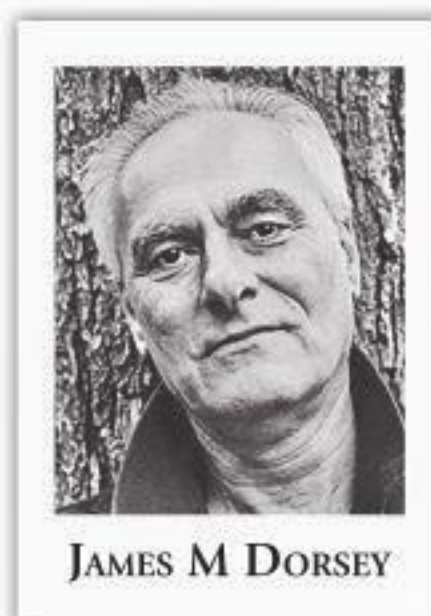


# Saudi policy shift: A rare Trump foreign policy success



JAMES M DORSEY

BY the law of unintended consequences, US President Donald J Trump's mix of uncritical and cynical embrace of Saudi Arabia and transactional approach towards relations with the kingdom may be producing results.

Saudi Arabia appears to be backing away from its largely disastrous assertive and robust go-it alone foreign and defence policy posture and reverting to a more cautious approach that embraces multilateralism, seeks international backing before acting and emphasises traditional and public diplomacy.

The kingdom's shift towards a less reckless, more coordinated and deliberate foreign and defence policy does not necessarily mean a change in rhetoric or a greater willingness to seek negotiated solutions.

It entails a change in tone and strategy rather than a backing away from key foreign or domestic policy positions, including Saudi Arabia's deep-seated animosity towards Iran.

Saudi state minister for foreign affairs Adel al-Jubeir made that clear, saying that Saudi Arabia had not ruled out a military response to drone and missile attacks that severely damaged two of its key oil installations.

Mr Al-Jubeir reiterated conditions for any successful negotiation that include tough restrictions on and oversight of Iran's nuclear programme and limits to its development of ballistic missile. He further demanded fundamental changes to Iran's foreign and defence policy.

"No nukes, no missiles and no terrorism," Mr Al-Jubeir said in language that was likely to appeal to a broad audience but masked the two countries' core differences.

Nicolas Dunais, an economic advisor to Gulf governments who last year was helping Saudi Arabia establish a national risk and resilience unit, got a glimpse of Saudi Arabia's fundamental attitude before the kingdom's recent repackaging.

Mr Dunais was taken aback when he

suggested opening a backchannel to Yemen's Iranian-backed Houthi rebels.

"Not only was the suggestion ignored, but it also led to questions as to my motivations and interests—as if trying to solve a national risk through dialogue was anathema, given the confidence that military might alone would be enough to crush an army of ragtag rebels fighting with AK47s," Mr Dunais recalls.

King Salman signalled the policy shift when he told a Cabinet meeting, days after the attacks believed to have at least been enabled by Iran, that they were "not aimed at the vital facilities of Saudi Arabia only, but also threaten the global economy."

King Salman's statement was as much an effort to capitalise on the attacks to garner international support and step up pressure on Iran as it was the setting of a different foreign policy tone.

Unlike the United States that put responsibility for the attacks squarely on the shoulders of Iran, Saudi spokesmen were careful to stop short of holding Iran directly responsible for the attacks. Instead, they asserted that the weapons used in the attacks were Iranian made and therefore it bore some degree of responsibility.

Similarly, in sharp contrast to the kingdom's rejection of an international investigation into last year's killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi and its tight control of access to war-torn Yemen, Saudi Arabia followed up on King Salman's statement by inviting the United Nations and others to participate in a forensic investigation of the attacks that would focus on the origin of the weapons employed, and the launching spot of the drones and missiles.

Speaking to the New York-based Council of Foreign Relations, Mr Al-Jubeir said foreign experts had already arrived in the kingdom.

Driving the point home, Mr Al al-Jubeir said earlier that Saudi Arabia was consulting "with friends and allies about the next steps to take."

