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James M. Dorsey



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Transition in the Middle East: Transition to What?

James M. Dorsey*

Abstract

The Middle East and North Africa are embroiled in multiple transitions, involving social, economic and political change at home, and struggles for power across the region dominated by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The often volatile and violent transitions amount to battles for survival of autocratic regimes and confrontations between either counterrevolutionary or autocratic forces, who oppose political change and see limited and controlled reform as a survival strategy, and forces seeking fundamental change of economic and political systems. The battles are overlaid by great power competition in a world in which the balance between the United States, China and Russia is in flux and regional powers like Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Israel are flexing their muscles. While the name of the game is beyond doubt transition, the question remains: transition to what?

To conceptualise the upheaval in the Middle East and North Africa is to understand that the region is enmeshed in a lengthy period of transition. Complicating the transition is the fact, that it involves multiple inter-linking sub-plots and proxy wars, as well as struggles between external powers, such as the United States and Russia (Goldenberg and Smith, 2017). Historically, periods of political transition last on average, anywhere between a decade and half a century (Moon, 2005). If that is the yardstick, then the Middle East is into the eighth year of transition and still at the beginning. Moreover, if transition is the name of the game, the question is a transition to what?

*Dr. James M. Dorsey is a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, co-director of the University of Würzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and co-host of the New Books in Middle Eastern Studies podcast. James is the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog, a book with the same title, Essays on Sports and Politics in the Middle East and North Africa, and the forthcoming China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom, among others.

Dominating the answer is the determination of Arab autocrats to stymie popular revolts at whatever cost and maintain the status quo, to the degree possible. The autocratic effort has schematically two aspects: a global Saudi campaign to contain the fallout of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran (Dorsey, 2016); and a broader Arab autocratic struggle to push, in the wake of the 2011 popular Arab revolts that toppled leaders of four countries and sparked protests in many more, for a Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led regional order based on an upgraded 21st century version of autocracy designed to fortify absolute rule (Dorsey, 2013a).

At the core of both, is the existential battle for regional hegemony between Saudi Arabia and Iran as one of several key drivers of what, post-2011, has evolved into an Arab counter-revolution that is as much about the Islamic republic as it is about opposition to concepts of popular sovereignty, transparent and accountable rule--if not democratisation, expressions of political Islam, and definitions of universal human rights. To achieve that, autocrats have embraced economic reforms accompanied by the inevitable social changes that would allow them to efficiently deliver public goods and services. It is an approach that rejects basic freedoms and political rights, and therefore is unlikely to produce more open and inclusive political systems in which all segments of society have a stake, and involves the unilateral rewriting of social contracts.

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An Existential Battle

Saudi Arabia has for the past four decades been locked in a global battle with Iran for dominance in the Muslim world. For the Al Sauds, the kingdom's ruling family, the struggle with the Islamic republic is existential. Iran not only represents an alternative form of Islamic rule that recognises some degree of popular sovereignty, but one that was established by a popular revolt that toppled the monarchy and an icon of US power. It also has assets the kingdom either lacks, or are less of an advantage compared to those of Iran. They are assets that are key to sustaining regional hegemony: a

large, highly educated population; a large domestic market; an industrial base; a battle-hardened military; geography; and a deep-seated identity grounded in a history of empire.

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry thrives on mutual zero-sum perceptions bolstered by the new found assertiveness of the conservative Gulf states and the heightened sense of encirclement in Iran. Conscious of its inherent weaknesses, Saudi concerns were further reinforced by the Islamic Republic's often bellicose rhetoric and the belief that it is bent on exporting its revolution (Ram, 1996). The kingdom sees the rising Iranian influence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as evidence of the Islamic Republic's regional hegemonic ambitions.

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Viewed from Tehran, the Middle East looks very different. Iran sees the spread of its influence as part of a forward defence policy that is designed to enable it to break out of its prolonged isolation and to end the sanctions that go back to the 1979 toppling of the Shah. Despite its strategic advantages, it sees a region dominated by forces that are intrinsically hostile to it and possess superior military capabilities. It is a perception that is rooted in the eight-year-long war in the 1980s, when the West and a majority of Arab states backed the Iraqi invasion of Iran. In response, Iran has sought to counter this encirclement by

achieving self-sufficiency in asymmetric military capabilities and increasing its strategic depth. Iran's ballistic missile programme, its network of proxies, and its alliance with Syria all serve to bolster that effort (International Crisis Group, 2018).

