

Gaping Holes in Trump's Well-Received Speech

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May 27, 2017



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المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

Current During his May 20-21 visit to Saudi Arabia, President Donald Trump sought to dispel Muslim misgivings about his views of their religion after a presidential campaign that was in part fed by pronouncements excoriating Islam. Delivering his prepared speech to over fifty Muslim prime ministers and heads of state, the president retreated from his strident rhetoric about “radical Islamic terrorism” and statements that “Islam hates us.” Instead, he put his listeners through what can be easily understood as a lecture on how Muslims should “drive out the terrorists and drive out the extremists” and “join the United States in an effort to combat terrorism.”

It is hard to reconcile the contradictions of the Jekyll-and-Hyde routine in which President Trump continues to engage, no matter the circumstances and causes of the flip-flops in his positions. In addition to his about-face regarding Islam and Muslims, over the last few months the president has retreated from campaign pronouncements about NATO, Asian allies, Saudi Arabia, and Palestine/Israel, among others. Given that his old rhetoric cannot simply be dismissed or glossed over, and looking at the institutional shallowness from which the Trump Administration suffers, it is problematic and indeed implausible to expect that the president's pronouncements will result in a radical change between the United States and the Muslim world at large.

Moreover, the president's speech on better relations with Muslims exposed flaws and

gaping holes the Trump Administration will have to correct if it wants to advance its interests and be more effective in fighting extremist violence. The president would do well to show more understanding of the nuances of political language. His administration must also reevaluate how it talks to the leaders and the public of the Muslim world and to espouse human rights in those discussions, and it should be humble enough to admit to faults in thinking and behavior. On the other hand, the Muslim world would do well to be aware of the challenges that Mr. Trump faces domestically as they forge their relationship with him and launch what they think is a new phase of Muslim-American relations.

What's in a Term?

Much positive commentary has been advanced about President Trump's seeming refrain during his speech from using the term “radical Islamic terrorism,” which his predecessor's administration had eschewed because of its potential for antagonizing the Muslim world. But the president traipsed awkwardly between the terms “Islamist” and “Islamic” — a blunder the White House blamed on exhaustion (on only the second day of the trip!) — and was obviously unfamiliar with the nuances separating the two terms; and more likely was unwilling to separate them. While the former refers to a basis for a political project leading to the establishment of an Islamic political order — and is thus the better term when referring to extremists — the latter designates a more general

reference to Muslims as a community of believers unconcerned with religion as political ideology.

During his campaign, the president had sought to differentiate himself from former President Barack Obama by attaching extremism, radicalism, and terrorism to the religion of Islam; in the process, he pointedly antagonized Muslims and tried to draw a clear distinction between the Muslim world and the West. He even excoriated Obama and his presidential rival Hillary Clinton for not being brave enough to talk about “radical Islam.” In insisting on accusing an entire community of believers—about a fifth of humanity—of embracing a radical fringe, he fed the ideology and rhetoric of the same extremist elements who had flocked in the thousands into the ranks of the so-called Islamic State, which characterizes its struggle as one of a clash of civilizations between the Muslim and non-Muslim (and un-Islamic) worlds.

In Saudi Arabia, President Trump appeared to scale back on the rhetoric, but he still used the two distinct terms interchangeably. Moderating the anti-Muslim rhetoric was obviously in the interest of mending fences and currying favor with a bloc of nations the United States would be too careless to antagonize and too derelict not to court. Indeed, the Trump Administration is trying to repair the perceived damage from the aloofness of the Obama Administration. President Trump needed to use diplomatic nuance, but being unfamiliar with the

distinction inherent in the terms, he tried to steer himself to safety by appealing to the human commonalities between religions and among their followers. He even went as far as describing Islam as “one of the world’s great faiths.”

In the end, what may have worked most in his favor was the eagerness with which the leaders of the Muslim world in attendance received his comments, as if they were waiting for him to give them a reason to believe and exonerate him. After all, last March in the United States, Saudi Arabia’s Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman “expressed his satisfaction after the meeting [with Trump] on the positive position and clarifications he heard from President Trump on his views on Islam.” Other Arab leaders had excused Trump’s transgressions as they began to see common cause with him on such an important geostrategic concern as Iran’s behavior in the area.

Neglecting Human and Civil Rights

As if reverting to the old righteousness of colonizers, President Trump indirectly berated his audience and the wider Muslim world by preaching to them about the virtues of expunging the evil that lives among them, poisons their minds, and destroys their future. It is hard to imagine that the leader of the free world could not find a well-informed aide or official who could explain to him the lengths to which Muslim leaders, especially those in the

Arab world, go to fight extremists with weapons supplied primarily by the United States. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council have been most committed to fighting against both homegrown and incidental terrorists. Other countries such as Egypt, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq are undergoing an unprecedented process of securitization for the supposed goal of eradicating the scourge of terror and violent extremism from their societies.

However, what was missing from the president's remarks was a reminder to those in attendance that the fight against violent extremism cannot merely rely on the blunt instrument of military power and repression. While extremists are a minority and opportunistically misuse Islam as justification for their nihilistic rhetoric and praxis, objective conditions in Arab and Muslim societies allow them to recruit the disenchanting and disenfranchised who are angry about their disempowerment and are looking for what they think is a way out. Indeed, terrorism is not merely and singly born out of misinterpretations or misuse of religious dictum; it is arguably most related to people's dire socioeconomic conditions and feelings of political alienation and exile.

