deal, the two sides signed other trade and investment agreements, in the field of infrastructure, communication technology and other military hardware, which stood at USD 350 billion. The signing of multiplicity of deals suggests the diversification of economy and reduced dependence on oil. On this issue, Dr. Majed bin Abdullah Al-Kassabi, Minister for Commerce and Investment, Saudi Arabia had said, “The sheer breadth and scale of these agreements epitomizes the accelerating diversification of the Kingdom's economy into high-growth sectors such as technology, industrial manufacturing and aerospace, creating and safeguarding 250,000 jobs both in Saudi Arabia and the US.”<sup>3</sup>

The two countries signed a “**Joint Strategic Vision Declaration**,” welcoming a new period of their strategic partnership with renewed spirits toward pursuing a peaceful Middle East. For this regional and global engagement, economic development, trade, and diplomacy will be the major features. The Strategic Vision Declaration, which would also boost the Saudi Vision 2030, focused on strengthening strategic partnership as well as providing tangible benefits to both nations.

#### **Outcome**

- **Mutual Economic Benefits:** Trade and investment agreements worth USD 350 billion signed between US and Saudi Arabian companies have further cemented the relationship

between the two nations built on economic cooperation, shared interest and mutual trust. The deals include multi-year licensing agreements, direct investments and Memoranda of Understanding, which are the largest in the more than 80 year relationship between the two countries. A total of 40 agreements were signed in this visit with investments valued at USD 15 billion in industrial project development and cross-sector capacity building. The agreements covered defense, energy, oil and gas, chemicals, infrastructure, technology and digital solutions, healthcare, and pharmaceutical among others. During a press briefing US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “We announced 23 foreign investment export licenses leading to upwards of more than USD 350 billion of historic direct investment.” Covering a wide range of sectors and investment to and from the US and Saudi Arabia, these agreements will create job opportunities and drive economic growth in both the nations. For instance, the transfer of technology to Saudi Arabia is one focus area to increase local content in production and manufacturing industries. In addition, investments in the technology sector through data centres, start-ups and digitization efforts will create over USD 100 billion in value and lead to more than 50,000 jobs in both the US and Saudi Arabia.<sup>4</sup>

**Strengthening Strategic Partnership:** To chart the course of strategic partnership the two nations planned to form a Strategic Joint Consultative Group, which will meet once a year to review areas of cooperation that includes robust and integrated regional security architecture. With a shared desire to address the threats to our shared security interests, the US and Saudi Arabia sought to embark on new initiatives to counter violent extremist messaging, disrupt financing of terrorism, and advance defense cooperation.<sup>5</sup> The measures taken on the **New Defense Cooperation Programme**<sup>6</sup> to strengthen the established ties of economic interdependence include,

- (a) Signing of a landmark defense and armaments agreement, which includes USD 6 billion to assemble 150 S-70 Blackhawk helicopters in Saudi Arabia in partnership with US Company Lockheed Martin. The program supports Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 by developing local capabilities through technology and skills transfer and is expected to support approximately 450 jobs in Saudi Arabia.
- (b) US defense and cyber leader Raytheon will focus on implementing programs to create indigenous defense, aerospace, and security capabilities in the Kingdom. These programs will positively impact Saudi and US economies including job creation.
- (c) US defense contractor General Dynamics agreed to localize design, engineering, manufacturing, and support of armoured combat vehicles on current and future programs with a target of fifty-percent localization in support of Vision 2030.

The New Defense Cooperation Programme aims to develop actionable partnerships, collaboration and investment opportunities in line with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 that focused on creating jobs and encouraging economic diversification.

Trump chose Riyadh as the first destination abroad reinforcing Riyadh's centrality to Washington's policy priorities. No other US President has chosen the Kingdom as a first foreign destination. However, Saudi Arabia has been the main US ally in the region since its creation and the relationship between the two became more robust following the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Indeed, the USD 110 arms deal signed at the bilateral Riyadh Summit is a strategically mature move in the direction of further strengthening the military alliance.