Saudi Arabia and Iran's opposing perceptions threaten to become self-fulfilling prophecies. Their epic battle is being fought not only on the international and Middle Eastern stage, but domestically in Muslim and non-Muslim nations that span the globe. Saudi Arabia's soft power thrust, the

single largest public diplomacy campaign in history, aligned itself neatly with Muslim governments that opportunistically played politics with religion and Muslim communities that embraced Saudi-style Sunni ultra-conservatism, instead of feasible alternatives.

Pre-empting Greater Political Participation

The rivalry between the kingdom and the republic dominates the Middle East's geopolitics and overshadows the region's second transition that began with the 2011 popular Arab revolts. It continues to play out in the region's multiple wars and autocratic efforts to reform economies in a bid to garner popular support, by ensuring that the more efficient delivery of public services and goods squashes any thirst for greater political participation. If the first round of the revolts was the toppling of four presidents, the second, but by no means last, round is the autocratic counter-evolution. Tunisia may be teetering, but is the only revolt that was not defeated. Egypt has turned into a brutal dictatorship that makes the rule of toppled president Hosni Mubarak look benign (Hammer, 2017). Yemen and Libya are torn apart by war. Syria is war-ravaged. Bahrain is a powder keg waiting to explode. Elsewhere in Morocco (Abdennebi and Laessing, 2018), Algeria (Chikhi, 2018) and Sudan (Amin, 2018) protests that are demand- and sector-specific or regional have become par for the course.

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In other words, despite the talk of an Arab winter rather than an Arab spring, the revolts have not gone away. Discontent is simmering under the surface, much like it did before 2011, at times exploding on to the streets as it did in Iran in late 2017 and early 2018. To be sure, repression -- the name of the game in the Middle East and North Africa-- intimidated many who saw what happened in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Bahrain since 2011 and are reluctant to risk a similar fate. Nonetheless, one cannot discount black swans, or what one scholar and a veteran of the overthrow of Ferdinand

Marcos in the Philippines, terms moral shock, an unpredictable event that triggers a revolt like the 1986 killing of Philippine Senator Benigno Aquino Jr, (Gavilan, 2016) or the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the fruit and vegetable vendor, in late 2010 in Tunisia that sparked the Arab revolts (Abouzeid, 2011). Nevertheless, the problem with either concept is that it is only in hindsight that one realises whether it was a black swan or moment of moral shock.

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Middle Eastern leaders are not oblivious to these risks. Their solution is economic change and depending on the country, either social tightening as in Egypt (Michaelson, 2017) or social liberalisation, as in Saudi Arabia (Mckernan, 2017). The fact of the matter is that 2011 occurred because autocracies, with few exceptions, had failed to deliver public goods and services, a failure that involved enormous human cost, that most autocrats have yet to address with deeds rather than words.

Stymieing the Will of the People

The autocratic response to the 2011 Arab revolts was not one that was designed to tackle causes and address grievances. It was one driven by efforts to ensure regime survival and existential regional struggles in which the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Iran were key players. The response linked the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the threat posed by popular discontent to a third transition, that involved a change in the region's historical security reliance on a hegemon – initially the Ottomans, then the British and post-World War II, the United States. The United States remains the hegemon and is likely to maintain its position for years to come. However, it no longer projects the reliability it used to, and is facing forces such as Russia abetted by China, as well as regional players like Iran and Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who are willing to challenge it. It was US President Barak Obama who sparked doubts about the reliability of the US security umbrella (Maclean, 2017). He did so by embracing a pivot

towards Asia that, had it succeeded, would have diminished the importance of Middle East, in US national security (Cohen and Ward, 2013).

Obama's refusal to support Mubarak, as millions of Egyptians took to the streets in early 2011 to demand his removal after 30 years in office, sowed the seeds of doubt among Gulf leaders about his commitment to autocratic rule in the Middle East, as a pillar of stability (Roberts, 2015). Those doubts were reinforced by Obama's willingness to engage with political Islam and entertain a role for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and elsewhere in the region (Gulf New, 2014). What perhaps cemented autocratic Middle Eastern perceptions of Obama, as at best, a frenemy or wolf in sheep's clothing, was his willingness to engage rather than isolate Iran, with the conclusion of the 2015 international agreement that curbed the Islamic republic's nuclear programme (Schreck, 2016).

