

Reversing 1979: Gulf Reforms and South Asia

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Summary

Recent reforms in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula have drawn worldwide interest. But South Asia has devoted little attention to the internal developments in the Peninsula that could have long term implications for the region. Given the historic dynamics between the subcontinent and the Arabian Peninsula, this paper suggests that the potential evolution of the Arabian Peninsula towards political and religious moderation could help counter the many negative trends in South Asia. The paper reviews the past negative impact of the Arabian Peninsula's developments on South Asia since the tumultuous events of 1979 and looks at the new promise of its reversal and its potential consequences for South Asia.

Introduction

Through the millennia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian subcontinent have had a deep and lasting impact on each other due to their proximity—geographic and civilizational. The Subcontinent's engagement with the Gulf and the Middle-East intensified in the imperial era. Indian troops, political agents, and traders brought the Gulf and parts of the Middle East into the orbit of the Raj. Fending off the European rivals from making advances to India through the Middle East and the Gulf—the so-called Great Game—was a major preoccupation of Great Britain and the Raj in the 19th and early 20th centuries. The armies of undivided India also played a critical role in the Middle East during the First and Second World War. After independence and partition of the Subcontinent, India withdrew from a security role in the region in the name of non-alignment and its emphasis on economic self-reliance began to constrain India's commercial engagement with the region. India's steady economic growth, its growing demand for oil and its export of manpower restored the mutual economic stakes between the Gulf and India in the Middle-East. This applied to other South Asian states as well. Pakistan chose to build new political bonds in the region in the name of Islam and embark upon significant security cooperation with key Gulf nations.

A number of developments in 1979 began to transform the economic, political and security linkages between the two regions. On the economic front, the second oil shock began to rapidly expand the wealth of the Gulf nations. While the mounting cost of energy imports created huge economic challenges for the macroeconomic stability of South Asia, the surge in manpower exports and the resultant rapid expansion of hard currency remittances into India alleviated the problem to some extent. The structural consequence was the deeper

energy and economic interdependence between the Subcontinent and the Gulf. Our focus in this essay is, however, on the political and security dynamics between the two regions since 1979. Amidst a major destabilization of the regional order in 1979, the Gulf took a turn to puritanical Islam and leveraged religion for policy purposes, there was an inevitable effect on the Subcontinent. Today key countries in the Gulf, like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are talking about reversing the direction set in 1979. We look at the negative political consequences of 1979 for South Asia and the Subcontinent's stakes in the Gulf reforms.

Impact of 1979 on South Asia

The year 1979 was indeed a defining moment that transformed the Middle East and had powerful consequences for the whole world, especially the Indian Subcontinent. The first among the three pivotal events was the seizure of the grand mosque in Mecca by a group of zealots, who accused the Saudi royalty of abandoning Islam and selling its soul to the West. From then on, the House of Saud moved rapidly towards conservatism. To counter the extremist flank from the right, it pandered to the clergy at home and extended support for Islamist forces abroad. This did not resolve the problem for the House of Saud. It turned parts of the conservative Sunni flank ever more hostile to the Saudi state. The second event was the Islamic revolution in Iran that overthrew Shah Reza Pahlavi in Tehran. Claiming to be the true guardian of Islam, Ayatollah Khomeini presented a big political threat to Saudi Arabia's leadership role in the Islamic world. The Saudi rivalry with the Islamic Republic of Iran for influence in the Islamic world, inevitably acquired a sectarian colour (Sunni versus Shia) as well as an ethnic dimension (Arab versus Persian). Containing the Iranian revolution became an important objective for the Gulf regimes as well as the West. The third event was the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan at the end of 1979. As the US-Russian detente of the 1970s collapsed, Washington stepped in to mobilise the regional forces against Soviet expansionism with the help of the Pakistan Army and the conservative forces in the Middle East. The Russian bear was successfully pushed out of Afghanistan a decade later, but radical political Islam had been legitimised.