Trump's first trip also highlighted Saudi Arabia's perennial conflict and America's hostility with Iran. While the major theme was to defeat ISIS and Islamic terrorism, President Trump left no chance in escalating attacks on Iran, calling Tehran as a major "threat" to the region. To spell out the 'dangers' and 'threats' posed by Iran, President Trump could not have found better destination than Riyadh and Jerusalem. Indeed, Trump's political assertion building up a narrative on isolating Iran was also visible in the arms deal that was signed with the Saudis in a bilateral agreement. The arms deal that was signed on day one of President Trump's visit was primarily to deal with "malign Iranian influence." The official State Department statement reads,

This package of defense equipment and services supports the long-term security of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region in the face of malign Iranian influence and Iranian related threats. Additionally, it bolsters the Kingdom's ability to provide for its own security and continue contributing to counterterrorism operations across the region, reducing the burden on US military forces.<sup>7</sup>

Continuing with the bilateral counter-terrorism policy, Riyadh and Washington focused on uniting in the fight against terrorism. Significantly, on February 2, 2017, State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs in its Factsheet described the Saudi Government as "a strong partner in regional security and counterterrorism efforts."<sup>8</sup> Earlier, State Department Country Reports on Terrorism, 2015, published on June 2, 2016, said, "Saudi Arabia continued to maintain a vigorous counterterrorism relationship with the United States, supported enhanced bilateral cooperation to ensure the safety of both U.S. and Saudi citizens within Saudi territories and abroad, and was an active participant in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL."<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile, the US has turned a blind eye to the inconsistencies in Saudi approach towards dealing with extremism and puritanical Islamic trends. Saudi leaders have time and again exhibited conflicting goals – at one level, abandoning Wahhabi Islam and seeking good relations with the West, particularly the US; and at another level, appropriating the clerical beliefs for establishing their political and religious legitimacy in the region in opposition to Iran. In strengthening its clout in the region, Saudi Arabia continues to function with these glaring inconsistencies and conflicting objectives. If this conflicting strategy goes unnoticed for long it can play out in a menacing way in the region.

## (2) GCC-US Summit, 2017

The leaders of the GCC, which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi and United Arab Emirates (UAE), met with the US President Donald Trump on May 21, 2017, to reaffirm the strategic partnership between the two sides. The discussion at the high-level gathering centred on the threats to regional security and stability; and also the building of stronger commercial ties between GCC and the Washington. The leaders reviewed the progress achieved in the previous summit held on April 21, 2016, which included the measures taken to enhance cooperation and deepen the strategic partnership between the two sides. The closed meeting with the six-member GCC's heads was not the first Gulf-US Summit. Earlier during the Obama administration years, two Summits were held in 2015 and 2016 in Camp David and Riyadh respectively. Strengthening their partnership frameworks, including the "GCC-US Strategic Cooperation Forum,"<sup>10</sup> the primary concern at the 2017 Summit was regional and international security, stability and prosperity. According to the Statement released<sup>11</sup>, some major highlights of the **strategic outcome** of the meeting include:

- **Terrorism:** The leaders at the Summit expressed their resolve to tackle the root causes of crises in the West Asian region, as well as take urgent steps to intensify efforts to defeat Daesh and al Qaeda. This included the renewed determination to continue joint efforts to combat terrorism, eliminate its organizations, prosecute its members, and dry up its sources of funding. The measures to confront terrorist threats and combat terror financing include, protecting infrastructure facilities and enhancing border and aviation security.
- **Confront Iran:** The leaders stressed the need to strengthen the ability of GCC countries to address threats emanating from their point of origin, and primarily confront Iran's destabilizing activities. In order to ease regional conflicts and find solutions for them, the leaders emphasised working together to reduce sectarianism and regional tensions that fuel instability, while at the same time oppose Iran's malign interference. The leaders expressed their condemnation of Tehran's interference in the internal affairs of the countries of the region, in violation of the sovereignty of the GCC States, and its attempt to spread division and stir sectarian strife among their citizens, including in the Kingdom of Bahrain, by supporting violent extremists, training proxies, smuggling weapons and explosives, inciting sectarian strife, and making statements at various levels to undermine security, order and stability. In addition to this, they expressed their deep concern over Iran's continued firing of ballistic missiles and stressed the need for Iran to comply with the nuclear agreement.
- **Ensuring Regional Stability:** In ensuring regional stability, the US reaffirmed its commitment to the security of the GCC member states against external threats. The leaders pledged deeper security cooperation and shared responsibility to address the threats facing the region and discussed a common vision for dealing with the most pressing conflicts in the region. The issue of regional security and stability included Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