In a further embrace of multilateralism, Saudi Arabia, days after the attacks, joined a US-led coalition to secure the Middle East's waterways. Earlier, Britain, Bahrain



Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman and US President Donald Trump at the White House in 2017.

PHOTO: AFP

and Australia pledged to participate in the coalition.

The Saudi moves were buffeted by a concerted reaching out to the media rather than relying primarily on expensive public relations and lobbying agencies to ensure that the kingdom's voice and more cautious approach was heard and noted.

The attacks drove home the vulnerability of the kingdom's oil assets that account for the bulk of its revenues and its international standing and a realisation that Saudi Arabia could not count on unquestioned support of the international community and particularly the United States, its long-standing guardian angel.

That realisation came as Saudi Arabia was working to repair damage to its image as a result of its conduct of the Yemen war; the killing of Mr Khashoggi; the massive crackdown on activists, critics and businessmen; and its abrupt and undiplomatic response to countries like

Sweden and Canada that voiced public criticism of the kingdom's policies.

This week, Saudi ambassador to the UN Abdulaziz Alwasil didn't mince his words, responding to Australia's leadership of 24 Western nations in issuing a statement condemning the kingdom for a raft of human rights abuses.

Yet, in a sign of the times and in contrast to earlier incidents involving Sweden and Canada, Mr Alwasil did not threaten disruption of trade and other forms of cooperation with Australia nor did he indicate that the kingdom may expel Australian diplomats.

Saudi Arabia's efforts to come to grips with new realities came as the kingdom was preparing for an initial public offering by its national oil company, Aramco, that has been struggling to ensure that it meets Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's target valuation of USD 2 trillion.

The precarity of the kingdom's situation

was obvious for all to see when Mr Trump made clear that his inclination was not to launch a risky retaliatory strike against Iran in response to the attacks but to tighten economic sanctions and to continue exploring a possible dialogue with the Islamic republic.

Adding insult to injury, Mr Trump emphasised the fact that the attacks were against Saudi Arabia and not against the United States and that his administration would support a Saudi response or potentially act on its behalf against payment.

As a result, Saudi Arabia has been manoeuvring to ensure that the situation does not get out of control and that it is not put in a position in which it risks an all-out war that could prove to be devastating.

Saudi Arabia's shift in policy approach follows in the footsteps of the United Arab Emirates that has in recent months sought to de-escalate tensions in the Gulf by distancing itself from Saudi positions.

The UAE has partially withdrawn its forces from Yemen in an effort to prevent further reputational damage, a move that sparked fighting between UAE and Saudi-backed forces in the country. It was careful not to blame Iran for attacks on tankers off the coast of the UAE believed to have been launched by Iran and reached out to the Islamic republic by sending a coast guard delegation to Tehran.

Rebecca Wasser, a senior policy analyst at RAND Corp, noted that the attacks had made the kingdom realise that it may be playing for stakes that are too high: "I think there has been a calculation that the costs might be too high."

Mr Trump can claim some credit for Saudi Arabia's emerging adoption of a more cautious approach. Higher costs and greater risk perceptions were likely one consequence of his transactional approach towards the kingdom.

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# Why we need to talk more about suicide

TASNIM RAHMAN NIRA

"PEOPLE who commit suicide are cowards."

"People who commit suicide are selfish and take the easy way out."

These are the common but unreasonable beliefs that our society holds, and in some respect promotes, towards suicides. So what makes it necessary for us to look into a behaviour our society labels "cowardly" and "selfish"? Why is understanding suicide important?

It is because as you are reading this article, according to WHO (World Health Organization), in some parts of the world, suicide is taking at least one life every 40 seconds. Which is 800,000 people every year. Being a topic less talked about, stigmatised and criminalised in the country, suicide has drawn much attention this year, making it the lead



reality of suicide: i) Once someone is suicidal, he or she will always remain suicidal. Fact: Suicidal thoughts are not permanent and someone who has them can be treated and can go on to live a long life; ii) Talking about suicide is a bad idea and can be interpreted as encouragement. Fact: Talking openly can give an individual an option or the time to rethink his or her decision; iii) Only people with mental disorders are suicidal. Fact: Suicidal behaviour indicates deep unhappiness but not necessarily mental disorders; iv) Suicides happen suddenly without warning. Fact: The majority of suicides have been preceded by warning signs, whether verbal or behavioural; v) People who talk about suicide do not mean to do it. Fact: People who talk about suicide may be reaching out for help or support; and vi) someone who is suicidal is determined to die. Fact: Access to emotional support at the right time can prevent suicide and make the person want to live on.