If the Middle East paid a huge price for the turmoil generated by 1979, so did the Subcontinent. Before 1979, the Subcontinent was a very different place. It was never really short of big economic and political problems. Despite the bitter legacy of Partition—the division of the Subcontinent along religious lines - violent religious extremism was not one of those. This is an awful legacy from 1979. The conservative turn in the Gulf coincided with the rise of General Zia ul Haque in Pakistan, who ousted Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto in 1977 and executed him in 1979. Any prospect for international criticism and the isolation of General Zia evaporated, thanks to the developments of 1979, especially the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the rehabilitation of Pakistan as a 'frontline state'. Not only was Zia able to consolidate his position in Pakistan, but he also began to impose conservative Islam on Pakistan. Externally he embarked on promoting a jihad—through a variety of Islamist

groups-- in Afghanistan against Soviet occupation with the support of the United States and the conservative Arab states, including Saudi Arabia. As the Army-Mosque axis consolidated itself within Pakistan, it began to see the value of extremist religious groups as a broader instrument of national security policy in the Subcontinent. This in turn sharpened Pakistan's conflict with India and sharpened the internal conflicts in Bangladesh.

The post-1979 political and sectarian rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia had its consequences on the Subcontinent. As they deployed their new wealth to gain influence beyond borders, the large Islamic communities in South Asia became an important target. Generous funding for new mosques and madrassas saw the 'Arabisation' of the large South Asian Sunni population and bring greater militancy to the minority Shia population. The proxy battles between Saudi Arabia and Iran deepened the sectarian schism in South Asia.

The global mobilisation of the Muslims to fight the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan helped forge connections amongst radicalised Islamists and imparted organisational, mobilisation and recruitment mechanisms for "jihad" in the Subcontinent. The agenda was not limited to Afghanistan but focused on redressing the perceived grievances of Muslims around the world. There was a conscious effort to redeploy the jihadi forces that fought in Afghanistan to other theatres. For instance, once the Soviets withdrew, some of the Pakistani jihadi groups that fought the Soviets, most notably, Harkat-ul-Mujahideen and Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (HuJI), turned their focus towards Kashmir – worsening India-Pakistan relations and the security landscape of the region. Similarly, some Bangladeshi volunteers who were drawn to the Afghan "jihad" returned to form HuJI-Bangladesh. The group has been instrumental in expediting the formation of the other major Islamist militant groups in the country – many of whom have been inspired by and have connections to transnational terrorist groups, and participate in not only local, but also global militant Islamist movements.

Reversing 1979 in the Gulf

If 1979 had transformed the South Asian landscape of religion and politics, internal and regional, it has been widely presumed that this dynamic was irreversible. But recent developments in the Gulf point to the potential for reversing the negative consequences of 1979. The problem of 1979 and the new political commitment in parts of the Middle East was framed quite dramatically by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, also known as MbS. Addressing an investors conference in Riyadh in October 2017, MbS said: "We are returning to what we were before — a country of moderate Islam that is open to all religions and to the world. We will not spend the next 30 years of our lives dealing with

destructive ideas. We will destroy them today.”¹ Soon after MbS told the Guardian: “What happened in the last 30 years is not Saudi Arabia. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, people wanted to copy this model in different countries, one of them is Saudi Arabia. We didn’t know how to deal with it. And the problem spread all over the world. Now is the time to get rid of it.” He expanded on the theme to the New York Times in November 2017. MbS said Saudi Arabia was not trying to ‘reinterpret Islam’ but simply ‘restoring Islam to its origins — and “our biggest tools are the Prophet’s practices and [daily life in] Saudi Arabia before 1979.”²

Two critical developments in the 21st century—Al Qaeda’s attack on New York and Washington in September 2001 and the ‘Arab Spring’ of 2011--began to compel key countries of the Middle East to reconsider many of their policies and begin the quest for moderate Islam. The 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington unleashed the great war on terror that put considerable pressure on Arab nations to stop supporting extremist groups. Given the threat that these groups posed to their own survival, many governments like the one in Saudi Arabia went after them. The Arab Spring, however, brought home the reality that the threat was not just from the extremist groups, but also from the moderate ones, like the Muslim Brotherhood, that were calling for systemic change in the Gulf. It is this pressure that nudged regimes like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to move towards more substantive reforms that included the emphasis on ‘moderate Islam’.