Obama spelt out his attitude towards Middle Eastern autocrats in 2002, during a rally in Chicago, when he opposed the then-President George W. Bush's plans to go to war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Still an Illinois senator, Obama said, "You want a fight, President Bush? Let's fight to make sure our so-called allies in the Middle East—the Saudis and the Egyptians—stop oppressing their people, and suppressing dissent, and tolerating corruption and inequality" (Goldberg, 2016). The Gulf leaders' worst fears turned to reality when Obama entered the White House in 2008. Obama made it clear that, unlike Middle Eastern leaders, he did not see the Saudi-Iranian rivalry as a zero-sum game and believed that the rivals would have to co-exist in the region, in what would amount to a cold peace. In one of the several lengthy interviews published in 2016 Obama told Jeffrey Goldberg that it was:

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An approach that said to our friends ‘You are right, Iran is the source of all problems, and we will support you in dealing with Iran’ would essentially mean that as these sectarian conflicts continue to rage and our Gulf partners, our traditional friends, do not have the ability to put out the flames on their own or decisively win on their own, and would mean that we have to start coming in and using our military power to settle scores. And that would be in the interest neither of the United States nor of the Middle East (Ibid) .

It was a message that, by then, had been heard loud and clear in Cairo, as well as the capitals in the Gulf. Together with the revolts of 2011, it had no greater impact than on two men with diagonally opposed concepts of regional security, the United Arab Emirates’ Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and the then Qatari emir, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. In many ways, Hamad got off to a wrong start with Mohammed and then Saudi King Fahd by assuming power after a palace coup in 1995 that allegedly a year later, sparked a Saudi and UAE-sponsored failed military attempt to topple him (Al-Jazeera, 2018).

The failed coup may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. Yet, Hamad’s plotting of an independent, idiosyncratic foreign and defence policy, that was at odds with Saudi and Emirati policies, was rooted in the long-standing Qatari understanding of its perilous geopolitical environment in which the kingdom, as well as Iran, figured both as friendly neighbours and potential threats. Moreover, as the world’s only other Wahhabi state, Qatar from the outset, was determined not to emulate Saudi Arabia’s empowerment of an ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim religious establishment with which the ruling family would share power (Dorsey, 2013b).

If Mohammed’s approach was based on maintenance of the status quo, suppression of dissent and any expression of political Islam, and projection of military as well as soft power, Hamad operated in the seemingly naïve belief that Qatar was best served by being in front of the cart of political change everywhere in the region, but the Gulf. Hamad’s defence policy was exclusively soft, rather than hard-power driven. It evolved around five pillars: maintaining relations with all parties to position Qatar as a go-to-mediator; projecting the Gulf state as a global, cutting-edge sports hub; situating Qatar as a transportation hub connecting continents with a world-class airline; turning the Gulf state into a cultural hub with dazzling museums and arts acquisitions; and investing in Western blue chips and high profile real estate (Dorsey, 2015, pp. 422-439).

Diverging Paths

Hamad made his first provocative move with the creation of the *Al Jazeera* television network in 1996 that broke ranks with the Arab world's state-controlled, staid media landscape that served to glorify autocratic rulers and control the flow of news at a time when social media had yet to emerge. *Al Jazeera* upset rulers in Riyadh, Cairo and elsewhere in the region by introducing freewheeling, breaking news coverage and debate that included dissident and often banned voices in the mould of hard-hitting journalism that lets the chips

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fall, where they may. *Al Jazeera* quickly gained a dominant share of the pan-Arab broadcasting market, forcing state-run broadcasters, particularly in Saudi Arabia, to move away from what author and journalist Hugh Miles termed "totalitarian drive" (Miles, 2017). *Al Jazeera* also broke ranks with the Arab media's refusal to report on Israel from the Jewish state, by becoming the first Arab broadcaster to open a bureau in Jerusalem.

To the chagrin of Arab rulers, *Al Jazeera* demolished social, political and religious taboos, and set a new standard of reporting across the Middle East and North Africa. It introduced concepts like democracy and human rights and drastically pushed the boundaries of free speech. As a result, *Al Jazeera Arabic*

became a go-to, albeit increasingly partisan, source of news during the 2011 revolts. Its English-language sister established several years after the Arabic channel, contributed to Qatari soft power by establishing itself as one of the world's premier global broadcasters alongside the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and Cable News Network (CNN).

