

DEBATE

SITUATION IN WEST ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIA*

There is a pervasive sense of crisis across West Asia as the region is coping with sectarian and ethnic contentions. There are ongoing civil conflicts in Syria and Yemen, in which regional players are also actively involved. These battles have left hundreds of thousands dead and civic life devastated, but have not provided military victory to any party.

At the heart of these conflicts is the competition between the two regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran, for regional influence. Their battle-lines have been largely shaped on sectarian basis, so that the divide between Shia and Sunni has become the hallmark of domestic and regional mobilisations on both sides.

The sectarian divide has also led to the rise of the trans-national Jihadi force, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) that, for a little over two years, has set up a proto-state across the territories of the two Arab neighbours, and had obtained affiliates in other parts of Asia and North Africa. It has also inspired vicious “lone-wolf” attacks in West Asia, Europe, and the USA by adherents motivated by its alluring propaganda on social media. Now that ISIS’s “proto-state” has been decimated by organised military action in both Iraq and Syria, lone-wolf attacks are likely to become even more frequent and widespread.

The breakdown of state order in Iraq and Syria has also encouraged the Kurds in both countries to pursue their aspirations for the widest possible autonomy, if not full independence. This has not only alarmed the leaders of the two countries, but also regional powers like Turkey and Iran which have Kurdish minorities of their own, and fear discord from domestic assertions of similar aspirations.

Turkey has deployed its military forces in the border areas of both Iraq and Syria, even as the USA is backing the Kurds in Syria against the ISIS, but could also use its affiliation with the Kurds to set up its military presence in both countries.

Syria is experiencing a peace process, led by Russia and backed by Iran and Turkey, which seeks to bring together the largest possible groups in the

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Syrian conflict to discuss and agree on constitutional arrangements that will resolve ideological and military contentions, and prepare the ground for national reconstruction. However, divisions between most groups are so deep that consensus-building has been a daunting challenge.

The role of two players in regional contentions is particularly disruptive. In Saudi Arabia, in a departure from several decades of past political practice, all political, economic and military power is now in the hands of one young prince, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has promised wide-ranging reform at home while leading a regional Sunni “Islamic Military Alliance” against Iran. In this, he enjoys the full backing of the Trump administration, which shares the Prince’s visceral animosity for Iran, even seeking to withdraw from the nuclear agreement that had been so painstakingly negotiated by major world powers during the Obama regime.

Support extended by President Trump has emboldened the Saudi Crown Prince to open a new front against fellow GCC member, Qatar, accusing it of seeking accommodation with Iran and backing Islamist groups affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Qatar has been subjected to comprehensive economic and political sanctions since June 2017 to compel it to accept several humiliating conditions for the easing of the blockade, acceptance that would effectively deprive the small island nation of all its dignity and even compromise its sovereignty.

The Saudi game-plan has not worked so far: Qatar has remained firm in rejecting the onerous conditions sought to be imposed upon it; it has also obtained the backing of Turkey and Iran, which has re-shaped regional alliances and called into question the Saudi-led “Sunni” coalition against it.

There are no indications that any effort is being made by any country or group to promote engagement and confidence-building between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In fact, the divide between them is being exacerbated by abusive sectarian rhetoric and even suggestions that the USA and the Kingdom might be promoting regime-change by encouraging dissent among Iran’s disgruntled minorities.

In fact, Iranian leaders have seen evidence of this mischief in the agitations that took place in the country in end-December 2017. There are legitimate concerns that the sectarian divide, ongoing proxy competitions, animosity of the USA, and fears of domestic discord could, inadvertently or otherwise, lead to a direct conflict between the two regional powers, with regional and extra-regional allies having mobilised on both sides. Thus, the Saudi-Iran strategic confrontation could easily descend into a full-blown regional war.

This will have negative consequences for India's interests and those of most Asian countries that have substantial energy and economic links with West Asia. India has the added concern relating to the safety and welfare of its eight-million citizens working in the region who remit to India about US\$ 30 billion annually. The implications of a region-wide conflict will in fact be so horrendous that sitting on the fence and not being involved may be a difficult option.

Prime Minister Modi has accorded priority to India's engagement with the principal West Asian countries during his visits to Saudi Arabia, Iran, the UAE and Qatar, and when ties have been refreshed, strategic partnerships have been affirmed.

There have been strong expressions from regional powers that India be involved actively in the promotion of stability and peace in the region.

What has been India's reaction to the developments, given the interests mentioned above? Should India involve itself diplomatically in West Asian contentions and, if it does, what should be the nature and content of the initiative?

The Indian Foreign Affairs Journal invited six experts in the field to comment on the above, and offer their views. Their views are published in the following pages.

(The views expressed by the authors are their own, and do not reflect the views of the Indian Foreign Affairs Journal, or that of the Association of Indian Diplomats)

An India-UAE Initiative to Address West Asia Security

Talmiz Ahmad*

The visit of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to the UAE in August 2015, the first visit of an Indian prime minister in 23 years, and the return visits of the crown prince of Abu Dhabi, Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in February 2016 and in January 2017 as the chief guest at India's Republic Day celebrations, have taken bilateral relations into areas not explored earlier. These include security and defence cooperation and cooperation in the areas of frontier technologies such as space, renewable energy and sustainable development, arid agriculture and desert ecology, and advanced healthcare and urban development.

The two leaders have also defined the relationship in terms that go well beyond the bilateral. They have noted shared threats to regional peace and stability mainly through the scourge of religious extremism and terrorism and, based on their "natural strategic partnership", have agreed to jointly endeavour to realise "the vision of an Asian Century". These interests have been given concrete shape in the "Comprehensive Security Partnership" agreement signed during the January 2017 visit which not only highlighted the two countries' concerns relating to the regional security scenario but also spelt out specific action points to safeguard their interests.

This has prepared the ground for a joint India-UAE initiative to promote security and stability in West Asia, a matter of deep and abiding concern to both countries.

West Asian security scenario

Since the Arab Spring events of 2011 that led to the fall of some Arab regimes and opened the doors to civil conflict in Syria, Libya and Yemen, as also the proliferation of extremist elements in Iraq and Syria in the shape of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the security situation in West Asia has deteriorated considerably. Now, the two major Islamic powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, are engaged in proxy wars in Syria and Yemen, and have shaped their

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strategic rivalry in sectarian terms. Over the last few months, the mutual rhetoric of animosity has grown more venomous and the two well-armed nations now glare at each other across the waters of the Gulf, creating conditions for a direct conflict between them.

During this period of regional uncertainty, the UAE has been re-shaping its role in regional and world affairs. Justin Gibbins has pointed out that it has done this through an astute combination of soft, hard, and “smart” power by utilising humanitarian assistance to over 150 countries, and military force in Syria, Libya, and Yemen in defence of its interests and in counter-terrorism operations. In the use of “smart” power, the UAE’s principal approach has been multilateral, based on its membership of important regional and global organisations, its world-wide economic engagements and its commitment to diplomatic solutions, wherever possible.