In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousted the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013 and began to emphasise the need for ‘moderate Islam’. Others in the region, like the UAE, picked up the argument. As the UAE Ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, put it at the end of 2015: ‘We are testing a new vision for the region — an alternative, future-oriented ideology. It is a path guided by the true tenets of Islam: respect, inclusion, and peace. It empowers women, embraces diversity, encourages innovation, and welcomes global engagement.’³ The UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah had highlighted how the UAE's partnerships with regional and international partners have put in place mechanisms “which remind youths of shared human values and counter the rhetoric of the terrorists” and “expose extremist and terrorist rhetoric and defeat it intellectually, and provide an alternative narrative based on the principle of peaceful coexistence and tolerance”.⁴ These

¹ Joseph Hincks, “The Saudi Crown Prince Says the Kingdom Will Soon Return to a ‘Moderate Islam’”, October 25, 2017, <http://time.com/4996355/saudi-arabia-crown-prince-moderate-islam/>

² Martin Chulov, “I will return Saudi Arabia to moderate Islam, says Crown Prince”, *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>; Thomas L. Friedman, “Saudi Arabia’s Arab Spring, at Last”, *New York Times*, November 23, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/23/opinion/saudi-prince-mbs-arab-spring.html>

³ Yousef Al Otaiba, “A Vision for a Moderate, Modern Muslim World”, December 2, 2015, *Foreign Policy*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2015/12/02/a-vision-for-a-moderate-modern-muslim-world-uae-abu-dhabi-isis/>

⁴ “Statement by His Highness Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of the United Arab Emirates before The General Debate of the 72nd session of the

initiatives include the formation the Muslim Council of Elders, the Global Forum for Prompting Peace in Muslim Societies, the Sawab Centre and Hedayah, among others. At the end of 2018, Abu Dhabi hosted Pope Francis where he was the first pontiff to celebrate Mass in the Arabian Peninsula. A new church is to be built in Abu Dhabi in honour of this landmark visit in celebration of interfaith relations.

The reform agenda of MbS comes in the wake of this emerging trend. MbS is trying to liberalise its conservative society, reforming the foundation of the modern Saudi state — an alliance between the House of Saud and Wahhabi clerics. The Prince's Vision 2030 states that he would like to promote a strand of Islam that is compatible with the rest of the world. He has since lifted a ban on female drivers, permitted various forms of entertainment such as cinema, theatre and music, and curtailed the powers of the religious police.⁵ Saudi Arabia held its "first" Coptic Mass last year at a private home in Riyadh and Prince Salman met with a delegation of the American evangelicals in Riyadh.

Prospects for positive influence on South Asia

If 1979 saw Saudi Arabia and UAE promote forces of extremism in the Subcontinent, they were beginning to send the opposite signal in the last few years. During his visit to India in 2018, Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, UAE's Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, made a surprising stop at the Akshardham temple in Delhi. The objective was to signal the new thinking on tolerance and peaceful co-existence of religions. Traditionally the Gulf countries have been associated, in the Indian public mind, with an Islam that was aloof and self-contained. Earlier, when the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited UAE in 2015, Abu Dhabi announced the construction of a Hindu temple on its soil to be opened by 2020. Both UAE and Saudi Arabia have been supportive of India's efforts to counter terrorism. The UAE's invitation to the Indian Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj to address a gathering of the foreign ministers of the OIC in early 2019, marked a big shift towards limiting the Islamic dimension that complicated Delhi's engagement with the Arab kingdoms in the past. These signs provide an important opportunity for the South Asian political classes as they struggle to cope with deepening religious polarisation. The reforms in the Gulf should also move the politics of faith in the Subcontinent towards moderation, harmony and political modernisation.

Sceptics will caution against too much hope, for a strong resistance to the new agenda of "liberal Islam" is inevitable. Turkey and Qatar, for example, challenge the notion of moderate Islam being promoted by Egypt, UAE and Saudi Arabia. Many in the Muslim world

United Nations General Assembly", Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations New York, September 22, 2017, https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/ae_en.pdf

⁵ Ben Hubbard, "Saudi Prince, Asserting Power, Brings Clerics to Heel", *New York Times*, November 5, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/05/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-wahhabism-salafism-mohammed-bin-salman.html>

might see the new agenda as part of the Western effort to weaken Islam. Some would want to paint the rulers of these countries as anti-Islam. It is by no means clear if the reform effort can succeed in places like Saudi Arabia and Egypt and will encourage others to emulate. Some would argue that even if the reforms in Arabia make some progress, their impact on the Subcontinent will be limited since the negative trends in South Asia have taken firm root. Yet, any effort to reverse 1979 must be welcomed whole-heartedly in the Subcontinent as it may have a genuine and positive impact, not just on Muslims in South Asia but also on other religious communities and ease the current tensions between them.

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