Hamad's notion of regional change as a mechanism for autocratic survival in the Gulf had the effect of a red rag before a bull when it came to

Mohammed, the UAE's effective ruler and a man rooted in the military, who sees the world through a security prism and has a paranoid obsession with any form of political Islam and particularly the Brotherhood (Dorsey, 2015 a, pp. 422-439). It was Mohammed who understood that the UAE despite its size would have to be militarily recognised to influence the re-shaping of the environment. He achieved this feat with US Defence Secretary James Mattis's description of the Emirates as Little Sparta, the UAE military's performance in Yemen and various UN peacekeeping missions, and its expanding string of bases in southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa (The Economist, 2017).

It was also Mohammed who realised that the UAE did not only need partners and allies, but also at times a front, through which it could work. He chose the court of the Saudi king as his vehicle, in a move that has served him well (Dorsey, 2017a). While the Saudi distrust of the Muslim Brotherhood dates back to the emergence of the opposition Sahwa movement in the kingdom in the 1990s and the Brotherhood's backing of Saddam Hussein in the wake of the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, it was Mohammed's inroads into Riyadh that enabled him to persuade the kingdom to take action.

Mohammed took advantage of the fact that by 2014, Saudi King Abdullah's concentration span was approximately two hours. It was at the end of a meeting with Mohammed, who was backed by the head of Abdullah's court, Khaled al Tuwajiri, that Abdullah agreed to declare the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation (Dorsey, 2017b). It was these circumstances that Mohammed was able to exploit in the walk-up to the 2013 Egyptian military coup, that overthrew the country's first and only democratically elected President and the withdrawal in 2014 from Doha of the Saudi, Emirati and Bahraini ambassadors, for a period of nine months that was a prelude to the Gulf crisis that erupted in June 2017.

The fact that policy making in Saudi Arabia and the UAE was prerogative of powerful individuals rather than institutional formation was also evident in the early days of the administration of King Salman, who ascended the throne in early 2015 after the death of Abdullah. Those early days constituted a period prior to the forging of a close relationship between Mohammed and his namesake, the Saudi king's son, Mohammed bin Salman, when the Emirati prince appeared to have lost the struggle for power, following the dismissal of Al-Tuwajiri as head of the court.

Newly in control of the kingdom, the Salmans were initially not about to roll back the banning of the Brotherhood. They signalled a willingness to compromise with the group, as part of an effort to forge a Sunni Muslim alliance against Iran. In a first public gesture, two weeks after Salman's inauguration, Saudi Foreign Minister Saud al Feisal told an interviewer that, "there is no problem between the kingdom and the movement" (Middle East Monitor, 2015). A month later the Muslim World League, a body, established by Saudi Arabia in the 1960s and dominated by the Brotherhood, organised a conference in a building in Mecca that had not been used since the banning of the Brothers, to which those Qataris with close ties to the Islamists were invited (Dorsey, 2015). The Saudi attitude towards the Brotherhood as well as Qatar and Iran hardened again, as relations between the two Mohammeds became ever closer.

Who is MbS?

While Mohammed bin Zayed (MbS) continues to play a powerful and influential role, Mohammed bin Salman has emerged as a figure who draws sharp and diametrically opposing reactions. To many, he is God's gift to Saudi Arabia, the man capable of taking the kingdom into the 21st century. To others, he is an impetuous, impulsive, power hungry and autocratic risk-taker who could bring the House of Saud tumbling down with unpredictable consequences. The truth probably lies somewhere in the middle. No doubt, Mohammed's reforms have benefitted women and created social opportunities with the introduction of modern forms of entertainment, including the recent opening of Saudi Arabia's first cinema as well as concerts, theatre and dance performances. Anecdotal evidence testifies to the popularity of Mohammed's moves, including his power and asset grab under the guise of an anti-corruption campaign that saw members of the royal family, former senior officials and prominent people in business, surrendering assets in exchange for their release from arbitrary detention (Torchia, 2018). Mohammed is banking on continued public support for his economic and social reforms, and on the fact that once the dust has settled, foreign investors will forget whatever misgivings they may have had about the lack of due process and absence of rule law.

A popular 32-year-old figure in a country where more than half the population is below 30, Mohammed, at least to some degree, understands youth aspirations, certainly better than the kingdom's octogenarian rulers. He instinctively understands what needs to change economically and socially to move the kingdom into the 21st century and ensure not only regime survival, but also its absolute grip on power. However, to maintain his popularity, Prince Mohammed will have to manage expectations, deliver jobs, continue to assuage the pain of austerity and the introduction of a new social contract, and ensure that the public continues to perceive his autocratic rule as a new era that will cater to aspirations, in which the high and mighty are no longer above the law.