It is noteworthy that the UAE has also quietly established an air and naval presence in the western Indian Ocean. Besides bases in Assab in Eritrea and Berbera in Somaliland, other UAE-controlled ports in the western Indian Ocean include Aden, Shihr and Mukalla, along the southern coast of Yemen; Socotra island off the Yemeni coast, where UAE companies are building a port and possibly naval facilities; two Yemeni islands in the Bab al-Mandab strait; and the Yemeni port of Mokha port on the Red Sea coast. It is also said to be eyeing Yemen’s principal port of Hodeidah, once it is liberated from Houthi control.

The UAE’s outreach to India should be seen in this background. The joint statements of August 2015 and January 2017 envisage a larger, region-wide security-promotion role for the two countries. In 2015, the two leaders spoke of the “need for a close strategic partnership” in these “uncertain times”. In the “comprehensive strategic partnership agreement” they agreed on the need to “work together to promote peace, reconciliation, stability, inclusiveness and cooperation in the wider South Asia, Gulf and West Asia region”.

Similarly, in the 2017 joint statement, the two leaders “resolved ... to expand the India-UAE partnership for the benefit of their countries, for peace, stability and prosperity in their region, and for the betterment of the world”. In the statement, the UAE leader also looked forward to India “playing an increasingly important role in regional and global affairs”. Prime Minister Modi reciprocated by saying: “Our convergence can help stabilise the region.”

In fact, the Singapore-based scholar, Mohammed Sinan Siyech views the participation of UAE troops in India’s Republic Day parade not just as an expression of the strategic partnership but also a “shedding of political

inhibitions” on the part of the two countries. The deteriorating situation in West Asia urgently calls for a collaborative role of the two partner countries to promote security and stability.

The UAE’s approach to regional security

On the face of it, this is a daunting challenge. The UAE is affiliated with the Saudi-led alliance against Qatar and Iran, while India has close ties with all the countries of the region, and till now has refrained from involving itself in the internecine competitions and conflicts of the region. However, some factors that could facilitate the joint diplomatic effort may be noted.

For instance, Iran need not be a divisive factor in the India-UAE initiative. First, unlike Saudi Arabia, the UAE is a pluralistic society, has a moderate approach in matters of religious belief, and is home to all of Islam’s schools and sects, including several Shia of Iranian and Arab origin who enjoy freedom to practice their faith and, in fact, hold distinguished positions in the UAE’s government and its corporate sector.

Again, while concerned about Iran’s increasing influence in the region, the UAE does not share Saudi Arabia’s sense of strategic vulnerability vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic; nor is it animated by the kingdom’s sectarian approach to mobilise regional support against Iran. The UAE also recognises that the proxy conflicts in Syria and Yemen are unwinnable, even as it is uncomfortable with the Saudi promotion of Brotherhood-related parties as lead role-players in the politics of the two countries once the conflict is over.

Above all, in terms of its security and economic interests, the UAE does not reject Iran’s presence, but only insists on the need for Iran to be a responsible and constructive role-player in regional affairs. There is every likelihood that Iran will adopt an accommodative posture in response to the initiative. It is facing the visceral animosity of the Trump administration and the latter’s overt desire to reduce, if not eliminate, Iran’s influence in the region, while threatening the country with regime change by fomenting dissident elements among Iran’s ethnic minorities, most of whom are Sunni.

In Yemen, the UAE has been projecting its own interests rather than subordinating itself to the Saudi agenda. According to Hilal Khashan, it was “displeased” by the initiation of military assault on Yemen by Saudi Arabia in March 2015, and later the UAE withdrew most of its troops in June 2016 without consulting Saudi Arabia. The UAE has also collaborated with the US special forces to conduct operations against Al Qaeda elements, while the

Kingdom seems to be using the latter's support against the Houthis. The UAE-backed militants in south Yemen have also attacked positions of the Al Islah party, a Brotherhood-affiliated group that is being supported by Saudi Arabia to assume a prominent role in the country after the fighting is over.

Promoting regional security

An integral part of the two-nation India-UAE diplomatic effort will be to encourage the principal participants to play down and, in time, eliminate references to sectarian identity and the sectarian divide from their discourse. Another aspect of the initiative will be that it will not include in its mandate any reference to the domestic affairs of the regional polities concerned. Finally, the contending parties will be enjoined not to use non-state actors or extremists against the other or interfere in the domestic affairs of the other.

Given that Saudi Arabia has deep apprehensions about Iran's "hegemonic" intentions in the region and the "existential" threat it perceives from its neighbour, the India-UAE diplomatic initiative to promote regional stability would need to address the Kingdom's specific security concerns.

The way forward is clear. The initiative will need to encourage the two Islamic giants to pursue an accommodative approach in the three theatres of contention – Syria, Yemen and Iraq. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia would be urged to accept the Houthis as part of the national political and economic order so that a viable national unity government can be set up. Iran on its part would need to accept that the Kingdom has legitimate interests in Yemen, given that it shares a 1400-km border with it. Given its limited strategic interests in Yemen, Iran is likely to accept this position.

Both countries would then need to cooperate in Yemen to provide relief and humanitarian assistance, and re-build the damaged infrastructure and civic life. Otherwise, the country will sink further into fratricidal conflict and endanger the stability of the whole region as the bastion of extremist elements.

In Syria, Iran would have to accept the Astana/Geneva peace process, the constitutional shaping of a federal order in the country, and the departure of Bashar al Assad after a reasonable transition period, followed by free elections. Given the age-old Syria-Iran strategic partnership, and the interests of Russia and Turkey in the country, Saudi Arabia will have to accept that it will have to work with these other countries to stabilise Syria.

In Iraq, the sponsors of the peace initiative will urge Iran to accept the systematic dilution of the sectarian discourse and putting in place by the

Haidar Al-Abadi government of a genuinely composite political order. This will involve the dismantling of the powerful Shia militia, and the gradual strengthening of the national army.

A united Iraq with a federal system will be more accommodative of the Iraqi Kurds, and should help to dilute demands for a sovereign Kurdish state which is a matter of deep concern for Iran. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran will need to recognise that Iraq is a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society, and its stability lies in the accommodation of these diverse identity groups, with minimum of outside interference.

Regional cooperative security arrangements

These confidence-building initiatives would need to be a prelude to a larger, more ambitious enterprise: the realization of a regional cooperative security arrangement. Over the last two decades, several proposals have been presented, both by Saudi and Iranian leaders as well as by Arab and western academics. However, none of these proposals could move forward because the GCC countries obtained their security through their alliance with the USA, the region's hegemonic power that was deeply hostile to Iran. Now, with the USA increasingly viewed as a disruptive and unreliable force in West Asia, the regional scenario is much more propitious for the promotion of a new security order in West Asia.