Economically and socially, most Muslim societies suffer from stunted development, inequality, and unemployment, especially among the youth. The resolution for these ailments lies in policies that advocate such

changes as better governance, redistribution of wealth, jobs programs, and fighting widespread corruption. Politically, these societies are looking for more freedoms and open participation in decision-making that go beyond nominal elections for pliant legislatures—ones that fail to produce meaningful checks on executive power or to form an effective institutional infrastructure for public engagement.

While extremists are not promising open and democratic systems, they challenge established governments to provide an outlet for voicing dissatisfaction in the absence of peaceful means of protest and expression. It is arguably the case that those joining the Islamic State and similar organizations—whether coming from Muslim or western societies—would be more reluctant to do so if they were gainfully employed, considered themselves part of a thriving community, or thought that they could influence their surroundings.

Indeed, President Trump ignored the possibility of calling on his listeners to make major corrections in how they run their countries and he sidestepped any mention of human rights—in a clear departure from at least the pro forma declarations that former American presidents felt obligated to issue from time to time. At the end, the president exhorted the audience to take responsibility for their own security against extremists and terrorists, offering American assistance and partnership. He seemed exhilarated when he urged them to

drive the terrorists “out of your places of worship,” “your communities,” and “your holy land.” He, however, did not consider it important to encourage his listeners to work to repair the damage that decades of authoritarianism have wrought on their societies and deprived their citizens of basic human and civil rights.

The Emperor Has No Clothes

As if accusing Muslims of coddling extremists and not mentioning the problems of governance in Muslim societies were not enough, President Trump forgot in his speech to blame instances of American foreign policy that have helped fuel extremism and increase the number of extremists. Absent was mention of the American bias in favor of Israeli policies and against redressing the tragedy of Palestine and the plight of millions of Palestinian refugees, ending Israeli occupation of Palestinian land, and securing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. It is no secret or strange coincidence that extremism feeds on the continued denial of a just solution to this tragedy, one that will soon conclude its seventh decade since the first expulsion of Palestinians from their homes in 1948.

Neither did the president remember the devastating impact on good governance in the Middle East—and America’s reputation by extension—of coddling repressive governments and autocrats since the 1950s. Nor did he seem cognizant of the devastating effect of the

American war on Iraq in 2003, which helped create the predecessor to today’s Islamic State and allowed Iran to stake a claim to the political order in Baghdad. No wonder then that a recent survey by the Doha, Qatar-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, conducted in the 12 largest countries of the Arab world, indicated that 82 percent of Arabs consider United States policy to be a danger to the Arab region.

Furthermore, lecturing Muslim leaders on fighting extremism should also include an appraisal of the negative impact of the two ill-advised and, according to the American judicial system, illegal travel bans on citizens from Muslim-majority countries coming to the United States. Such bans may serve the president’s objective of currying favor with domestic supporters, but they also help increase the purported civilizational tension that extremists thrive on as an ideological underpinning for their ideology. The same can be said of the intensifying drone strikes the American military is conducting on suspected terrorist bases and hideouts in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen, which inadvertently kill innocent civilians already traumatized by war and destruction.

According to the Syrian Observatory of Human Rights, almost 1,500 civilians, including over 300 children, have been killed as a result of “US-led air operations since 2014” in Syria alone. Further, a total of 225 people were killed there in just the four-week period between April 23

and May 23, 2017. A Pentagon investigation concluded that the US military is responsible for the death of 105 civilians when it bombed a suspected building in Mosul, Iraq, last March. Such unnecessary loss of human life in what the United States considers a justified war on the Islamic State creates its own momentum of grievances that only inflame passions and benefit extremist recruitment.

Hindrances in the Face of Better Relations

The president's audience in Saudi Arabia may have been too enthusiastic about starting a new relationship with the United States now that the "cloud" of an unenthusiastic Obama Administration has passed. President Trump also appeared friendly and eager to strike deals and affirm commitments, signing agreements worth hundreds of billions of dollars with Saudi Arabia alone, including \$110 billion for American weapons and upgrades. For Gulf and other Muslim leaders, the American rhetoric about and commitment to facing up to Iran and its proxies were also welcome developments that, from their point of view, may help reshape the politics of the region in the foreseeable future.

But while the future will prove or disprove the efficacy of the hoped-for new direction in US-Muslim relations, there are hindrances arising from the domestic American political scene and the institutional structure of the Trump Administration which could influence the long-term outcome of the president's trip and speech.

In fact, Muslim leaders would do well to include these in their calculations.

The first obstacle is related to investigations into President Trump's campaign and allegations of his surrogates' collusion with Russia to sway the 2016 presidential election. While it is too early to draw any definitive conclusions about these investigations, what has transpired and is being covered by the American media and discussed in the halls of power calls for great trepidation for the administration. The president himself has finally begun to take all of this very seriously and is said to have hired a personal attorney—outside of the White House Counsel's Office—to deal with the possible repercussions of the investigations. If turmoil continues in the administration as this matter winds its way through the different channels, or if there are grounds for impeaching the president, what appeared possible in Riyadh may not come quickly to fruition.

The second hindrance is connected to the institutional capacity of the Trump Administration to chart, implement, and enhance a renewed relationship with the Arab and Muslim worlds. For example, the Department of State is short on the personnel and experience necessary for a vigorous relationship. The US Senate's confirmation of John Sullivan as Deputy Secretary of State is certainly a step in the right direction but it does not address the shortages in expertise in the department's bureaus dealing with the Muslim world. Furthermore, the administration's new

budget proposal for the coming fiscal year reportedly slashes the department's allocation by 32 percent, or \$26.5 billion, including operations by the US Agency for International Development. With such institutional

shallowness, the administration will not be able to provide the necessary partnership to Muslim nations; in their turn, these nations will find it impossible to rely assuredly on a renewed American commitment.

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