The question is whether he knows how to do it. Mohammed's reforms involve a fundamental and unilateral rewriting of the social contract, that has sparked criticism and anger on social media when the government has failed to cushion the pain. And that is what makes Mohammed bin Salman's popularity fragile. There has been no

management of economic expectations or of the process of social change. Expectations are running high, time frames are unrealistic and delivery is key. An unpublished survey of the aspirations of 100 male Saudi 20-year olds indicated the problems Mohammed is likely to encounter, beyond opposition of the ultra-conservatives, in moderating the kingdom's ultra-conservative interpretation of Islam. The men "wanted social change but they pull back when they realise this has consequences for their sisters. Their analytical ability and critical thinking is limited," said Abdul Al Lily, a Saudi scholar who conducted the survey and authored a book on rules that govern Saudi culture (Dorsey, 2017c).

According to Al Lily, some 50 per cent of those surveyed said they wanted to have fun, go on a date, enjoy mixed gender parties, dress freely and be able to drive fast cars. Issues of political violence, racism, international

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interests or the dragged out Saudi war in neighbouring Yemen did not figure in their answers. However, Al Lily's interviewees bolted when confronted with the notion that the liberties they wanted would also apply to their womenfolk. "People ended up not doing anything when confronted with the idea that someone might want to go on a date with their sister. They pulled back when they realised the consequences," said Al Lily.

The crown prince has been equally ambiguous about the degree of social change that he envisions. While he has been decisive in his power and asset grab, he has yet to say a clear word about ending Saudi Arabia's system of male guardianship that gives male relatives control over women's lives. Similarly, there is no indication that gender segregation in restaurants and other public places will be lifted. Asked about the guardianship, Prince Mohammed evaded specifics. "Today, Saudi women still have not received their full rights. There are rights stipulated in Islam that they still don't have. We have come a very long way and have a short way to go," he said (O'Donell, 2018).

Multiple incidents illustrate contradictory attitudes of the public that often impact policy. It suggests that Mohammed's top-down approach rests on shaky ground. The approach involves a combination of rewriting history rather than taking responsibility, the imposition of Mohammed's will on a reluctant and ultra-conservative religious establishment and suppression of religious and secular voices who link religious and social change to political reform. In one incident, a Saudi beauty queen withdrew from a Miss Arab World contest after being attacked and threatened online (Maza, 2017). In another, holders of tickets for a concert in Jeddah by Egyptian pop sensation Tamer Hosny, were surprised to receive vouchers that warned that, "no dancing or swaying" would be allowed at the event. "No dancing or swaying in a concert! It is like putting ice under the sun and asking it not to melt," quipped a critic on Twitter (Agence France Presse, 2018). Similarly, Saudi sports authorities shut down a female fitness center in Riyadh over a contentious promotional video that appeared to show a woman in figure-hugging workout attire. "We are not going to tolerate this," Saudi sports authority chief Turki al-Sheikh tweeted as he ordered that the centre's licence be withdrawn (Agence France Presse, 2018).

Maintaining Legitimacy

There has long been debate about the longevity of the Saudi ruling family. One major reason for doubts about the Al Sauds' viability was the Faustian bargain they made with the Wahhabis, proponents of a puritan, intolerant, discriminatory, anti-pluralistic interpretation of Islam. It was a bargain that produced the single largest dedicated public diplomacy campaign in

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history. Estimates of Saudi spending on the funding of ultra-conservative Muslim cultural institutions across the globe and the forging of close ties with non-Wahhabi Muslim leaders and intelligence agencies in various Muslim nations, that have bought into significant, geopolitical elements of the Wahhabi worldview, are in a grey zone. With no accurate data available, they range from

\$75 to \$100 billion.

It was a campaign that frequently tallied nicely with the kingdom's deep-seated anti-communism, its hostility to post-1979 Iran, and the West's Cold War view of Islam as a useful tool against Arab nationalism and the left – a perception that at times was shared by Arab autocrats, other than the Saudis. The campaign was not simply a product of the marriage between the Al Sauds and the Wahhabis. It was central to Saudi soft power policy and the Al Sauds' survival strategy. One reason, certainly not the only one, that the longevity of the Al Sauds was a matter of debate was, that the propagation of ultra-conservatism was causing a backlash at home and in countries across the globe. More than ever before theological or ideological similarities between Wahhabism, or for that matter Salafism and jihadism, were since 9/11 under the spotlight. The problem for the Al Sauds was not just that their legitimacy seemed to be wholly dependent on their identification with Wahhabism. It was that the Al Sauds since the launch of the campaign were often, only nominally in control of it. They had let a genie out of the bottle that now had an independent life and could not be put back into the bottle.

