

Major shifts in Middle East can have an impact on S-E Asia: Shanmugam

How Muslims on this side of the world react can have significant social consequences, he says

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Major shifts in the Islamic centre of gravity that is the Middle East – from warming geopolitical ties to growing socioeconomic openness – are being watched closely by Muslims in South-east Asia.

And as the practice of Islam in the Middle East evolves, how Muslims on this side of the world react can have significant social consequences, said Law and Home Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam.

“The countries of the Gulf are taking steps to prepare themselves for a very different world in the decades to come, in a bid to stay prosperous, vibrant, attractive, and they have set out to reform not just their economies, but also their

societies,” he noted yesterday.

In a keynote speech on the second day of the Middle East Institute’s (MEI) two-day annual conference, he noted that economic relations between the Middle East and South-east Asia were also likely to expand.

The MEI is an autonomous research institute within the National University of Singapore.

With South-east Asia boasting a young population of 600 million and a continually growing economy, there will be opportunities aplenty and competition for talent, said Mr Shanmugam.

Changes in the Middle East – including the further normalisation of Arab-Israeli ties and increasingly secular attitudes – would also affect the balance of power there, with states acting in their best interests, depending on the issue

at hand, he added.

Mr Shanmugam, who was foreign minister from 2011 to 2015, spoke of significant regional realignments. The most substantial change, he said, has been the Abraham Accords – brokered by the Trump administration in 2020 to normalise ties between Israel, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States. “Others have their ties too, growing stronger, but on the quiet,” he said.

In late March, Israel also hosted a historic summit in its Negev desert, attended by the Egyptian, Emirati, Bahraini and Moroccan foreign ministers and their Israeli and American counterparts.

Said Mr Shanmugam: “The details about the summit are few, but they point towards further normalisation of the Arab-Israeli relationship.”

In the context of these changes, one question is how the Muslim-majority countries in South-east Asia will react, he said.

Mr Shanmugam noted that signif-

icant experiments in different economic and social approaches were also taking place in the Middle East. In Saudi Arabia, women are no longer required to don the hijab and are allowed to drive and work. Concerts by Western acts and cinemas have returned.

A short film shown at the Saudi pavilion at the Dubai World Expo starred the American actor John Travolta and featured lines such as “one of the greatest melting pots in the world”.

Said Mr Shanmugam: “This is a vision. Observers have commented, it is coming from the top, it has to percolate down and be accepted, and that is work in progress.”

The UAE, too, is moving towards some laws based on a more secular footing – for example, by decriminalising alcohol consumption and cohabitation of unmarried couples. “The approach is that Dubai, in particular, is a cosmopolitan place, it’s open for business, welcomes people from all over the world.”

The UAE is also promoting itself as a nation of interfaith tolerance and harmony, with active congregations of other religions and a Ministry of Tolerance.

Qatar will also host the football World Cup later this year and the presence of thousands of fans will in itself create a changed dynamic, Mr Shanmugam observed.

All these shifts are driven in large part by countries seeking to diversify their economies, change attitudes, change the social compact and bring in talent from around the world, said the minister.

“One key question is if the changes can be continued through, and whether the forces unleashed by the changes can be managed, or whether the reactions might be very strong and difficult to manage,” he said.

“What we can say is the leaders in charge seem to know what they are doing, and they will seek to manage them.”

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WORK IN PROGRESS

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