The proposed regional cooperative arrangements will be greatly facilitated if the India-UAE diplomatic initiative were to be expanded to embrace the Indian Ocean. This is because West Asian security is closely linked with stability in the Indian Ocean region which is increasingly witnessing burgeoning competitions and the expanding presence of the navies of extra-regional powers. These have serious implications for the interests of India and the Gulf countries, given that this ocean is the pathway for energy, trade, investment, and human resource connectivity that embrace most of Asia.

Some important aspects of these links are:

- The bulk of Gulf hydrocarbon production is now consumed in Asia. The exports of the Gulf states to China, India, Japan and South Korea are more than three times larger than those to the USA and the European Union, and are projected to increase steadily over the next two decades;

- Today, 55 percent of Asian crude is being consumed in Asia as is 95 percent of the gas; by 2040, 90 percent of West Asian oil production will be consumed in Asia;
- India today gets 80 percent of its oil from the Gulf while China gets 70 percent; Japan and South Korea get over 90 percent of their oil imports from the Gulf;
- 30 percent of global trade is now South-South; the total trade of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries with Asian countries is over 40 percent; and
- Almost of the food imports of GCC countries, accounting for 80-90 percent of domestic food supply, pass through the maritime chokepoints in the region: the Suez Canal, the Bab al-Mandab, and the Straits of Hormuz.

The Indian Ocean, which is so crucial for the livelihood and well-being of billions of people, has failing states which have bred dangerous forces of discord and destruction. Its geo-economic importance has also caused geopolitical tensions and confrontations that are simmering under the surface at present but could easily flare up into wider and destructive conflicts.

The absence of a comprehensive security management system has meant that no effective platforms are available for dialogue and conflict-amelioration. This also means that some of the long-term areas of concern, such as climate change and environmental degradation, do not receive the high-level and focused attention that they urgently deserve. As Lee Cordner has noted succinctly:

It is in the marine domain that the interests of Indian Ocean Rim (IOR) states largely converge, and it is at sea that the need for cooperative security is most pressing. It is also at sea that the best opportunities lie to develop mechanisms, and ultimately habits, of security cooperation that may in the future have applications to more controversial security agendas.

The India-UAE joint statement of January 2017 had expressed the resolve of the two countries to cooperate to counter piracy “in their shared maritime domain in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean regions”. It had added that the two countries would “exchange experiences in maritime security, including joint anti-piracy training and exercises”. Elsewhere in the statement, the two leaders had referred to cooperation on security issues, including counter-terrorism, maritime security, and cyber-security, as “a key pillar of the bilateral strategic partnership”.

The Indian Ocean has two pan-oceanic institutions of which both India and the UAE are prominent members: the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA), a platform to promote economic cooperation among its 21 member-countries, and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), which brings together the naval chiefs of 35 member-countries to discuss maritime security issues.

However, there are no institutional arrangements in place in either organisation to discuss and coordinate policies and action plans for ocean-wide security and stability. It is proposed that India, in association with the UAE, shape and lead a diplomatic initiative to put in place government-to-government dialogue and policy coordination mechanisms that would embrace the Indian Ocean community.

Challenges

India-UAE cooperation to promote regional security will face daunting difficulties. It is being proposed at a time of serious disruptions in the regional order, coupled with challenges to domestic systems emerging from the post-oil era, technological incursions, and new aspirations being articulated by youth across West Asia. At the same time, the steady descent of the region into catastrophic conflict is not an acceptable option. India and the UAE need to intervene at a time when no regional or extra-regional power is taking any action to stem the tide of conflict.

Peace and stability in West Asia will have some significant positive implications for West Asia and the western Indian Ocean region in general in terms of regional food security and logistical connectivity. Both Iraq and Syria will re-emerge as major food producers: Iraq lost 40 percent of its agricultural production capacity after ISIS took over large parts of the country, while Syrian agriculture is near-collapse due to civil conflict over the last seven years.

Another benefit of peace in West Asia will be the ability of the Indian Ocean countries to pursue the expansion of regional logistical links as trans-Asian projects, embracing not just the China-initiated proposals included in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) but also the projects India is pursuing through Iran to Afghanistan, Central Asia, Russia, and Western Europe.

The India-UAE initiative will bring to the region, for the first time in a century, a non-military approach to regional security that is based on the active participation of the regional states themselves as key role players, but

would not exclude other nations, including Western countries, that have a stake in regional security

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Current Geopolitical Scenario in West Asia: Implications for India

Ranjit Gupta*

West Asia has been undergoing the worst ever period in its long conflict infused, blood soaked history since the wave of revolutionary fervour and popular demonstrations against autocratic regimes swept through the Arab world from the winter of 2010-2011 onwards. Seven years on, the only truly positive development is that the Islamic State, in its territorial manifestation, is on the verge of comprehensive military defeat and that the conflicts in Iraq and Syria have wound down to a considerable extent. However, as President Assad will continue to be in power - at least for the foreseeable future - with almost 35 percent of the country not under his control, various heavily armed rebel groups will continue to fight. The situation in Yemen is getting more complicated and deteriorating further. Saudi Arabia cannot win this war.

Yemen is on the anvil of an unprecedentedly monumental humanitarian disaster. Saudi Arabia's heightening and unpredictable foreign policy assertiveness, combined with unprecedented domestic developments in the country, is creating dangerous new uncertainties. The bitter hostility that marks the Saudi Iranian standoff is becoming more volatile by the day.

Iran seems to be emerging as the most influential country in West Asia, but is being subjected to a tightening diplomatic siege by the USA and facing rising internal vulnerabilities. Turkey continues to be proactively interfering in the region, and threatening increased military involvement in Iraq and Syria against the Kurds.

Israel is taking the fullest advantage of the conflicts among West Asian Muslim countries, and the carte blanche backing of US President Donald Trump, the most pro Israeli US president ever, to expand settlements and further curtail Palestinian's rights.

Amongst the major powers, Russia has very clearly emerged as the most significant player in West Asia. Trump's policies in West Asia have very considerable potential for further destabilising the region rather than contributing to reduction in conflicts and tension.

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China is concentrating on further strengthening its already very strong economic ties with all countries of the region while remaining comparatively unobtrusively engaged with the politico-military aspects of the multifarious problems in the region being a Permanent Member of the UN Security Council.

New tactical and strategic equations are emerging which could not have even be imagined just a few years ago. Until increasingly contentious and hostile sectarianism is contained, and the practice of using hundreds of thousands of 'mujahedeen' being patronised and used by different countries as proxy armies to overthrow or undermine regimes in other countries is abandoned, it is difficult to envisage any meaningful reduction in conflicts in West Asia. Armed intervention by foreign countries in the internal affairs of other countries with a view to bringing about regime change remains rampant.

Furthermore, if solutions are conceived of in terms of zero-sum outcomes (as Saudi/UAE and US narratives suggest) conflicts cannot end. It is difficult to visualise any meaningful improvement in the situation in the foreseeable future. Indeed, with leaders of some countries displaying increasingly pugnacious behaviour and rhetoric, there are distinct possibilities of new conflicts arising. This is the overall current geopolitical scenario in West Asia.