That is one major reason why some, in the past decade have argued, that the Al Sauds and the Wahhabis were nearing a crunch point. One that

would not necessarily offer solutions, but could make things worse by sparking ever more militant splits that would make themselves felt across the Muslim world and in the minority Muslim communities elsewhere in multiple ways, including increasing sectarian and intolerant attitudes in countries like Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The rise of the Salmons challenges these assumptions. For one, it raises questions as to the degree to which the rule of the Al Sauds remains dependent on religious legitimisation, as Mohammed moves de facto from consensual family to one-man rule, in which he anchors his legitimacy in his role as a reformer. It also begs the question of what would ideologically replace ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim Islam as Saudi Arabia's answer to perceived Iranian revolutionary zeal. The jury on all of this is out. The key lies in the degree to which Mohammed is successful in implementing social and economic reform. It is yet to be clarified as to what he envisions as moderate Islam, and the extent to which the members of the religious establishment and other segments of the population, will resist his religious redefinition and social reforms.

Saudi officials have spoken of possibly halting the funding of international religious institutions, although an apparent agreement to pump a billion dollars into the building of hundreds of mosques and religious centres in Bangladesh, would suggest otherwise (Dorsey, 2018a). There are also other indications that Mohammed bin Salman is not averse to funding militants when it suits his geopolitical purpose. Last year the US Treasury declared Maulana Ali Muhammad Abu Turab, a specially designated terrorist on the very day that he was in the kingdom to raise funds. Abu Turab is a prominent Pakistani Islamic scholar of Afghan descent, who serves on a government-appointed religious board, maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia, runs a string of madrassas attended by thousands of students along Balochistan's border with Iran and Afghanistan and is a major fundraiser for militant groups (US Department of Treasury, 2017).

Abu Turab's visit to the kingdom came at a time when Saudi and UAE nationals of Baloch heritage were funnelling large amounts of cash to militant anti-Shiite and anti-Iranian Islamic scholars in Balochistan. It is unclear whether the funds were being donated with Mohammed bin Salman's tacit blessing (Dorsey, 2017d). What is clear, however, is that the funding and Abu Turab's visit coincided with the drafting of plans to destabilise Iran by exploit-

ing grievances and stirring unrest among Iran's ethnic minorities, including the Baloch. These plans have not left the drawing board and may never do so. The funding nevertheless raises the question of how clean a break with ultra-conservatism is Mohammed contemplating .

Engagement vs. Confrontation

Similarly, Mohammed has been less than consistent in countering Iran. By and large, Mohammed has projected a muscular, assertive and confrontational approach that has mired Saudi Arabia in an ill-fated, debilitating war in Yemen and failed to produce results in Lebanon and Syria. Ironically, his one success story is Iraq, where he opted to forge close diplomatic, economic and cultural ties with the Shia-majority country. In doing so, Mohammed broke with Saudi Arabia's long-standing refusal to engage with Iraq (Dorsey, 2018b). Mohammed's engagement bears testimony to the fact that the multi-billion dollar, decades-long support for Sunni Muslim ultra-conservatism that at times involved funding of both violent and non-violent militants had failed in Iraq. It constituted a recognition that Saudi Arabia's absence effectively gave Iran a free rein.

It took the kingdom 11 years to open its first embassy in post-Saddam Iraq -- the kingdom's first diplomatic presence in the country since it broke off diplomatic relations in 1990, because of Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait (Agence France Presse, 2015). Beyond the opening of the embassy, Saudi Arabia is slated to open a consulate in Basra (Asharq Al-Awsat , 2018) as well as in Najaf, widely seen as Shia Islam's third most holy city, that rivals Iran's Qom as a centre of Shiite learning. Unconfirmed reports suggest that Prince Mohammed may visit Najaf (Toumi, 2018). The two countries have reopened the Arar Border Crossing that was closed for 27 years and restored commercial air traffic for the first time, in more than a quarter of a century (Reuters, 2017). More than 60 Saudi companies participated in the Baghdad International Fair in early 2018. A Saudi Arabia-Iraq Coordination Council, inaugurated last year, seeks to strengthen security ties as well as economic and cultural relations, envisions student and cultural exchanges and Saudi investment in oil and gas, trade, transport, education, light industry, and agriculture (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2017). Saudi Arabia pledged \$1.5 billion for Iraqi reconstruction at a donors' conference in Kuwait (Shalhoub, 2018).

