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Donald Trump's Visit to the Middle East: Pilgrimage for Peace or Invitation to Instability?

United States (US) President Donald Trump has just concluded his first trip overseas. He visited the region from which the three major Abrahamic faiths emanated: Christianity, Islam and Judaism. Thereafter, he travelled to Brussels and Sicily for the summits of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Group of Seven industrialised countries. This paper focuses on the first leg of this tour. It was a learning process that may moderate his current style in terms of smoothening its sharp edges.

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Most Americans want their president to inspire respect. This is in line with their astonishing achievements in many and varied fields over the past couple of centuries. However, they have a leader now who evokes curiosity. More importantly, he oftentimes causes consternation. This is in line with the burgeoning international perception that the United States (US) is in the process of an inexorable decline. Will the present global generation witness the US falling apart in terms of power and influence just as the previous generation had seen the Soviet Union, once a superpower, collapse? Not so fast, a rational mind would perhaps conclude – America's technological advances are too great to allow that to happen easily. However, certain

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developments in its seat of power, the White House, and in its inner and intimate circles of authority, may, if not reversed, prove the rational mind wrong. Many may see what is happening on the American political stage as a comedy being enacted, more as a source of entertainment than enlightenment. Some observers take a more sombre view of the unfolding situation as a later-day Greek tragedy. Meantime the audience, the world, has little option but to wait and see.

These strands of speculation are best illustrated by Trump's first foreign tour. His initial remarks on the campaign trail, and even in the early days of his presidency, almost bordered on 'Islamophobia'. One of his former aides, now removed from the scene, Michael Flynn, described 'Islamism' as a "vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people" (implying that every Muslim is affected) that has to be "excised".² After assuming office, Trump himself issued executive orders banning immigration from a number of "Muslim majority countries", now sagaciously restrained by America's legal system, upon which the ultimate responsibility to restrain the executive along a prudent and rational path may devolve. However, several Muslim rulers, mainly the wealthy Gulf potentates, seemed to come to a simple conclusion. It is that a combination of gold, glamour, glitz and gild could do more to persuade the leader of the free world than earfuls of logic and reason. They extended an invitation to the US President to a summit of Muslim leaders promising a grand welcome. The prospect of such a reception to Trump was most pleasing! Trump decided to accept and, indeed, convert this trip into a "grand tour" of the holy places of the Abrahamic faiths (Islam, Judaism and Christianity), adding Jerusalem and Vatican to the itinerary. His cohorts appeared to project a messianic vision of bringing peace to the troubled land of the Middle East.

For good measure, King Salman of Saudi Arabia invited all Muslim heads of government to this 'Arab-Islamic-American' conclave. As the 'keeper of the two holy shrines', the Saudi monarch occupies a special status in the Islamic world. Most of the invitees saw their participation in this conclave as little short of a Hobson's choice. In fact, these leaders appeared to do little in terms of active participation, and they did not sign on to much. Given the nature of their domestic politics, many participants prefer to remain non-committal to the outcome of the talks. Arguably, the US-Saudi objective, applicable to several Gulf States, was the

² Please see Andrew Kaczynski, *Micheal Flynn in August: Islamism a "vicious cancer" in body of all Muslims that "has to be excised"*, CNN, 22 November 2017.

mustering of Sunni forces against Shia Iran. Ironically, Iran had just then re-elected its moderate President, Hassan Rouhani, who is publicly committed to implementing the constrictive nuclear deal with the United States. The kings, emirs and the sheikhs of the Gulf, in particular the Saudis, succeeded in integrating American power to their plans. This came in exchange for the double-red carpet and lavish meals comprising menus that would bring blushes to the cheeks of Croesus, the richest of monarchs, of the classical times. A seemingly joyous US President joined the traditional sword dance laid on by the hosts; the irony was that America had sold deadly ordnance to Arab states.

Trump's next stop was Israel, which is only a hop, step and jump away. However, the ambience must have appeared very different and extremely western. In Jerusalem, he said he had just come from "the Middle East." It was a remarkable Freudian slip (though he quickly managed to correct himself). This was because many Americans do see the Israelis to be, so unlike the Arabs, belonging to a different region. Trump also crossed over to the 'Occupied Territories' for a session with the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas. He sought to project himself as a votary of peace. His remarks contained much rhetoric and many platitudes, and were bereft of practical plans. The absence of substance can be explained away by the fact that, at this stage, no one expected the US President to lay down a peace proposal. He left Jerusalem, convinced perhaps that there was no easy fix to the Palestinian issue and that the proverbial Gordian Knot that could not be easily and impatiently cut. The US President was exposed to the realist Talmudic dictum that the existence of a problem does not necessarily mean that there is a solution!