Implications for India

West Asia has two distinct regions: the Levant and the Gulf region. In the contemporary definition, the Levant includes Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria, and some would include the northern part of Iraq - the area that became part of the Islamic State. Yemen is not part of either region. Armed conflicts within and between countries in the context of the revolutionary unrest that swept the Arab world from the winter of 2010-11 onwards have been taking place primarily in the Levant and Yemen. These conflicts have not had any adverse impact on India for two reasons: first, except for Israel, India has no substantive national interest dependency on any of these countries; and secondly, because India has adopted a completely hands-off approach vis-à-vis these conflicts.

The Gulf region of West Asia comprises the six GCC countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran, and Iraq. India has extremely important substantive interests in these eight countries, and in Israel. Though there are very serious disputes and extremely bitter rhetorical confrontations between Saudi Arabia and UAE on the one

side and Iran on the other and between the USA and Israel on the one side and Iran on the other, so far no armed conflicts have taken place between them. For India, its relationships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the USA are amongst its most important global relationships, and to preserve them simultaneously with each of the four countries needs skilled diplomatic navigation by India. Fortunately for India, a very solid foundation has been built up over the past three decades.

It is noteworthy that India's relationships with the GCC countries, Iran, and Israel started growing meaningfully simultaneously in the early 1990s, with Prime Minister Narasimha Rao establishing full diplomatic relations with Israel in January 1992 and reaching out to a less than friendly Iran. The highest point of the India-Iran relationship was in the mid 1990s when India and Iran strongly supported the Northern Alliance against the Pakistan installed Taliban. Based on mutual benefit and advantage, they developed in parallel without impinging on each other even as each of these countries was fully aware of India's developing relations with the others. This transparent approach has gone down well for India.

Iran's President Khatami was the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day in 2003. The same year, President Bush included Iran amongst the three countries that constituted an 'axis of evil' but pragmatically ignored developing India-Iran bonhomie. He reversed decades of enormous pressure on India on nuclear-related issues, and oversaw the signing of Indo-United States civil nuclear deal on 18 July 2005, capped by his repeated declarations that the USA intended to help India become a great power. The USA has been strongly backing India's membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group. Despite President Trump's well known strong antipathy toward Iran, he has expressed understanding for India's relationship with Iran in the context of Chabahar port. Except for China, the other four permanent members endorsed India's quest for permanent membership of the United Nations Security Council. Taken together, these developments constitute public recognition that the world welcomes India's rise, in contrast with growing anxieties about China's rise.

The rather rapid diplomatic rehabilitation of India consequent on its nuclear tests in 1998 as well as the complete lack of support for Pakistan following its Kargil misadventure in 1999 from the USA and its Gulf allies, the first time there was such a response in the long history of the India-Pakistan conflicts - were confirmation that positive geopolitical ground realities were emerging for India.

A strong economy is the fundamental bedrock of political clout and increasing military prowess. India's GDP stood at Rs 5,86,212 crore in 1991 when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao launched dramatic economic reform and liberalisation. 25 years later, it was Rs 1,35,76,086 crore, up 2216 percent. In dollar terms, India's GDP crossed the US\$2 trillion mark in 2015-16. India is now considered the fastest growing major economy in the world, and is tipped to be the second largest economy in the world by 2050. It has been the world's second largest economy in PPP terms for some years now.

Even as all this was happening Pakistan was increasingly descending into political instability due to rising Islamic militancy and terrorism. The deadly terrorist attacks in November 2008 in Mumbai became a watershed. GCC countries finally recognized the potential dangers to the region of Pakistani-sponsored terrorism against India. These attacks were strongly and unequivocally condemned, though without explicitly naming Pakistan. Since then, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided excellent and expanding anti-terrorism cooperation by repatriating those wanted in India for terrorist activity within India, despite intensive efforts by Pakistan to prevent such repatriations.

India's Muslim population is 180 million - the third largest in the world. It is also the least radicalised Muslim community in the world. In the contemporary context of rampaging terrorism in the name of Islam, it is particularly significant that there has been no Daesh related terrorist attack in India.

Due to all these factors, and being almost next door to the Gulf region with which it has enjoyed uninterrupted people to people interaction from the dawn of history, it was natural for countries in the Gulf region to start looking at India very differently, and seek to cultivate the strongest possible relations with it.

The advent of the new millennium witnessed a flurry of visits by GCC rulers to India. The big ticket visit was that of King Abdullah. India was the second country he visited after ascending the throne; the initiative was entirely that of Saudi Arabia. One of the many particularly notable things that happened during this visit was that the King personally signed the Joint Declaration with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh - Saudi monarchs do not usually do this. He again signed the Riyadh Declaration when Prime Minister Manmohan Singh paid a return visit in 2010. Thereafter, an impressive exchange of visits at the level of Head of State/Government between Gulf countries and India started taking place even as very serious conflicts were going on in West Asia in which these countries were deeply involved.

During 2015-16, in a ten-month period, Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Qatar, and hosted the de facto ruler of the UAE, the Abu Dhabi Crown Prince, in February 2016 in Delhi, after which the Crown Prince was the Chief Guest at India's Republic Day celebrations in January 2017. Never had an Indian prime minister engaged personally with West Asia with such intensity. Since then, Prime Minister Modi also visited Israel in July 2017. Despite India's vote against President Trump's declaration of Jerusalem as Israel's capital at the United Nations in January 2018, the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu paid a particularly high profile 6 day visit to India during which Prime Minister went out of his way to extend unprecedented courtesies. It merits mention that just two days before Netanyahu's visit, the Iranian Transport Minister visited and told the press that everything is on track regarding the Chabahar port and associated projects, including the construction of railway line; he also announced that President Rouhani will be visiting India in 2018.

Over 8 million Indians live and work in the GCC countries, sending remittances of around US\$ 35 - 40 billion back home annually. There are over 3 million each in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Indians are the largest expatriate group in each of the six GCC countries. They constitute 37 percent of all expatriates in the GCC countries, making them the foreign nationality of first preference. These 8 countries of West Asia's Gulf region collectively supply almost 2/3rds of India's oil requirements, and more than 90 percent of its gas requirements. As a group they have also become India's leading trade partner. In the past decade, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have consistently been amongst India's top 4 trade partners.

All these facts self-evidently attest that no major power has the kind of people-to-people socio-cultural compatibility and socio-economic interdependence with the GCC countries in particular and the Gulf region in general that India does. The political relationship is also flourishing.

This happy situation has come about because Gulf countries have been very keen on establishing a close relationship with India. This is borne out by the following facts:

The 'Hydrocarbon Relationship'

In an intensely competitive environment where oil exporters are battling for market share, they are as keen to export to India as India is keen to ensure assured long-term access to energy resources. Therefore, the India-Gulf countries' hydrocarbons relationship has become a very strong,

mutually beneficial symbiotic relationship.

Whenever oil supply disruptions from particular countries have happened due to regional or international geopolitical events, one or more countries of the region themselves stepped in to fill the breach on their own. Oil has never been used as an economic or political weapon against India by any of these countries - even during Indo-Pakistan conflicts when many of them had particularly special relations with Pakistan.

