



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Indian Muslims: A Valuable Prize for Regional Rivals

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,069, January 21, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The hearts and minds of Indian Muslims would be a valuable prize for Saudi Arabia and Turkey as they vie for leadership of the Muslim world. This is particularly true in the wake of the October 2 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, which catapulted the rivalry to center stage.

When President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan recently declared that Turkey was “[the only country that can lead the Muslim world](#),” he probably wasn’t only thinking of Middle Eastern and other Islamic states such as Pakistan and Bangladesh. There is growing evidence that Indian Muslims, the Islamic world’s fourth-largest community after Indonesia and the South Asian states, is on Erdoğan’s radar.

Erdoğan’s interest in Indian Muslims highlights the flip side of [a shared Turkish and Indian experience: the rise of religious parties and leaders with a tendency towards authoritarianism in non-Western democracies](#) that, according to Turkey and India scholar Sumantra Bose, calls into question their commitment to secularism.

Erdoğan’s interest in Indian Muslims goes beyond his hitherto [unsuccessful attempts to persuade Indian authorities to shutter some nine schools and colleges](#) associated with exiled Muslim preacher Fethullah Gülen.

Accusing Gülen of responsibility for a failed 2015 military coup, Erdoğan’s government is [seeking the preacher’s extradition to Turkey](#) from his refuge in the mountains of Pennsylvania.

While Gülen remains an obsession for Erdoğan, his interest in Indian Muslims shows he has bigger fish to fry. Indian Muslims are too big a community to ignore in Erdoğan's rivalry with Saudi Arabia for leadership of the Muslim world. This is particularly true in the wake of the October 2 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, which catapulted the rivalry to center stage.

Erdoğan's efforts to create inroads into the Indian Muslim community is facilitated by the Hindu nationalism of the country's PM, Narendra Modi, which prompted *The Washington Post* to headline a recent article by Indian journalist Rana Ayyub describing mounting anti-Muslim sentiment and Islamophobia "[Modi's India is a living nightmare for Muslims.](#)"

Erdoğan is competing for Indian Muslim hearts and minds with a continued [flow of Saudi funds to multiple Salafi organizations](#), including charities, educational institutions, and political organizations, as well as reporting by [Turkish journalists associated with the Gülen movement](#) who point to Turkish links with militant clerics.

They include controversial televangelist Zakir Naik, whose Peace TV reaches 200 million viewers despite being [banned in India](#).

Problematically for Erdoğan, some of his interlocutors, including Naik, seemingly prefer to straddle the fence between Turkey and Saudi Arabia and play both sides against the middle.

"One among the few Muslim leaders who appreciate, have the guts to support Islam openly, is the president of this country, that is President Erdoğan.... [You are lucky to have a president like president Erdoğan](#)," Naik told a crowd in Istanbul shortly before Turkey declared its support for Qatar at the outset of the 18-month-old Saudi-United Arab Emirates-led economic and diplomatic boycott of the Gulf state.

Naik's remarks are unlikely to have sat well with Saudi Arabia, whose [King Salman had two years earlier awarded the preacher the King Faisal International Prize](#) for "service to Islam."

The award includes US\$2 million in prize money. Unconfirmed press reports say Naik has been [traveling on a Saudi passport](#) since his Indian document was revoked in 2017.

If the geopolitical stakes for Erdoğan are primarily his leadership ambitions, for Saudi Arabia it's not just about being top dog. Influence among Indian

Muslims creates one more pressure point for the kingdom in its opposition to Indian funding of Iran's Arabian Sea port of Chabahar.

Saudi Arabia fears the port will help Iran counter harsh US sanctions imposed after President Donald Trump's withdrawal of the US from a 2015 international agreement that curbed the Islamic Republic's nuclear program.

The kingdom is further concerned that the port will enable Iran to gain greater market share in India for its oil exports at the expense of Saudi Arabia, raise foreign investment in the Islamic Republic, increase government revenues, and enable Iran to project power in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

Finally, Saudi Arabia sees Indian Shiites, who are believed to account for anywhere between 10% and 30% of the country's 180 million Muslims, as an Iranian fifth wheel.

Indian media quoted a report by India's Intelligence Bureau as saying that ultra-conservative Saudi Islamic scholars were frequently visiting Indian Sunni Muslim communities. The Bureau reportedly [put the number of visitors in the years between 2011 and 2013 at 25,000](#). It said they had distributed tens of millions of dollars – a scale unmatched by Turkish funding.

The Saudi effort is furthered by the fact that some three million Indians work in the kingdom, many of them from Kerala in southwestern India.

"The Muslim community in Kerala is undergoing the process of Arabification... It is happening like the westernization. Those Indians who had lived in England once used to emulate the English way of life back home. Similarly, [Muslims in Kerala are trying to bring home the Arabian culture and way of life](#)," said scholar Hameed Chendamangalloor.

South Asia scholar Christophe Jaffrelot noted that Muslim institutions in Kerala, including the Islamic Mission Trust of Malappuram, the Islamic Welfare Trust, and the Mujahideen Arabic College had [received "millions of \(Saudi\) riyals."](#)

As in the case of Naik, Turkey has reportedly sought to forge ties to Maulana Syed Salman Al-Husaini Al-Nadwi, a prominent Indian Muslim scholar who is a professor at one of the country's foremost madrassas (religious seminaries), Darul-uloom Nadwatul Ulama in Lucknow.

Al-Nadwi [tweeted his support for Erdoğan](#) in advance of last June's election. "We represent the Muslim peoples and 300 million Muslim Indians. We want

the Turkish people to take place next to Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his party,” Al-Nadwi said.

Al-Nadwi’s son Yusuf was a [speaker at a conference in Istanbul in 2016 on the history of the caliphate movement](#) in Turkey and South Asia organized by the South Asian Center for Strategic Studies (GASAM). That center was founded by Ali Sahin, a former deputy minister for European affairs and a member of Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP).

Al-Nadwi sparked controversy in 2014 by [suggesting to Saudi Arabia that he raise a 500,000-strong militia of Sunni Muslim Indian youth](#) that would contribute to a global Islamic army to “help Muslims in need,” fight Iraqi Shiites, and become part of a Caliphate. At about the same time, he raised eyebrows by praising ISIS’s success in Iraq in a letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

The Turkish-Saudi competition for Indian Muslim hearts and minds is grist for the mill of Hindu nationalists, even if Turkish moves have attracted less attention than those of their Saudi rivals.

The India Foundation, with its close ties to Modi’s Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), warned last year in an [analysis of the significance of two Saudi-funded universities’ adoption of a palm tree in their logos](#) that the kingdom’s proselytization “laid the ideological foundation for Arabization of Muslims in India. Over time, this has dealt a suicidal blow to the local character of Islam in the Indian subcontinent.”

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