From the Middle East, Trump travelled to the Vatican to meet Pope Francis. The Pope, apart from being the Head of State of the Holy See, is also the spiritual leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics. The two have sparred in the past. On Trump's plan to build a wall to prevent the Mexican migrants from entering the US, the Pope's view was it was "not Christian". According to the Pope, "concern for the poor" was at the "core of the (Christian) faith", as indeed the "(the concern) for those who like Lazarus, stand before our door."³ These comments had severely tested Trump's patience. He had called them "disgraceful". The Pope also disfavoured Trump's negative position on climate change. It was an issue that was the subject

³ For the heated exchange between the Pope and the President, please see: "Donald Trump would be honored to meet Pope Francis on Italy trip, says White House", Telegraph, 20 April 2017.

of a papal encyclical not so long ago. Indeed, he presented a copy to his visitor. Of course, Trump had gone to the Vatican not to build walls but merely to mend fences. However, that did not work very well. The Vatican squeezed in Trump's visit between an early breakfast and the Pope's morning mass. The event lasted barely half an hour. As if in a premonition of how mournful the outcome was going to be, the ladies in the Trump delegation were clad in extremely severe black attire, going well beyond what the current protocol requires. The result was that the interaction of the two sides appeared much more sombre than it perhaps really was. In an effort at diplomatic nicety, Trump did say that his meeting with the Pope was an "honour". However, his indiscriminate use of this expression earlier robbed it of much of its meaning on this occasion. Earlier, he had used a similar adjective to describe any future meeting with Kim Jong Un of North Korea, which no one believed was truly meant. The President's Abrahamic journey concluded with the trip to the Vatican. From there, he continued his travels to advance the more conventional pursuits that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Group of Seven summits entail.

The trip happily passed off without much negative impact. Many feared Trump would commit too many gaffes but happily, such apprehensions did not come to pass. In any case, the current political analyses appear to have widened the margin of tolerance for Trump's *faux pas*. It was also a success in terms of the perceivable American goal of strengthening ties with the Saudis. This was to happen, as some would allege, at the expense of American values, which they believed were sacrificed at the altar of realpolitik. The massive sale of weaponry, worth US\$110 billion (S\$152 billion), by the US to Saudi Arabia is a case in point.⁴ The threat of terrorism from the Islamic State (ISIS) was much emphasised. As was the need for an active coalition in Yemen. However, very soon, the events in Manchester in the United Kingdom (UK) and Mindanao in the Philippines showed that such emphases did not amount to much in facing the real-world challenges. The strategic aim of a grand alliance of Arabs and Sunnis against Iran and the Shias was also not altogether achieved for the following reasons.

First, while the US sees Saudi Arabia as a clear leader of the Arab Gulf, this becomes less clear if one analyses the intra-mural Gulf politics. Qatar, small but wealthy, and often seen by Riyadh as an '*enfant terrible*' would be a subtle dissenter. Since long, it has had a tricky relationship with Saudi Arabia. It has often challenged Saudi Arabia's regional pre-eminence. It hosts a US

⁴ US and Saudi Arabia sign arms deals worth almost US\$110 bln, Al Jazeera, 20 May 2017.

base and often punches above its weight in global politics because of its vast resources in cash and kind. Under former Prime Minister Sheikh Hamad bin Jassem bin Jaber al-Thani, a brilliant diplomatic strategist often compared to Metternich, it had sought a conciliatory relationship with Iran in its perceived national self-interest. In fact, as soon as the red carpets laid out for Trump in Riyadh were rolled back, Iran's Rouhani called the Qatari Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad bin Khalifa, for a friendly conversation. Even Bahrain, whose ruling family would be grateful to the Saudis for keeping it in power, would be chary of needlessly offending its sizeable Shia population.

Second, the principal non-Arab participants in the gathering – Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia and Indonesia – who comprise a significant proportion of Muslim populations, and are democracies, have governments that face electoral tests. While they respect the Saudi system as protecting some core Islamic institutions, as their people would want them to, they are also wary of the extremist Wahabi/Salafi ideology that the clerics of that Kingdom often espouse (which is widely seen in these parts as a greater threat than Iranian Shiasm). Some, in particular Pakistan, have a considerable Shia population. Consequently, and logically, these states would not like to be viewed as helping to widen the Shia-Sunni cleavage. Bangladesh, overwhelmingly Muslim, tends to be democratic, syncretic and tolerant. Bangladeshis would prefer their leaders to take part in religious rites in Saudi Arabia instead of attending substantive political conclaves that could be potentially divisive in Bangladesh itself. This is because in the basically syncretic form of Islam practiced in Bangladesh, influenced by Sufistic tradition of tolerance, taking sides in a global Shia-Sunni divide would be problematic. In Malaysia, there is a government, which while leaning towards religious parties for electoral support, is, at the same time, battling 'Islamist extremism'. In Indonesia, the state is having to manage the 'Islamic predilections' of many in the country with circumspection, as is evident in its very cautious handling of the case of the former Jakarta Governor, a Christian who has been sent to jail for blasphemy, following a case that has aroused considerable controversy. None of these countries want additional domestic problems that could flow from agreeing to decisions in Arabia that have little to do with their own interests.