During the UAE's Crown Prince's visit to India in January 2017, the Chief Executive Officer of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company invited India to explore investments in upstream oil and gas exploration and downstream in refining and petrochemicals; and to store 6 million tonnes of oil in an Indian Strategic Oil Reserve facility. Both are firsts from a GCC country.

Indian Diaspora in the GCC countries

Indians outnumber indigenous Emiratis (in the UAE) by 2 1/2 times, and are more than twice the number of Pakistanis; in Qatar Indians are twice the number of indigenous Qataris, and more than four times the number of Pakistanis; in Saudi Arabia Indians are almost double the number of Pakistanis. All these three countries have a special relationship with Pakistan. Till the end of the 1990s, Pakistanis were significantly more in number than Indians. Thus, these countries have made a conscious choice in favour of India over Pakistan.

Being overwhelmingly Muslim countries in which internal security is the single most important policy priority - even more so in the context of the current troubles in the region - these facts constitute an enormous vote of confidence in Indians and India.

India has adopted a completely hands off approach in relation to the multiple conflicts going on in West Asia. Leaders on both sides have tacitly agreed that they would focus on strengthening, deepening, and widening the scope of bilateral relations as is exhibited in the language of all the Joint Statements since 2006. It is worth noting that there are no contentious bilateral disputes.

Despite India's excellent mutually beneficial bilateral relations with all West Asian countries, the reality is that India does not have any strategic influence or leverage whatsoever with any of these countries in relation to the raging disputes and conflicts. Thus, India must continue with its completely

hands-off approach, and must not attempt to mediate between contending parties in any of the West Asian conflicts under any circumstances, as any such attempt is doomed to failure and could only create misunderstandings with one or both sides.

As long as there is no war between Iran and Saudi Arabia/UAE, the excellent relationship between India and countries of the Gulf region should continue. The primary focus of attention for the Gulf counties is on the conflicts in the region and, therefore, to ensure that they maintain their interest in the further strengthening of their relations with India, India needs to get its act together to take advantage of opportunities in relation to the connectivity, economics, energy, and investment fields. It is more than three years since the UAE offered to invest US\$ 75 billion in India, the largest amount ever committed to India in writing at the highest levels by any country in the world. However, India has not yet been able to provide a single project.

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Shifting Diplomatic Gears in a Rapidly Unravelling West Asia

Adil Rasheed*

The near extermination of the ISIS threat from West Asia has, ironically, brought a new set of challenges in its train. Major global powers that came together to pound the terrorist proto-state to smithereens are now contending with each other to carve their own geostrategic space at the expense of setting the regional order right.

A new power axis - Russia, Iran, Turkey, and to an extent China - threatens to arbitrate the post ISIS dispensation by bringing Iraq and Syria into their expanding sphere of influence, thereby upsetting the traditional hegemonic applecart of the USA in the region, along with its allies - Israel and Saudi Arabia. Thus, an incipient Cold War is playing out in this most fractious hub of geopolitics, with the USA threatening to rescind on its commitment to the Iran nuclear deal, and planning to impose fresh sanctions on Russia before its presidential elections in March.

A Crescendo of Crises

The ferocity with which major geopolitical events have wracked West Asia over the past year is a cause for serious concern, as any of these events has the potential of flaring up into a serious international crisis in an already fraught and destabilised region.

To list just a few flashpoints: we have the simmering groundswell of public discontent against the Iranian regime that manifested in the New Year protests spreading across 31 provinces; the still unravelling power struggle within the House of Saud under the garb of an anti-corruption drive led by a young and 'inexperienced' Crown Prince; a widening wedge within the GCC following the Saudi Arabia-led travel and trade blockade of Qatar; the continuing barrage of Scud-like missiles from Yemen landing ever so close to the Saudi capital; and the USA unilaterally declaring Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and preparing to move its embassy to the 'Holy City'.

Worsening the present scenario is the emergence of a dangerous bi-polarity in the region, with Cold War rivals the USA, Israel, and Saudi Arabia pitted

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against a 'revisionist' Russia that is forging alliances with Turkey, Iran, and now Egypt. Thus, the incidence of any geopolitical crisis in the near to medium term cannot be discounted which, in turn, might have severe implications for India. With arguably more at stake than any other country outside the region, India has over 7 million of its citizens working in GCC states alone, an economy that remains vulnerable to energy price fluctuations, and a maritime trade that has critical chokepoints on its sea lanes through the Gulf region, such as the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab Al Mandeb.

India: The Cost of being a Mute Spectator

Therefore, the time has come for India to reconsider the continuing viability of its hitherto successful policy of diplomatic non-intervention in West Asia. By making full use of its well-earned goodwill among all regional players – who are cognizant of India's growing geopolitical heft and its major stakes in the socio-economic development of the region – the country needs to consider shifting its diplomatic gear into a more active peace building, if not peace-making role, rather than remaining a passive fence-sitter in a presumed state of incapacity. In any case, New Delhi should at least start making arrangements in the event any sudden contingencies arise out of the worsening situation.

The purpose of this essay is not to sound alarmist, but to debate the trajectory of the worsening situation in the region in order to prepare ourselves for dire situations. Any futuristic scenario building is always riddled with uncertainties; but the appearance of a black swan in the treacherous waters of West Asia seems less far-fetched today than ever before. In fact, many analysts aver that West Asia is an accident waiting to happen!

This essay posits that there is now a growing sense of unease among individual actors of the region, who are faced with major internal and external challenges, which many openly characterize as being of an existential nature. In such a charged atmosphere, there is a high degree of possibility for an uncalculated, unilateral action (like many recent actions by major powers in the region) that might snowball into a major international crisis. The following sections briefly survey these inner vulnerabilities of the regimes in the region that make them susceptible to taking desperate, uncalculated risks in times of danger, thereby making a major geopolitical crisis hitting the region the most likely scenario in the near to medium term, with disastrous repercussions for the world and the Indian economy.

Iran: Regional Strengths, Internal Vulnerabilities

In the nearly four decades of its history, the theocratic regime of Iran has never enjoyed a more commanding presence across West Asia than it does at present. However, it has also never felt equally vulnerable internally, with the Supreme Leader Ali Khomeini drawing flak from both hard line and reformist groups as well as from a growing cross-section of the public as seen during the January protests that spread over a hundred towns and cities across all provinces.

For a very long time, the country has remained under severe international sanctions, which has seriously impaired its economic progress, thereby making its people increasingly frustrated with the regime's highly touted foreign policy.

In fact, the Iranian government appears to have been cognizant of rising public umbrage for a long time, which compelled it to forge a nuclear deal (JCPOA) with the P5+1 countries in 2015, which it then sold to its people as a foreign policy breakthrough that would pave the way for the lifting of sanctions, the facility to sell oil worldwide, and the 'unfreezing' of Iranian assets in various international financial institutions.