- (i) **Syria:** The leaders affirmed their firm position to preserve the unity, stability and territorial integrity of Syria and expressed their support for the efforts of the United Nations Secretary-General's envoy to find a political solution based on Geneva 1 Communiqué and United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, and stressed the need to lift the siege on besieged Syrian cities, the delivery of humanitarian aid to affected areas and besieged civilians, the cessation of shelling of civilian areas, and the release of detainees.
  - (ii) **Iraq:** The leaders at the Summit expressed their hope that the process of liberating Mosul will lead to the return of displaced persons to their cities and villages, and to finding a comprehensive political reform process that brings together the Iraqi people without exclusion or dispersion to meet the aspirations of the Iraqi people.
  - (iii) **Yemen:** Stressing the importance of a political solution according to the Gulf Initiative and its executive mechanism, and implementation of UNSC decisions, the leaders affirmed their full commitment to the unity of Yemen, respect for its sovereignty and independence, and the rejection of any interference with its internal affairs. The leaders affirmed their commitment to work with the international community to prevent the continued supply of weapons to Houthi militias and their allies. They also stressed the need for collective efforts to confront the affiliates of al-Qaeda and Daesh or ISIS in the Arabian Peninsula.
- **Strengthening Economic ties:** The leaders agreed to strengthen and support economic relations in various fields, including trade and investment, energy and alternative energy, industry, technology, agriculture, transportation and infrastructure development, in line with the development visions adopted by GCC countries.
  - **Review of the progress of the first Gulf-American Summit:** The leaders reviewed the achievements of the Joint Working Groups that were formed to implement the outcomes of the first Gulf-American Summit in the fields of defense against ballistic missiles, arms transfers, training, combating terrorism, maritime security, cyber security, and protecting infrastructure, as well as confronting malign Iranian interference in the region. This led the leaders to affirm their commitment to continue close coordination on issues of mutual concern through meetings of foreign and defense ministers from both sides and agreed to meet annually in this format to review progress made on all the initiatives agreed upon during the Summit.

During GCC-US Summit, President Trump promoted the idea of an “Arab NATO”, a coalition of Sunni states, primarily to stand up against Iran and then ISIS. While lambasting Iran, Trump kept Iran – a sovereign state - at par with the Islamic State – a non-state actor. To call for building an “Arab or Sunni NATO” is a misnomer and over-simplistic, given the differences between the Arab countries among themselves. No sooner did the President announce the creation of such a coalition, the signs of falling apart were visible. A case in point is the recent

diplomatic rift between Qatar and the five Gulf neighbours, including Saudi Arabia, which is more of a setback to Trump's "unified Sunni coalition of countries" intended to counter Iran.

Importantly, the larger threat emanating from the region is clearly not from the Islamic Republic of Iran but from a more potent force - ISIS, a terrorist outfit that feeds on Wahhabism – a form of Islam that emerged in Saudi Arabia in the eighteenth century and is practiced there till date. In doing this, Trump embraced the traditional US policy towards West Asia, which is marked by the thawing of relations with the traditional American allies in the region and pledging an aggressive posture towards Iran.

Continuing with his erstwhile leaders like George Bush in bashing Iran, Trump, too, denounced Iran as a "state sponsor of terror". However, he feigned ignorance at Saudi Arabia's role in promoting decades of intolerance and extremism in the Muslim world, based on its strict Wahhabi teachings. At the same time, Saudi is a crucial partner of US in counterterrorism. In this visit, the focus was on the Sunni world coming together behind Washington and Riyadh against Iran and terrorism, not to forget the historical US-Saudi partnership that dates to back to 1943. In fact, in building up a military alliance with Riyadh, Trump continued with its previous administration's policies. The US administration under President Barack Obama had generously supplied weapons to Riyadh. According to a Report by William Hartung associated with Washington-based Centre for International Policy, Obama's administration had offered Saudi Arabia more than USD 115 billion in weapons, other military equipment and training in 42 separate deals. This is the maximum under any under any US administration in the last 71 years.<sup>12</sup> This clearly indicates the duality in Obama's approach in dealing with Saudi Arabia, transforming from being a critic bemoaning the extremist version of Islam the Saudis practice to striking a major military deal. In fact, continuing with Obama's back-and-forth US policy in West Asia, Trump's arms deal further enhances the well-established military-support relationship the two countries enjoy.