This trip was a learning experience for President Trump. While its impact on him is not altogether evident, it is undeniable that Saudi Arabia, Israel and the Vatican will have exposed him to leadership styles that might help him in moderating some of his earlier views. Trump's journey, along the spiritual trail in the Middle East, might also help him see certain cultural

commonalities in the faiths and beliefs of Islam, Judaism and Catholicism. This, in turn, could jettison the ‘foreignness’ of any of these religions, in particular, Islam, from his mind. His early executive actions such as the “Muslim travel ban” reflected a modicum of *a priori* ideas that he will perhaps have the occasion to reflect upon more deeply now. However, there are some other lessons to be learnt from the Mediterranean parts, from the ideas and ideals that found efflorescence there and that fed the wisdom of centuries, laying the foundation of global civilization. The consequence that the Riyadh summit produced immediately in the Gulf should be an eye-opener to Trump, as to how complicated politics of the region can be. Immediately after the trip, the fissures between Gulf countries surfaced. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt severed all diplomatic ties with Qatar over differences on issues of terrorism.⁵ It is quite likely that team Trump would be caught by surprise by such developments that they would have least expected, as an outcome, however remote, of a visit that they had been taunting as a success.

Classical philosophers, thinkers and writers from this region were among those who made enormous contributions towards improving the human minds and enhancing man’s intellectual grasp. Among them was Herodotus who wrote and taught history, emphasising, not so much the details – he was known to be garrulous and happy to mix facts with fiction – but the general lesson to be drawn from general trends in historical evolution. He, and some others of his ilk, drama-writer Aeschyles and chronicler Thucydides, for instance, pointed to the great danger of ‘*Hubris*’. It refers to ‘extreme arrogance’ flowing from the possession of great power. It is often directed against the innocent. Many a time, it is exacerbated by a sense of ‘moral blindness’ on the part of the wielders of such power. This the ancients called *Ate*. In Greek tragedies, which to the ancients were great learning experience, in such situations divine powers at times showed warnings or signs of displeasure. This point in the unfolding of the drama is known as *Phthonis*. If the portents went unheeded the consequence would be *Nemesis*, in the form of catastrophe.

The founding fathers of America placed great store by the lessons of classical Greek history. The Federalist Papers are filled with such references. “I have but one lamp by which my feet are guided”, the mighty Patrick Henry had said, “and that is the lamp of experience. I know of

⁵ Saudi Arabia, UAE, Egypt and Bahrain break diplomatic ties with Qatar over “terrorism”, Guardian, 5 June 2017.

no way of judging of the future but by the past.” Those aspiring to put “America first”, like Trump, cannot afford to ignore the wisdom of the “first Americans”!⁶

The US-UK decision to invade Iraq in 2003 is often seen as an act of *Hubris* or great-power ‘arrogance’. This is because the principal reason for it, the allegation that Iraq possessed ‘weapons of mass destruction’ was proved to have been entirely erroneous. The refusal to accept the fact of the untold sufferings it unleashed, and the enormous complexities and complications it created in the already turmoil-ridden Middle East, turning a Nelson’s eye to these, are akin to *Ate* or ‘moral blindness’. This is all the more important because, in many of the cultures upon whom death and destruction were inflicted, revenge is a significant component of their value-systems. Warning signs of extremism, in the form of Al Qaeda and ISIS resemble the stage of *Phthonis* or ‘divine signs of displeasure’. In all fairness, Trump cannot be held responsible for what he has inherited. It could be argued, with a modicum of truth, that Trump cannot be held responsible for the problems he has inherited from Republicans such as President George W Bush and his “neo-con” advisers who took the US into some needless wars overseas. However, the office he holds, by far the most powerful in the world, entails responsibility to manage the world. For all the talk of its decline, America is still the major global protagonist. It is the only ‘hyper-power’. Trump cannot afford the luxury of a slow-learning process or he will have the face of *Nemesis* stare at him. He cannot afford to make serious mistakes. In a world bristling with nuclear weaponry, a tour of the Biblical lands should have surely filled him with the fear of the ultimate calamity, the *Armageddon*. There is a need to reflect on how this catastrophe can be avoided.

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⁶ Patrick Henry made this speech at St. John’s Church, in Richmond, Virginia, on 23rd March 1775, whose famous concluding words were: “Give me liberty or give me death!”. Please see Worth, William, *Sketches of the life and character of Patrick Henry*, (Philadelphia), 1836, as reproduced in Lewis Copeland and Lawrence W Lamm (eds.), “The world’s great speeches”, New York, 1973.