However, the precipitous fall in oil prices and the election of an inimical US President following the deal did not deliver the Iranian economy the promised reprieve it was looking for. With President Trump not certifying the nuclear deal with Iran, a substantial segment of the Iranian population - particularly the economically challenged sections - have grown increasingly disillusioned with the theocratic dispensation.

Anticipating public unease, the re-elected Rouhani government in May last year formed a cabinet filled with members from the regime's unpopular intelligence agencies. Many of its new ministers are said to have had dubious human rights records, and their inclusion had to be made at the expense of the first woman minister and leaders from ethnic and religious minorities that Rouhani had promised in his pre-election campaign.

Thus, many eyebrows were raised when Alireza Avaii was appointed justice minister last year, although he is said to be involved with the infamous 'Death Committee' that supervised the alleged execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. Even Communications Minister Mohammad-Javad Azari-Jahromi and Labour Minister Ali Rabiei are alleged to have been intelligence officials in charge of interrogations, torture, and censorship.

These cabinet appointments by the Iranian government are indicative of its increasing sense of insecurity on the internal front which, in turn, makes it

susceptible to engaging in militaristic misadventures abroad in order to secure greater authority and control within.

It is important to note here that Iranian Defence Minister said a few months ago that if the Saudis did anything “ignorant”, his country will leave “no area untouched” in that country except Mecca and Medina. The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Force also issued a threat to Israel last year that “Hezbollah and the revolutionary youths of the Muslim world can target the fake regime of Israel anytime they decide to do so.”

Saudi Arabia: The Bogey of Iran’s Sectarianism

A similar existential angst bedevils the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As internal squabbles increase among a new generation of princely claimants to the throne (with King Salman bin Abdulaziz being the last of Ibn Saud’s many sons), Saudi Arabia has been externalizing its internal insecurities by successfully demonizing the Shiite theocratic state of Iran in the eyes of the West. As sectarian bitterness spews out of its religious institutions and media outlets, Saudi foreign policy and military debacles remain shrouded from the gaze of the domestic audience, including setbacks in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Qatar.

Saudi Arabia is also in the midst of a major socio-political change. With the ascension of the octogenarian King Salman bin Abdulaziz to the throne in 2015 and the rise of his 32 year-old-son Mohammed bin Salman (popularly known as MBS) as the Crown Prince, Saudi Arabia has sought to modernize its economy under the Vision 2030 programme, giving more freedom to its women population, and opening up its cultural centres and entertainment outlets, etc.

These measures are in response to an increasingly restive Saudi population facing economic challenges following a secular decline in oil prices and a large unemployed youth bulge rising from the fact that 70 percent of the population being under the age of 30. In an increasingly unpredictable global economic environment, the new leadership’s plan to transform Saudi Arabia from an oil-revenue dependent country into a modern knowledge-based economy by 2030 appears too ambitious to say the least.

Meanwhile, the Saudi leadership appears increasingly isolated and beleaguered not only in the region (given its poor relations with Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and now Egypt) and among certain members of the GCC, but even within the walls of the royal household. Having learnt that its proxies often

turn rogue, Saudi Arabia has started flexing its own diplomatic and military muscle - such as in Yemen and Qatar - with disastrous consequences. It is in the context of these inherent insecurities and fractiousness that the Saudi kingdom appears more susceptible to taking extreme decisions, mainly against its formidable rival Iran, which might put regional security in jeopardy.

A New Cold War Heats Up in West Asia

Many US experts claim that, these days, US hegemony in West Asia is being seriously challenged by Russia. In recent years, Kremlin has managed to rope in NATO member Turkey, Iran, and now Egypt into its expanding regional orbit. With the assistance of Iran and the grudging acceptance of Turkey, it has helped Bashar Al-Assad reclaim most of his lost territories in Syria, much to the chagrin of his hapless adversaries in the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Israel.

Many US strategists view the Obama administration's muddled policies in the Middle East, particularly the abandonment of its own 'red lines' over chemical weapons use in Syria, as the turning point in the geostrategic game that allowed Moscow to step in and increase its diplomatic clout.

The drubbing received by the Trump administration at the UN vote against its decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, followed by the poor US showing in another UN vote over Iran's crackdown during recent protests, has done little to salvage US prestige and influence in the region.

One can only expect and an even more bellicose response from an embittered and beleaguered Trump administration in the event of another regional showdown with Russia or Iran in the near term. Perhaps the only beneficiary from a prospective geopolitical calamity involving most global players would be China.

US-Israeli Right-wing Governments

Much like Saudi Arabia, Israel too considers Iran a real and present danger to its existence. On the one hand, it is wary of Iran's role in stirring up a Palestinian uprising given Tehran's stated support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with the head of Iran's Quds Force, Qasem Solaimani, recently claiming to be in direct contact with the military commanders of the two Islamist groups. On the other hand, Israel is concerned about the growing military strength of Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, following the latter's successful experience in conventional warfare in the Syrian conflict, and its ability to

now fully focus on confronting Israel in southern Lebanon and south-western Syria.

In order to overcome these challenges, Israel has reportedly signed a secret agreement with the USA in December last year, following talks between Israeli national security advisor Meir Ben-Shabbat and his US counterpart H.R. McMaster, for the two sides to take action and devise scenarios against Iran on several fronts. The news of the agreement was released by Israel's television outlet Channel 10, and points to a growing commitment to address the Iranian challenge.

Suggestions for a Pro-active Indian Engagement

It is generally assumed that most options discussed in India for addressing issues relating to West Asia have been so thoroughly explored that there appears to be no point in revisiting them. There is a critical wariness that appears dismissive of any new proposal, let alone revisiting earlier explored options in a new light. Still, this essay would like to submit a few suggestions for consideration.

- a) **Diplomatic pre-emption versus post-crisis damage control:** As argued earlier, India has more at stake in West Asia than any other external power in the region. Although our unstated policy of diplomatic disengagement has served us well till date, we may need to re-evaluate the cost of letting the dangerous melee undermine our vital national interests right before our eyes, or taking a more pro-active approach for promoting peace in the region in a way that it does not violate our carefully cultivated relations with any of the contending parties. The recent French intervention in reinstating Sa'ad Hariri to the position of premiership - after the latter had resigned from that position during his protracted sojourn in Saudi Arabia - helped diffuse a major political crisis in Lebanon. Thus, proactive peaceful interventions can prove to be less costly than post-crisis disaster management, and the time has come for Indian leadership to step up to the challenge.
- b) **The need for a clear, coherent West Asia policy:** In times of crisis, any country apparently deferring the enunciation of a clearly stated policy creates more problems, and no perceived benefits. For one, the country is not respected or even trusted in the larger international community as expediency often leads to embarrassing, poorly understood, and even self-defeating choices. The statement of a clearly stated policy informs not only the external players but brings clarity to the government in the

pursuance of its stated goals. The government should come out with a White Paper on West Asia which says that India wants all sides to resolve their differences, conform to international conventions, and that it shall be open to mediate if so desired by the contending parties. In this way, India will be able to project itself as a trustworthy power and a force for good in the region.