### (3) Arab-Islamic-American Summit

The historic Arab-Islamic-American Summit was held on the second day of President Trump's visit to Riyadh on May 21, 2017 with the purpose to build more robust and effective security partnerships to counter and prevent the growing threat of terrorism and violent extremism around the globe through promoting tolerance and moderation between the US and the Muslim World. With the focus on global security, President Trump inaugurated the Global Counter Extremism Centre in Riyadh. Addressing the unprecedented gathering at the King Abdulaziz Conference Centre, Trump called upon the leaders of 55 Muslim nations to confront the "crisis of Islamist extremism and the Islamist terror groups it inspires."<sup>13</sup> The Declaration<sup>14</sup> of the Arab-Islamic-American Summit addressed five major inter-related points that include:

- **Combat terrorism and establish Middle East Strategic Alliance:** The leaders affirmed their commitment to combat terrorism in all its forms, address its intellectual roots, dry up its sources of funding and to take all necessary measures to prevent and combat

terrorist crimes in close cooperation among their states. The leaders valued the step of intending to establish a Middle East Strategic Alliance, for which Riyadh will play host, and in which many countries will participate to contribute to peace and security in the region and the world. The establishment and the declaration of the accession of participating countries will be completed in 2018.

- **Establishment of a Global Centre for Countering Extremist Thought:** The Centre's strategic objectives include combating intellectual, media and digital extremism. The leaders welcomed the readiness of a number of Islamic countries to participate in the Islamic Military Coalition to combat terrorism and to provide a reserve force of 34,000 troops to support operations against terrorist organizations when needed. This also included the establishment of a Terrorist Financing Targeting Centre to help combat the financing of terrorism and which would be hosted by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh.
- **Promote coexistence and constructive tolerance as well as enhance sustainable development programs (SDP):** The participants stressed the importance of broadening the scope of meaningful and serious cultural dialogue, which demonstrates the tolerance and moderation of the Islamic religion and its rejection of all forms of violence. The leaders stressed on joint cooperation for SDP to improve the living level for their peoples, and provide a safe, stable and prosperous environment that serves as an incubator for the youth against the deviant and extremist thought.
- **Confronting sectarian agenda and interference in other countries affairs:** The leaders emphasized the importance of the current cooperation between countries, the relations based on the principles of good neighbourhood, non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries and respect of their independence, sovereignty and integrity of territories. Condemning the Iranian regime's hostile positions and continuing interference in the domestic affairs of other countries as a flagrant violation of the principles of international law and good neighbourhood, the leaders at the Summit confirmed their absolute rejection of the practices of the Iranian regime designed to destabilize the security and stability of the region and the world at large and for its continuing support for terrorism and extremism.
- **Countering piracy and protecting navigation:** The leaders stressed the importance of enhancing joint action to protect regional waters, combating piracy to maintain security and stability and avoiding disruption of ports and sea lanes of ships, which negatively affect the commercial movement and economic growth of the countries.

Fulfilling his pre-visit promise to construct a new foundation to combat "terrorism" during his trip to Saudi Arabia, Trump inaugurated the Global Centre for Combating Extremism, headquartered in Riyadh, as the Arab-Islamic-American Summit came to a close on May 21, 2017. The Declaration closed with the follow-up mechanisms in areas of partnership between the Arab and Islamic worlds and the US to achieve the aspirations of their strategic partnership. For this,



the leaders assigned concerned parties in their countries to follow-up and implement the decisions of the Riyadh Declaration, forming necessary Ministerial Committees and Subcommittees and the necessary meetings, discussions, direct coordination and periodic reports on the progress of these actions.

Much like the US-Saudi bilateral Summit, Trump while addressing the leaders of the Muslim countries gathered at the Arab-Islamic-American Summit said that he considered the Kingdom as a crucial ally in fighting terrorism and confronting Iran. It is here that we see the continuities and change in Washington's approach towards Riyadh, Tehran and the larger regional politics. The US-Saudi Arabia alliance has passed through some strains, starting with the oil embargo in 1973 and the involvement of 15 Saudi nationals in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

Building a regional bulwark against "Iranian expansionism", primarily seen in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, Donald Trump during the Arab-Islamic-American Summit on May 21 said,

From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region. For decades, Iran has fuelled the fires of sectarian conflict and terror. Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they deserve.<sup>15</sup>

Casting Iran's isolation as the final goal, Trump called upon West Asian countries to work together towards this end. There is no policy realignment in Trump's approach towards Iran. In fact, this tough stance taken by Trump is in line with his predecessors. The point that is generally made here is about Trump's departure with the Obama administration's Iranian policy of engagement and cooperation. However, what ought to be remembered is the limitation of such a policy of engagement – which was limited to the nuclear deal that was signed on July 14, 2015 that in turn lifted the UN-imposed economic sanctions that had crippled Iran's economy. At the level of foreign policy, Obama's nuclear deal did not diffuse the US-Iran Cold War and Tehran continues to fit into Washington's old political calculus of mistrust.