The magnitude of the shifting of gears in Saudi policy towards Iraq as well as other steps that Mohammed has taken to curb, redirect, and reduce, if not halt, Saudi support for militant ultra-conservatism, is highlighted by the conclusions of a 2002 study on funding of political violence, conducted by the New York-based Council of Foreign Relations (Greenberg, Wechsler and Wolosky, 2002). Coming in the wake of the 9/11 attacks when Saudi funding and counter-terrorism cooperation with the United States was put under the magnifying glass, the study suggested that the kingdom's global support for ultra-conservatism was woven into its very fabric. The study warned:

It may well be the case that if Saudi Arabia...were to move quickly to share sensitive financial information with the United States, regulate or close down Islamic banks, incarcerate prominent Saudi citizens or surrender them to international authorities, audit Islamic charities, and investigate the hawala system—just a few of the steps that nation would have to take—it would be putting its current system of governance at significant political risk.

Saudi Arabia's approach to Iraq has come a long way since the days when Saudi support for a sectarian Sunni Muslim insurgency from which the jihadist Islamic State emerged more than a decade ago, was textbook example of the decades-long Saudi campaign to confront Iran globally by promoting ultra-conservatism and sectarianism and in some countries – Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bosnia Herzegovina, Iraq, and Syria – by funding violence (Dorsey, 2018c). The question is whether the kingdom will draw a lesson from its success in managing its regional rivalry with Iran. So far, there is little indication that Iraq is more than the exception that confirms the rule.

Asian Realities

But even if it does, erasing the impact of 40 years of the global funding of ultra-conservative, intolerant strands of the faith is unlikely to be achieved by decree and is certain to be felt for at least another generation across the Muslim world, particularly, in Asia, home to the greatest number of adherents to the faith. This is not only because ultra-conservatism has taken root in numerous Muslim countries and communities, but also because it has given opportunistic politicians a framework to pursue policies that appeal to bigoted and biased sentiments to strengthen their grip on power. Examples of the fallout abound among recipients of Saudi largess. They include institutionalised discrimination in Pakistan against Ahmadis, (Dorsey, 2016) a sect consid-

ered heretic by orthodox Muslims, as well as biased policies towards non-Muslims and Shiites in Pakistan (Constable, 2018), Malaysia, and Indonesia (Dorsey, 2018d). Coupled with the rise of Hindu nationalism, the faultlines with Islam in India have become sharper.

Basic freedoms in Bangladesh are officially and unofficially curtailed in various forms as a result of domestic struggles (Chowdhury, 2018) originally enabled by successful Saudi pressure to amend the country's Constitution in 1975 to recognise Islam as its official religion. The amendment was a condition for Saudi recognition of the young republic and substantial financial support. As a result, Bangladesh, the world's fourth-largest Muslim nation, is at the heart of a struggle between liberalism and ultra-conservatism that questions Saudi Arabia's legacy and is about reforms that go beyond anything envisioned by Mohammed. It is a battle in which free-thinking journalists, writers, and intellectuals have often paid with their lives.

On the plus side, there is a silver lining for Asian countries in the prolonged crisis in the Gulf, that pits a UAE-Saudi-led alliance against Qatar. That is, as long as Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates shy away from attempting to harness their financial muscle to shore up lagging international support for their diplomatic and economic boycott of the idiosyncratic Gulf state. Asian nations, including India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and the Philippines, whose nationals constitute the Gulf's labour force, have already reaped initial benefits with Qatar, eager to put its best foot forward, significantly reforming its controversial kafala or labour sponsorship regime (Dorsey, 2017e). Qatar has become the first Gulf state to introduce a minimum wage, albeit criticised by human rights groups for being \$200 below earning levels in many of the labour-supplying states. It has also sought to strengthen workers' rights and committed to improving their living conditions.