- c) **The need for leveraging the Indian Diaspora:** It is generally assumed that the Indian Diaspora in West Asia, particularly in the Gulf countries, mainly constitutes blue-collar workers. Few recognize the presence of eminent Indian business tycoons like Khimji Ramdass (the only Hindu Sheikh in the GCC), Mukesh Jagtiani, Yusuff Ali M.A., and Sunil Vaswani, along with B. R. Shetty, Sunny Varkey, Ram Buxani, etc. Some of them, like Mohan Jashanmal (spokesperson for the Indian Diaspora, founder of the India Club in Abu Dhabi, and chairperson of the Indian Business Group) have done a lot for promoting the interest of India and the Indian community abroad. Perhaps, the time has come to develop stronger linkages with these leading Indian luminaries in the region, not only for promoting the welfare of the Indian Diaspora but also for promoting the Indian outlook and interests in the region. Various forums, cultural centres, think tanks, and direct channels of communications should be developed for a closer exchange between the Indian government and non-resident Indians.
- d) **Teaming up with Europe for a mediating role:** The growing bi-polarity in West Asia, with the Trump administration aligning itself more closely with traditional regional allies, like Israel and Saudi Arabia, against a resurgent Russia, as well as joining forces with Iran and Turkey makes the region a veritable powder keg. The absence of any influential mediating power bloc that might keep the contending parties at bay from potentially disastrous geopolitical outcomes worsens the prospects of peace in the medium to long term. Perhaps, India needs to take a bold and imaginative leadership position to safeguard its vital interests in the region by teaming up with other major world powers which may have the same influence, respect, and credibility like India to bring all the contending sides to a better understanding.

In this respect, the role of European nations – such as France, Britain and Germany – who have stuck to internationally agreed positions on the Iran nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and the status of Jerusalem in a non-partisan, and statesmanlike manner, could be engaged by India for a wide variety of well-coordinated peaceful initiatives. These could involve various diplomatic

means and channels, including bilateral and multi-lateral efforts, to restrain the USA and Russia from getting trapped in any contentious row or conflict from which they might find it difficult to disengage.

India and Europe have strong trade links (EU being India's biggest trading partner), most of which find passage through the chokepoints on the sea-lanes through West Asia and have critical geostrategic, cultural, demographic, and economic interests tied to peace in West Asia and, as exponents of liberal democracies and multiculturalism, they would prove ideal peaceful intermediaries in diffusing any untoward escalation.

India's intervention would re-establish the nation's credibility as a constructive player among all parties and, to an extent, forestall growing Chinese influence in the region.

Conclusion

There is no denying that the diplomatic tight rope India has walked for decades in West Asia has served the country well till date. However, the growing geopolitical and economic interdependence with the region now necessitates greater peaceful engagement to secure India's long term interests, and to fulfil the dreams of our aspirational population which can never be realized without making West Asian peace and security integral to India's grand strategic geopolitical and economic design.

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The 'Security Dilemma' in West Asia: Implications and Options for India

Sameena Hameed*

Nearly half of the world's civilian deaths have taken place in Iraq, Yemen, and Syria in this decade. More than 17 million have fled their homes. This displacement of people has been unprecedented since the World War II. Millions are at risk of epidemics and starvation. Isn't this more disastrous than any Third World War? The fractious regional order in West Asia has been plagued by virulent conflicts, and rather than diplomacy preventive wars/strikes have become the new norm. The litany of failed states and failed peace processes have led to the cancerous global growth of extremist and Jihadi militias, along with ethnic, tribal, religious militias, and networked criminals.

In a recent report, the International Committee of the Red Cross has revealed that five times more people have died in city offensive rather than in other regular battles. 'War by other means' has blurred the distinction between military and civilian targets. Saudi Arabia seems to have not yet reached 'war fatigue' from the invincible wars in Yemen and Syria, and is positioning itself for another one by posing Iran as an 'existential threat'. Iran is also firming itself up to resist the escalating threat by the USA and the looming risk of renewed sanctions by boosting its proxies and local militias in the region. In an asymmetric war-like situation, Iran has sustained its retaliatory capability against US led international isolation as well as against Arab-Sunni mobilization by propping up regimes in Syria and Iraq, and maintaining its influence in Yemen, Lebanon, and Bahrain through militias. The *Al-Hashd Al-Sha'abi*, the Popular Mobilization Forces, is modelled on the Iranian Basij paramilitary force and outnumbers the Iraqi state army. By backing shia militias like Hizbollah, Iran has been winning proxy wars in Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq. At the same time, Saudi Arabia and its allies are backing militias fighting the Houthis in Yemen and the Syrian opposition forces fighting the Assad regime. Iran has so far had an upper hand as the Saudi military arsenal, though being the best, is designed for large conventional wars, and not proxy wars. Besides, there is a minuscule deployment of ground forces and most of the fighting is done either through the aerial routes or through local/tribal

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militias. The vicious circle of militia warfare as created by what is known as the 'security dilemma'¹ unleashed by the threat of asymmetric war has created a complex battle fields in some West Asian countries.

In Syria, the government negotiator has quit the UN-led peace talks in Geneva as the opposition insisted that Bashaar-al-Asad should play no role in the interim post-war government. At the same time, the peace process through 'intra-Syrian dialogue' initiated by the troika of Russia, Iran and Turkey has been complicated by Turkey's military offensive along its border with Syria. The Kurdish question would continue to circumscribe the efforts of Iran and Turkey of ironing out difference among the various interest groups in Syria due to its implications in their own countries.

In Libya, the militias that were nurtured to fight Qaddafi's forces for eight months, and later co-opted by the transitional government to fill the security vacuum have put the country in a downward tailspin. The political divide in Libya, with three governments in Tripoli, Tobruk, and Benghazi seeking control and authority through armed militias, has undermined the political process with low voter turnout at each successive election. Even though, Sirte has been freed from the strong hold of the ISIS, Libya still remains a vulnerable location where indicators for its regrouping in Central Libya are reported as political rivals focus on populated coastlines and consume the security infrastructure in their conflict. Armed fuel smugglers and human traffickers have mushroomed along the coastline between Tripoli and the Tunisian border, amassing huge wealth through extensive criminal networks.

Besides, multiple social and economic grievances have been feeding on one another. The political economy of oil dependence and the burgeoning demographic/societal pressure of the youth bulge are making the existing social contract between the regimes and their people untenable. The people facing declining living standards have been questioning the legitimacy and accountability of their regimes. The initial protests during the Arab uprising to vent these grievances have been subsumed in civil wars that imploded in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen as Saudi Arabia and Iran fought for regional dominance through proxy wars, and as ISIS and other jihadist/extremist groups grew and fed on the sectarian mobilisation of the regional rivals.

