

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نېاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم ویر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

<http://www.thenational.ae/opinion/comment/trump-is-risking-long-term-friendships-in-arab-world#page2>

Trump is risking long-term friendships in Arab world

James Zogby
February 11, 2017

As American president Donald Trump and Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei trade barbs, a nervous Arab world is caught in the middle. Last week, Iran's supreme leader made headlines thanking Mr Trump for "revealing the true face of America". While much of Mr Khamenei's criticism was directed at the administration's hardline policy and threat to "put Iran on notice", he zeroed in on the disastrous White House executive order and its impact on refugees, immigrants and visitors from seven Muslim countries.

Mr Khamenei said of Mr Trump: "Now with everything he is doing – handcuffing a child as young as 5 at an airport – he is showing the reality of American human rights." (A five-year-old child was detained after Mr Trump's executive order, but he was not handcuffed).

This news item and the war of words between Iran's religious leader and the president of the United States brought home the intimate connection between America's domestic and foreign policies and encapsulated the dilemma that will now be faced by America's Arab allies. It reminded me of two stories from the first George W Bush administration – both involving Saudi Arabia's then crown prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz.

Mr Bush's disregard for the rights of the Palestinians, his administration's policies that trampled on the rights of Arabs and Muslims in the US, and his disastrous invasion of Iraq all severely strained US-Saudi relations. The kingdom, ever cognisant of the important role the US played in providing a security umbrella protecting the Gulf Arab states from the threat of the revolutionary Iran, was at its wits' end. At one point, Prince Abdullah told Mr Bush that if the US persisted in

ignoring Arab concerns, Saudi Arabia might feel compelled to go its own way. It was not a step he was eager to take, but it was one born of frustration with US policies and the increasingly high cost they incurred at home.

To make his point, Prince Abdullah liked to tell a story about a sheep herder who was losing a sheep a night to aggressive wolves. To protect his flock, the herder hired guards. They kept the wolves at bay, but the herder had to kill two sheep daily to feed his newly acquire protectors. The price he was forced to pay, he noted, was greater than the benefit received.

Then on US presidential election night in 2004, I received a call from a friend who was an adviser to the crown prince. He asked me excitedly whether the news stories he was hearing were correct – that Democratic challenger John Kerry was in a position to beat incumbent George Bush. I was surprised and asked why he would be supportive of Mr Kerry. I said: "Kerry has been very critical of Saudi Arabia, while Bush claims to be our friend." He responded (and he made clear that he was speaking for himself, not his boss): "I think it is better for us to have a US president who hates us, than to have a US president hated by our people".

During the past 16 years, US-Gulf relations have been on a dizzying roller-coaster ride. First there was the adventurism of the Bush administration, which went from neglect to destabilising war to misguided democracy promotion based more on ideology than reality. The Obama administration only compounded Arab frustration. It began with great promise but the failure to deliver coupled with many miscues led to it being judged an enormous disappointment.

By 2016, the Arab region was in disarray and the US-Arab relationship was in tatters. Thanks to the foolish Iraq war, and its seriously bungled aftermath, that country is in the midst of a long civil war. Iran has been unleashed and emboldened as a threatening regional power. The US military and public are war weary and wary of new conflict. Russia has extended itself into the Middle East. Violent extremist movements have found safe havens and metastasised, spreading across the region. And, because US allies have felt abandoned, they have felt compelled to act on their own, sometimes rashly, to defend their interests vis-a- vis Iran's designs.

To some extent, Arabs felt like they were caught up in the tale of Goldilocks and the Three Bears. With Mr Bush they had too much; with Mr Obama, too little. With the 2016 election, they were hoping for "just right". They wanted a relationship with a partner who would work with them to ensure regional security and stability. And a partner who was both respected by and respectful of their people.

From its performance to date, the Trump administration does not appear to be such a partner. Mr Trump has spoken forcefully about wiping out extremism and reining in Iran, but he and too many of his advisers have coupled this with ham-fisted anti-Muslim rhetoric and policies that have caused ISIL and Al Qaeda – and now the Iranian leader – to thank him.

It would be a grave error for this administration to fail to understand the connection between how it treats and is perceived to treat Arab and Muslim people and its ability to achieve its broader policy objectives in the Middle East. The scenes at American airports and the heartbreaking stories that filled Arab media after the executive order – and the shocking anti-Muslim rhetoric

associated with some White House officials – has outraged Arab and Muslim public opinion. It has also heartened America’s adversaries and put relations with US allies at risk.

While a dramatic course correction is required, it remains to be seen whether this administration is capable of that. If it doesn’t change, or if it takes more provocative measures against Arabs and Muslims (or does something else to aggravate tensions, such as moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem), the destabilising roller-coaster ride will continue, with severe consequences that will be felt for years to come.