Given this political background, at Riyadh Summit on May 20-21, the leadership of US and Saudi Arabia displayed a more aggressive approach towards their archenemy Iran. The Iranian-Saudi tensions have overshadowed the region for decades. During this Summit, King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud in his speech gave an aggressive call to confront Iran, blaming it for decades of terrorism in the region. In a similar tone President Trump denounced Iran.

## **SECTION II**

### **President Trump's visit to Jerusalem and West Bank**

In the second part of his first foreign trip, President Trump visited Jerusalem where he met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, followed by a visit to Bethlehem in West Bank to

meet Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. On this second and final day of his visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority, President Trump discussed at length the following three developments and concerns:

- Reaffirming US-Israeli alliance
- Desire for Israel-Palestine peace
- Destroy ISIS
- Confronting Iran and its regional expansionism

During his visit to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, Trump articulated his desire for peace between the Israelis and Palestinians. He said, “I heard it’s one of the toughest deals of all, but I have a feeling we will get there eventually, I hope.”<sup>16</sup> Reaffirming the “unbreakable bond of friendship between Israel and the United States,” Trump said,

But we are more than friends. We are great allies. We have so many opportunities in front of us. But we must seize them together. We must take advantage of the situation... That includes advancing prosperity, defeating the evils of terrorism, and facing the threat of an Iranian regime that is threatening the region and causing so much violence and suffering.<sup>17</sup>

Addressing the audience at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem on the same day, Trump stressed on establishing an “unshakable” bond between US and Israel and commented on Iran’s threatening role in the region. Trump assured Israel, “I make this promise to you: my administration will always stand with Israel...And Iran’s leaders routinely call for Israel’s destruction... “Not with Donald J. Trump, believe me.”<sup>18</sup> While upholding “shared concerns” of Arabs and Israelis regarding Tehran building a nuclear capability, President Trump indicated that this would help unite Israel and Palestine. Demanding that Tehran ceases its military and financial backing of “terrorists and militias”, Trump placated growing concerns in Tel Aviv regarding the Obama-era Iran nuclear deal by telling the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu on May 23, that “Iran will never have nuclear weapons.”<sup>19</sup>

Later on the same day, Trump met President of the Palestinian Authority Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem, West Bank. Here again he pledged “to do everything” to achieve peace between Israelis and Palestinians. During a press conference at Abbas’s presidential palace, Trump said, “Peace is a choice we must make each day, and the United States is here to help make that dream possible for young Jewish, Christians and Muslim children all across the region.”<sup>20</sup> Talking in the same breadth and assuring Trump of Palestinian cooperation in attaining peace, President Abbas stressed that Palestine’s conflict with Israel is not of a religious nature but one of occupation and settlements. Asserting that “the conflict is not between religions,”<sup>21</sup> Abbas said that the Palestinians “are committed to working with you to reach a historic peace deal between us and Israel.” He reaffirmed his commitment to work with the US and the Israelis so that “the children of Palestine and Israel can enjoy a safe, stable, and prosperous future,” based on the “Palestinian people’s attainment of their freedom and independence” that is the key. Referring to

such a deal as “an amazing accomplishment”, Trump said, “If Israeli and the Palestinians can make peace, it will begin a process of peace all throughout the Middle East.”<sup>22</sup>

The visit to Jerusalem and Bethlehem were marked by commitment and reaffirmations on all sides towards the attainment of peace between Israel and Palestine that Trump had once called an “ultimate deal.”<sup>23</sup> However, the question remains, can Trump really make the “ultimate deal” happen? What will be the implications of such a deal, if made? How will President Trump navigate through the sectarian faultlines in West Asia?