**An alarm for adolescents and youth**

We saw the rate of suicide among school to university students grow in recent years. Common causes exhorting suicide have been: anxiety and depression, significant academic pressure, family problems, trauma and societal pressure. The global scenario is the same. According to WHO, suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 years old. Hence comes the necessity of child emotional hygiene which may lead to sound mental health throughout life.

One hindrance is when parents do not want to acknowledge the fact that suicide can be an issue for their children, when, in reality, it could be an issue for any individual of any family at any time. Once they acknowledge it, their first step should be to talk to the children about suicide and open the first door of communication. When you are open to this issue, your children learn that it is not something they should keep secret and eventually they can bring up the topic in the future and reach out to you for help.

Educational institutions are no less important than home in promoting good mental health. No matter how good emotional regulation a child learns at home, if the

institution, where he/she spends one third of their day, lacks cooperation, we can in no way expect progress in the field of mental health. Though some developments have been noticed in the national policy, we are struggling to implement them effectively.

**What we can do as individuals**

A global issue as extensive as suicide may seem insoluble, but its prevention can be possible on an individual level. There is a misconception that only a mental health professional can help a suicidal person. But when a person faces such a risk, we cannot wait for a professional to intervene. Hence, it is a great relief that anyone can provide the first aid to suicide.

Empathy is at the core of helping a person with a suicidal mentality. When you presume someone is considering suicide or notice any warning signs, the first thing to do is to start a conversation and let the person know that you care for them. There is no alternative to asking a person directly whether he/she is thinking about suicide. A person who has decided to give up on life, and thus is already vulnerable, requires the emotional-support giver to be non-judgemental and sensible toward them. Sometimes distraction helps (such as going out for coffee or having a stroll) as the urge to die attenuates momentarily, but it is not a permanent solution to suicidal thoughts as they might recur. One cardinal point to bear in mind during this time is that there should be no confidentiality when there is an emergency safety concern. So, in an inauspicious situation, the support giver must ask for help whether to parents or to a professional.

Looking at the big picture, we may feel dismal, as the daunting statistical figures are getting even more horrible with each passing year. But the collective effort of individuals can play a big part in suicide prevention. Our own part of communicating with others in a proper way, practicing emotional hygiene, overcoming the stigma through awareness can be the impetus to not only suicide prevention, but also to overall mental well-being.

Tasnim Rahman Nira is program manager, Identity Inclusion.

**CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH**

**ACROSS**  
1 Brisk pace  
5 Alda and Arkin  
10 News summary  
12 Math comparison  
13 Gowns and tuxes  
15 Bro's sibling  
16 2016 Olympics host  
17 High card  
18 Brewing item  
20 Egyptian goddess  
21 Mown strip  
22 Auto ding  
23 Fashionably dated  
25 Antlered animal  
28 Cardiff's land  
31 Carry

32 Follows as a result  
34 NYC subway line  
35 Droop  
36 African grazer  
37 Tees and sweats  
40 Dutch bloom  
41 "Divine Comedy" writer  
42 Bridges  
43 Glade grazer

**DOWN**  
1 Wave peak  
2 Imposes, as a tax  
3 Winter fisherman's tool  
4 Skillet  
5 Jason's ship  
6 Bar study  
7 Relaxed

8 One of the B vitamins  
9 Most tender  
11 Buccaneer  
14 Pajamas and peignoirs  
19 River boat  
20 Pop stars  
24 Extended  
25 High-stepping aids  
26 Shredded  
27 Hun leader  
29 Playwright O'Neill  
30 Capitol group  
33 More certain  
35 Eats in the evening  
38 Naughty act  
39 Bankroll

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