

Nationalism comes to Saudi Arabia

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Prince Salman's downplaying of pan-Islamism offers New Delhi an opportunity to forge a strategic partnership with Riyadh.

When we think of nationalism in the Middle East, we recall "Arab nationalism" that animated Indian engagement with the region over the last several decades. But as Delhi prepares to host the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman this week, India must come to terms with an unfamiliar idea — "nationalism in Arabia".

Promoting nationalism and downplaying pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism is at the very heart of Crown Prince Salman's effort to reorient Saudi Arabia's internal and external policies. And he is not the only one. Others, especially the United Arab Emirates, are also trying to construct a national identity to cope with the turbulence in the Middle East.



The kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula did not have to fight for their "national" independence from colonial rulers. Nor did they inherit a clear and continuous territorial entity on which

to found a nation. The Arabian monarchies, naturally, chose to rely on tribal and religious identities for their political legitimacy. The Arabian monarchies were also quite happy to go with the regional flow on supra-national politics. Today, as the Gulf monarchies review the growing threat of transcendental ethnic and religious movements, they are turning to nationalism as an insurance. The rulers of the Arabian peninsula are also acknowledging that the construction of coherent communities out of their societies — overflowing with expatriates of different faiths and denominations — will need more than shared religion, sect, tribe or ethnicity. That is where “nationalism in Arabia” comes in. It is very different from “Arab nationalism”, which was supposed to transcend national boundaries. Nationalism in Arabia is about defining the interests of separate sovereign states. In the past, Arab nationalism was seen, especially in India, as a progressive force countering conservative religious impulses. Today “nationalism in Arabia” has risen out of the debris of Arab unity and Islamic solidarity. That the old illusions are irrelevant is reflected in the fact that the Arab League and the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation are both in a shambles.

For newly-independent India, “Arab nationalism” had a special appeal. It resonated with the ideas of anti-imperialism as well as the slogans of state socialism and non-alignment. The issues that dominated the region — the conflict between the Arabs and Israel, the Palestinian struggle for nationhood and the joint initiatives by the Arabs — reinforced India’s decision to frame the politics of the region in those terms.

As Arab nationalism went on the backfoot after the stinging defeat suffered by the Arabs in the 1967 war with Israel, the Saudis took the lead in launching the Organisation of Islamic Conference in 1969.

With the emergence of political Islam as the dominant discourse in the Middle East came the concerns in Delhi at OIC’s meddling in India’s disputes with Pakistan, including Kashmir. In cultural terms, the Indian foreign policy elite and political classes were more comfortable with the pan-Arab Baathists in suits rather than the Gulf Sheikhs in their white thawbs or the Iranian mullahs in black. Neither India’s traditional enthusiasm for Arab solidarity nor Delhi’s fears about Islamic unity are of little policy consequence in the region.

That Saudi Arabia is ranged against the political Islam of Turkey and Iran and is confronting groups like the Muslim Brotherhood says something about the unfolding structural shift in the region’s politics. The House of Saud, which let religion play an ever larger role in its domestic politics and foreign policy since the late 1970s, woke up to existential threats after 9/11 attacks, the Arab Spring beyond its borders and the challenge, from within, of the extremist groups that championed political Islam.

The attempts to strengthen nationalism in Saudi Arabia began under King Abdullah during his long years as the crown prince. The annual Janadriyah festival, that he began, celebrates the Arabian peninsula’s heritage and culture. In 2005, he declared the Saudi National Day — September 23 — as a national holiday. This is the only non-religious holiday in the kingdom.

Crown Prince Salman is taking forward this agenda. Being a “Saudi” is slowly, but certainly, becoming as important as being a “Muslim” or an “Arab”. The word “traitor” is increasingly being preferred over “infidel” to describe the enemies of the state. Sports, especially football, have begun to forge a new secular bond among the Saudis. “Patriotism” has also become the trope to mobilise popular sentiment behind the Saudi armed forces participating in the civil war in Yemen.

Prince Salman’s nationalism is not all about symbols and vocabulary. In a land that has not known freedom of religion for non-Sunni Islamic denominations and non-Muslim faiths, he is taking some tentative steps. There is a conscious effort to strengthen the outreach to the long-sullen Shia minority in the kingdom’s eastern part. There is mounting speculation that Riyadh might have its first Shia mosque in the not too distant future. The first ever mass of Coptic Christians was held on December 1 last year at a private home in Riyadh and Prince Salman has received delegations of American Christian evangelicals.

These are but small steps in one of the world’s most conservative societies. Salman’s nationalism is also, without question, a top-down project. It will surely run into many a problem. But that does not take anything away from the fact that the kingdom is experimenting with long overdue change at home. Reorienting foreign policy has been much easier for Salman, who now talks of putting “Saudi Arabia First”. As the importance of religion begins to decline in the conduct of Riyadh’s foreign policy, India will have much to benefit from a closer strategic partnership between Prince Salman and other votaries of “nationalism in Arabia”.

India and Saudi Arabia relations

Why in the discussion?

- Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia is on a two-day visit to India, during which time India will raise the issue of Pakistan-sponsored terrorism.
- At the same time, both the countries will also discuss about the improvement in defense relations, in which joint naval exercises are included.
- During this visit, 5 MoUs will be signed between India and Saudi Arabia.
- Apart from trade and investment, in this visit special focus will be on the strengthening of bilateral strategic relations.

main point

- Foreign Ministry' sources say Prince Salman's visit to India is very important and India is going to be the eighth strategic partner country of its ally, Saudi Arabia.
- Between Saudi Arabia and India, there is a bilateral trade of US \$ 27.48 billion. In comparison to 2016-17, it increased by ten percent last year.
- Saudi is the fourth largest economic partner of India.
- India currently buys 17 percent of oil and 32 percent of gas of its requirement from Saudi Arabia.
- Both countries are keen to increase joint alliances in areas such as food security, infrastructure, renewable energy and fertilizer.

Expected Questions (Prelims Exams)

1. Consider the following statements-

1. Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest economic partner country.
2. Saudi Arabia is the leading exporter of oil to India.

Which of the above statements is/are correct?

- (a) Only 1
- (b) Only 2
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Expected Questions (Mains Exams)

- Q. How does stress on "Nationalism" by passing the global Islamic ideology by Saudi Arab will be beneficial for India? Discuss. (250 Words)

Note: Answer of Prelims Expected Question given on 18 Feb. is 1(c)