The articulation of an anti-Iran sentiment dominated Trump’s visits, from Riyadh to Jerusalem. Taking it forward to Jerusalem on May 22, 2017, Trump reasserted the “threat posed by the Iranian regime.” Reiterating his thoughts on Iran’s growing influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Iraq, Trump, during his visit to Jerusalem, decried Iranian political overtures to Israeli President Reuven Rivlin. Stressing the threats emanating from Iran, Trump talked about the shared concern of many Arab states that are coming closer to Israel. To President Rivlin, Trump said, “What’s happened with Iran has brought many of the parts of the Middle East toward Israel.”<sup>24</sup>

Apart from this, Trump’s élan to achieve “the ultimate [Israel-Palestine] deal” was noteworthy, however, with no concrete measures identified. In terms of approach and course of action towards the peace-process, there appears ambiguity in President Trump’s assertion and commitment with nothing clearly spelt out. In fact, since assuming office, Trump has been unclear about his plans on the future of an Israel-Palestine solution. A month after taking oath of office, Trump during a joint press conference with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on February 15, 2017, had said, “I am looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like... I can live with either one.”<sup>25</sup> Continuing with his ambiguity over the issue, President Trump still seems uncertain where he stands on the two-state versus one state solution.

However, despite the ambivalence, Trump made it clear that he wants a deal, asserting, “I intend to do everything I can” to broker Palestine peace deal. The lack of clarity by President Trump could be a matter of conscious choice, leaving it the way it is at this early stage of his Presidency. He clearly refused to pick any side. While the visit did not have much substance in terms of future course of action on the issue, it was useful in diplomatically reaching out to the two conflict-ridden sides, which was evident from his empathetic tone and moderate narrative.

Moreover, if we raise our lenses beyond the prism of Israel-Palestine conflict we see that the sectarian cauldron in West Asia that is brimming with instability, chaos and violence has a devastating potential in the region in a post-Palestinian peace process scenario. It is politically naive to say that Israel-Palestine peace settlement can bring peace throughout the West Asian region. One example of this is the ongoing war in Yemen, where Saudi Arabia supported the Government of President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi against an alliance of Houthi Shiite rebels, backed and supported by Iran. Three years into the war in Yemen and with no endgame to the war, it becomes increasingly clear that power rivalry - the quest for regional dominance - coupled with sectarian strife between Saudi Arabia and her nemesis Iran defines the politics of the West

Asian region that is rife with a rivalry of narratives for hegemony in the region between Riyadh and Tehran. In fact, President Trump's first two visits to Riyadh and Jerusalem were full with political overtones and partisan approach, which pose a bigger challenge in addressing the regional crisis in West Asia.

## **Conclusion**

The major themes that dominated President Trump's visit to Riyadh and Jerusalem were political and strategic – first to confront Iran and second to combat extremism, specifically ISIS. Both these themes, identified as common areas of cooperation and shared concerns, were iterated and reiterated by President Trump in Riyadh on May 20-21 as well as in Israel on May 22-23.

The answer to Trump's diplomatic choice to visit Riyadh lies in the fast changing politics of the West Asian region where President Trump is seen pursuing and supporting a possible Saudi-Israeli alliance aimed at countering and preventing Iranian attempts at expanding its regional influence. On the other hand, the aim of such a visit can also be understood as an act of persuasion where President Trump, while extending support to Israel along with the Muslim Arab countries, is seen telling the Israelis and the Americans that much like the Israeli leadership, the Arab counterparts are also an important strategic defense asset in West Asia.

The developments, including the statements made by the leaders in these four days of President Trump's visit to Riyadh and Jerusalem, proposing to build an Axis against Iran, bear political implications. By emphasising the threat of Iran, President Trump may have built the momentum for a strategic alliance but it must be realised that in drawing an American-Gulf-Israeli alliance to combat Islamic extremism, the concerned powers must take Iran on board for a constructive outcome. The approach of isolating Iran, regionally and internationally, if accomplished, is a serious miscalculation, which will hurt the West Asian region for decades to come.

In a visible divergence from the strident anti-Islamic rhetoric that was an essential element of his election campaigns, he pledged not to “lecture” or “tell other people how to live ... or how to worship”. Incidentally, in the meetings and Summits, the tone and tenor of Trump's speeches was friendly at one level and antagonistic at another. While the first was to do with the host countries, the latter was directed towards Iran, emphasising on isolating Tehran in regional and global politics. In giving a decisive call for “zero tolerance for terrorism and murder of civilians”, President Trump antagonised Iran, downplaying the important role played by Iran in the future of West Asia. Given this bias, tilted towards Saudi Arabia and Israel, it is important to ask if such a divisive approach in international politics – of placating one and isolating the other – will deliver the desired results of peace and stability in the region.