Qatar was under pressure to reform the kafala system long before the Gulf crisis erupted, but the dispute with its Gulf neighbours strengthened its interest in being seen to be doing the right thing. Its moves, over time, are likely to persuade other Gulf states to follow suit. The boycott, following its refusal to accept UAE-Saudi demands that would curtail its independence, has forced Qatar to restructure trade relationships, diversify sources for goods and services, create alternative port alliances and recalibrate the strategy of its na-

tional carrier, Qatar Airways (Wintour, 2017). The UAE, Saudi Arabia, and their allies insist that Qatar should unconditionally break its ties with various political groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood, follow the Saudi and UAE foreign policy, downgrade relations with Iran, shutter the *Al Jazeera* television network, and accept monitoring of its compliance. Qatar has rejected any infringement of its sovereignty and called for a negotiated solution.

The UAE's articulate ambassador to Russia, Omar Ghobash, suggested in June this year that, "there are certain economic sanctions that we can take which are being considered right now. One possibility would be to impose conditions on our own trading partners and say you want to work with us then you have got to make a commercial choice" (Wintour, 2018). The UAE and Saudi Arabia have yet to act on their threat, as Qatar settles in for the long haul and structurally ensures that it no longer depends primarily on its Gulf neighbours. Food security is a Qatari priority. Turkey and Iran have been quick to step in to fill the gap created by the Saudi ban on the export of dairy and other products to Qatar (The Straits Times, 2017). With the import of some 4,000 cows, Qatar has sought to achieve a degree of self-sufficiency, with domestic production, within a matter of months, accounting for approximately 30 per cent of consumption. Nonetheless, with a minimal food processing industry, Qatar will seek to diversify its sources, creating opportunity for Asian producers.

With the loss of some 20 Gulf destinations because of the boycott, state-owned Qatar Airways, the region's second largest airline, may be the Qatari entity most affected by the crisis. Against the backdrop of a likely annual loss, Qatar Airways is looking to expand its route network elsewhere and is weighing stakes in other airlines. Asia is an obvious target. Qatar is scheduled to initiate flights to Canberra in Australia, Chiang Mai and Utapao in Thailand, and Chittagong in Bangladesh next year. The airline has rejected proposals that it bid for Air India, but plans to move ahead with plans for the launch of a domestic Indian airline. Elsewhere, Qatar Airways acquired a 9.61 per cent stake in the troubled Hong Kong-based Cathay Pacific for \$662 million (Qatar Airways, 2017). Similarly, Qatar has had to compensate for its loss of port facilities, primarily in the UAE, by diverting to Salalah in Oman and Singapore. While that resolved the Gulf state's immediate bottlenecks, it is

likely that Qatar will acquire an interest in other Asian ports in competition with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Given the Saudi interest in China-backed ventures such as Pakistan's Gwadar port and the Maldives, Qatar could well look at Indian alternatives, including the Indian-supported Iranian port of Chabahar, a mere 75 kilometres further up the coast from Gwadar. Singapore port has stepped in with Qatar availing itself of shipping and logistical services. Vietnam and India see opportunities for the sale of food and construction materials.

Perhaps most fundamentally, Asian countries like India, in a bid to ensure the security of their energy supplies, are looking at diversifying their sources and increasing the non-Middle Eastern component from producers like the United States. Indian Oil minister Dharmendra Pradhan adopted a tough stand in recent talks with OPEC Secretary General Sanusi Mohammad Barkindo, telling him that India was looking at alternative sourcing (Sharma, 2017). India last year, cut crude oil imports from Iran because of stalled negotiations over the development of an offshore gas deposit in the Gulf, forcing Iran to look for alternative buyers in Europe (Iran Review, 2017).

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Conclusion

The Gulf, irrespective of if and how, the crisis may be resolved, is unlikely to return to the status quo ante. For that matter, neither is any other part of the Middle East, a region that is in a transition. It is a transition that is often sought to be violently and brutally defined. As a result, the region's multiple conflicts and disputes are certain to influence and change political, cultural, economic, and commercial relationships. That creates risks, including those of extremism and political violence, for Middle Eastern or West Asian nations as well as the rest of Asia that will need to mitigate risks and gain from opportunities that it potentially can capitalise on. Capitalising on opportunity

will be the easy part. Mitigating the risks is likely to prove far more difficult. That is where the real challenge lies. There are no quick solutions or short cuts and the value of partial solutions is questionable. The key will be the articulation of policies that over the medium term can help create an environment more conducive to inclusiveness across the continent, rather than the pursuit of identity politics and the continuous opting for security-focussed knee-jerk reactions to events and facts on the ground.

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