

# Bashing Muslims helped Trump win. Now he needs a Muslim-world win to help fix his image.

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His Islam speech won't be a game-changer, but he'll use it to try resetting the narrative of his floundering presidency.



By **Ebrahim Moosa** May 20 at 4:00 PM

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On Sunday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, President Trump will deliver an address to Muslims that National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster described as an “inspiring, yet direct” appeal “to unite the broader Muslim world against common enemies of all civilization and to demonstrate America’s commitment to our Muslim partners.”

That’s a complete 180 from the inflammatory rhetoric that helped him win the White House, and shows how fast political fortunes change: Scapegoating Muslims was politically useful when Trump sought the presidency. Now, he needs to show that he can mend fences to help change the narrative of his floundering presidency.

Perhaps no American figure in recent memory has so flagrantly targeted a religion for political gain as Trump did with Muslims. In 2015, he called for a “total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.” In an interview a few months later, he said “I think Islam hates us.” His administration began with the

appointment of now-disgraced Gen. Michael Flynn — a man who described Islam as “a cancer” — as National Security Adviser. Reportedly, the Riyadh speech itself will be drafted by White House aide Stephen Miller, who, as a college student, was in a group that held an “Islamofascism Awareness Week” event. Policy-wise, the president prioritized his Muslim travel ban.

*[Trump’s administration says the travel ban isn’t like Japanese internment. It is.]*

The chutzpah it takes to then make Saudi Arabia — country of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina — the locus of his first international speech as president is jarring. Even more so when you consider early reporting by the Associated Press suggesting that the speech will appeal to the global Muslim community by arguing Americans “are not here to lecture — to tell other peoples how to live, what to do or who to be. We are here instead to offer partnership in building a better future for us all.” It’s language meant to send the message that as long as Muslim countries work with the U.S. in the war on terror, they won’t be pressured to make political reforms or improve their protections of human rights.

Yes, the speech also reportedly will cast the fight against the Islamic State as a “battle between good and evil” — it is — but it’s unclear whether the president will be offering a genuine refresh of U.S. Middle East policy, or merely a gloss over what has been a dismal last almost two decades, as well as the president’s own derisive view of over 1 billion Muslims, including over 3 million of his own Muslim American constituents.

As the Brookings Institution’s Shadi Hamid notes, “Even the most well-intentioned presidents have struggled to find the right way to talk about Islam.” Notably, President Barack Obama, who spent part of his childhood in Muslim-majority Indonesia, did not achieve the desired impact from his Cairo speech, similarly delivered early in his administration. Given Trump’s well-recorded antipathy, his aversion to nuance and the high stakes domestically and globally of his first overseas trip, it’s somewhat surprising he’s attempting this speech at all.

So why go through with it?

Throughout his presidential campaign and in the early days of his administration, Trump has expressed his view that U.S. allies should pick up a greater share of the global security tab. He’s chastised NATO allies for not paying their share of defense costs. At one point he floated the idea of Japan and South Korea developing their own nuclear deterrent to North Korea. And he’s said that Muslim countries should shoulder more of the burden in the fight against the Islamic State. To that end, the Post’s Josh Rogin reported this week, while in Saudi Arabia the president plans to call for an “Arab NATO” — never mind that the Saudis have focused their recent military efforts in a proxy war with Iran in Yemen, not against the Islamic State, and that they already lead an existing security alliance of Middle East monarchies, the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Despite this, according to reports, Saturday Trump signed a 10-year, \$350 billion dollar arms sales agreement with the Saudis, giving the kingdom more access to the fighter jets, helicopters and other military hardware than it already had after the Obama administration agreed over time to sell them a reported \$115 billion in weapons.

No doubt Trump, after having little to show for the first few months of his presidency other than controversies surrounding multiple investigations of his team related to Russia, wants to show that abroad, at least, he can get something done.

But a speech poses risks.

There's no evidence the arms deal will mean that Trump gets an immediate return on investment in the form of more direct military involvement of the Saudis or leaders of other Sunni Arab nations in the fight against the Islamic State.

Trump also risks hardening the Middle East's Shia-Sunni divide by letting the Saudis set the stage. The Saudi government, for its part, invited Fuad Masum, the Kurish, Sunni president of Iraq to attend the speech, but far more powerful Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shia, was reportedly snubbed.

*[Israelis cheered for Trump. But they may miss Obama more than they expected.]*

And if he wades into a discussion of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, he risks over-promising. "There is no reason there's not peace between Israel and the Palestinians — none whatsoever," Trump told Reuters. But that statement itself betrays a naivete about the complexities of the issue, compounded by the president's early choice of his inexperienced son-in-law, Jared Kushner, as an envoy. Gulf states have signaled they'd offer improved relations with Israel if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reciprocates. But neither Palestinians nor Israelis are likely to be made happy by the fact that language aside, the Trump administration, so far, hasn't broken meaningfully with previous policy. Israeli settlements continue to be built in Palestinian territory and the U.S. Embassy in Israel remains in Tel Aviv, not in Jerusalem.

The U.S. is still blamed for destabilizing the Middle East with the 2003 Iraq invasion and occupation, which in turn made it possible for groups like the Islamic State to eventually flourish. To restore any kind of trust in the region will require more than just a pep rally from Trump. A Middle East Marshall Plan — to rebuild war-ravaged Somalia, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan — would be a start, but would require greater political and economic commitment than Trump is likely to offer. Platitudes, and calls to ramp up military force, without demonstrating sincerity or a plan, aren't how you end terrorism or foster more enduring relations.

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