Relying on the strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia, Trump denies the relationship that the Kingdom shares with the clergy that preaches and proselytises Wahhabism – the ultra radical form of Islam which has been a source of inspiration for terrorist outfits, including ISIS and al

Qaeda. This kind of wilful ignorance and denial has a price, that is, a compromise with the larger objective of eradicating Islamist extremism. In its global war on terror, United States has been warming up to one and warring with another, building a Cold-War style policy and dividing the region into two major blocs – the Sunni Saudi and the Shia Iran – with US supporting and backing the former as against the latter. It is crucial to learn that a selective and biased approach in dealing with terrorism is a Sisyphian exercise.

Without a holistic approach that includes economics, politics, religion and diplomacy, the fight against extremism is half won. Any tilted or biased approach, like the one displayed by President Trump in his visit to Riyadh and Jerusalem, will superficially address the problem. Undeniably, foreign policy needs a more balanced approach towards all players and pragmatic politics in order to address the security challenges faced by the nation-states.

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Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Prior to Donald Trump's visit, US National Security Advisor H R McMaster told this to reporters at the White House on May 16, 2017. Donald Trump's Saudi visit: Fighting radical Islam on agenda, *Indian Express*, May 17, 2017, <http://indianexpress.com/article/world/donald-trumps-saudi-visit-fighting-radical-islam-on-agenda-4659735/>, accessed on May 23, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, Saudi Arabia: Background and U.S. Relations, *Congressional Research Service*, June 6, 2017, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL33533.pdf>, accessed on June 14, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Press Information, President Trump's historic Saudi visit yields deals worth more than \$350 billion, creates 250,000 jobs, May 21, 2017, *Riyadh Summit, 2017*, <https://secureservices.riyadhsummit2017.org/UploadedImages/636310076128202878.pdf>, p. 1, accessed on June 6, 2017

<sup>4</sup> Press Information, Op Cit, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Joint Strategic Vision Declaration for United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Riyadh Summit, 2017*, May 20, 2017, <https://secureservices.riyadhsummit2017.org/UploadedImages/636309364411477597.pdf>, accessed on June 6, 2017

<sup>6</sup> Saudi-US CEO Forum, New defense cooperation program agreed at Saudi-U.S. CEO Forum, May 20, 2017, *The Riyadh Summit, 2017*, <https://secureservices.riyadhsummit2017.org/UploadedImages/636308873555617851.pdf>, accessed on June 8, 2017

<sup>7</sup> Supporting Saudi Arabia's Defense Needs, Fact Sheets, Office of the Spokesperson, *US Department of State*, May 20, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2017/05/270999.htm>, accessed on May 25, 2017

<sup>8</sup> State Department Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, *Fact Sheet: U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia*, February 2, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/3584.htm>, accessed on June 12, 2017

<sup>9</sup> Country Reports on Terrorism 2015, Chapter 2-Country Reports, *Bureau of Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism*, [http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/p\\_may\\_2016/p\\_sr\\_Terrorism\\_Report\\_2015\\_full\\_report.pdf](http://photos.state.gov/libraries/korea/49271/p_may_2016/p_sr_Terrorism_Report_2015_full_report.pdf) , p. 213, accessed on June 12, 2017

<sup>10</sup> The US-GCC Strategic Cooperation Forum was created as a medium to advance coordination on multilateral challenges and issues concerning Washington and its Gulf allies. The inaugural Ministerial session of the Forum was convened March 30, 2012 in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia with the then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton representing the US and Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal representing the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since then there have been five Ministerial sessions with the last organised on September 30, 2015 in New York. In the past, the SCF has served as an important forum to strengthen strategic cooperation and advance shared priorities and interests on political, security, economic, and military issues. (See, GCC-US Strategic Cooperation Forum, Saudi-US Relations Information Service (SURIS), <http://susris.com/glossary/us-gcc-strategic-cooperation-forum/> , accessed on June 6, 2017)

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<sup>12</sup> Obama administration arms sales offers to Saudi top \$115 billion: report, *Reuters*, September 7, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-saudi-security-idUSKCN11D2JQ>, accessed on May 26, 2017

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