States have often created grave external threat perceptions for external/regional mobilisation and gaining greater internal control. Projecting Iran as a common external enemy has served the cause of Arab-Sunni mobilization for the regimes in the region as well as the pretext for tightening civil liberties

even as they are being forced to, with falling oil revenues, roll back some of their patronage in the form of subsidies, lesser public sector job opportunities, and levy taxes. They are also conveniently cashing in on hardening US-Iran relations under the Trump administration, to firm up the otherwise faltering US commitment to the region. The escalation of belligerent rhetoric and regional mobilization against Iran would push it further to strengthen its proxy warfare strategy through local militias against US backed regional coalitions, thus stimulating similar responses from its Arab neighbours. This fuels/feeds the coalescing of sectarianism with the Jihadists that has been taking place due to the failings of Nouri al-Maliki's sectarian politics in Iraq².

The protagonists of 'divine warfare' imagine the world as an unambiguous realm of good and evil, and distinguish their acts from other forms of violence by directly involving God as an active role player. They pursue a 'war without limits' where total destruction of the other is the desired aim, and martyrdom a cherished prize³. This implies that any interventions become futile as warring groups never reach 'war-fatigue'. The scenario is – as former Indian envoy to a number of Gulf countries, Talmiz Ahmed, aptly describes it – 'quicksand' that threatens to grasp those on it and around it.

So, what are the implications for India? And, what are its options?

The region is India's immediate maritime neighbourhood, and home to about eight million Indians and a source of livelihood for their families back home through billions of dollars in annual remittances. The impact of dipping fortunes of the countries in the Gulf by the low oil prices since 2014 as well as by the escalating geopolitical and social tensions and the Qatar blockade is perceptible. Qatar is reported (by *The Economic Times* 5 November 2017) to have cancelled its order of 8 long dhows costing 8-9 crores each, in which it wanted to host visitors for the World Cup 2022 from the Bepore based Baramy ship builders in Kerala. The inwards flow of remittances has also declined by 12 percent between 2014-16. Though remittances constitute a small percentage of India's GDP, at the sub-national level, the share is as high as 36 percent of Kerala's GDP. Internal labour migration to Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal has been driven by job opportunities emanating out of flow of Gulf remittances to these state. Falling Gulf remittances affects their household incomes as well. India has been seeking international partnerships to facilitate domestic economic transformation.⁴ Its relations with the USA and Japan have been planned in such a way as to give impetus to the growth trajectory of India.

Among the Gulf countries, the UAE acquires special place in this respect. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority will become the first institutional investor in the National Investment Infrastructure Fund and a shareholder in its investment management company, National Investment and Infrastructure Ltd. It has also committed \$75 billion investment fund in India. The geopolitical contentions in the region and the vulnerability of regimes would also determine the flow of investable funds to their strategic partners. Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund (PIF), with a proposed investment of \$20 billion to a \$40 billion fund with a US private equity firm Blackstone, which was founded by Trump supporter Stephen Allen Schwarzman, 3.5 billion in the US company Uber, and a commitment of \$10 billion in Russia speak of their geopolitical underpinning.

India's merchandise trade with the West Asian region has also been consistently declining in the last few years. It declined from \$803 billion in 2013 to \$617 billion in 2016. Partly, the decline is attributed to falling oil prices; but it is also reflective of declining demand/production from the conflict ridden region. The displacement and dispossession of the people from conflict zones have already put pressure on the neighbouring countries and some European countries beyond their carrying capacity. It is enmeshing with the networks of human traffickers. India has already come under pressure due to the mass exodus of the Rohingyas from Myanmar, and has been battling human trafficking for some time. The proliferation of Jihadi groups and the recent spate of pirate attacks on navy vessels and merchant tankers in the narrow strait of Yemen speak of symbiotic nexus between the two. This poses a serious maritime security challenge to India's energy security and trade with the region. India depends on the region and regional sea routes for the bulk of its energy supply, even the ones coming from the USA and Nigeria.

India has been skilfully navigating the Saudi-Iran/Israel-Palestine fissures in the region, and has bilateral relations with all these countries which are significant in their own context. India's most tangible manifestation of its relation with Iran is cooperation in the transport and trade corridor from the port of Chabahar in the Gulf to Herat in Afghanistan. Both are also cooperating on the building of an ambitious International North-South Transportation Corridor that would link the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas to Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia. India aims to link Chabahar and the North-South projects as an alternative to China's transcontinental Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). It also offers Iran ways to circumvent its strategic isolation. India's relationship with Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf countries are on an equally high pedestal.

It has secured their cooperation in the extradition of many terrorists to India despite Pakistan's disapproval. India has also successfully de-hyphenated its relations with Israel from the Palestinian issue while maintaining credible support to their cause by its vote in the UN over Jerusalem. It has also displayed strategic autonomy in its foreign policy by parting with US positions on contentious debates and resolutions on the West Asian conflict, especially on Syria and Libya.

India has also made significant contribution to building and strengthening multilateral forums. It is one of the top three troop contributors, with strong professional army personnel deployed in UN peace keeping. It has diplomatically balanced opponents/competitors through multilateral alliances/forums, like the India-Japan-US trilateral, the India-Japan-Australia trilateral, and India-Japan-Australia-US Quad and BIMSTEC. At the same time, it engages them through SAARC/BRICS. India resonates well with the members of ASEAN as seen in the enthusiasm with which their leaders became chief guests for this year's (2018) Republic Day's celebrations. India's ties with the USA have been steadily growing, and cover vast areas of collaboration with a strong convergence of interests and concerns. India's relationship with Russia has also grown substantially in the last two years.

While India has traditionally followed a policy of non-intervention which stands well on the ravages of external interventions in conflict zones, it nevertheless has all the convening power to facilitate peace initiatives. Conflicts intertwined with terror attacks have become transnational. Thus, multilateral bodies/forums are the practical units of peace and confidence building. India can still perform a crucial role in building peace and stability without appearing to take sides or antagonizing sections of its own society.

Peace deals/agreements are just one step in the tortuous road to lasting peace, and the international community should engage as advisors, mediators, and guarantors for effective implementation and continuous confidence building as well as financial supporters to rehabilitate warring groups. Some of the crucial constituents of peace deals/process that moved some of the world's worst conflicts are financial aid (Egypt-Israel conflict); political participation/representation/reforms in domestic policies (civil wars in El Salvador, Bosnia, Papua New Guinea, Nepal); participation of all stakeholders/spoilers in society (the four decade long conflict in Guatemala, Liberia); and power sharing and incentives to paramilitaries to disarm (Northern Ireland, Columbia). Most of the deals were not conditioned on regime change but worked with existing regimes for credible domestic reforms. Regime changes are best left to the

will of the people. The deals have to be implemented by willing governments, and international recognition/financial assistance are tested drivers for the political motivation to act. Even seemingly, the most recalcitrant regime of North Korea has been seen as responding positively to such diplomatic initiatives in the 1990s, till the USA started failing on its commitments.⁵

Russian President Putin has already made intensive contacts with the USA, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to seek common ground. Russia's display of game changing military punch against the Islamic State goons in Syria, and its diplomatic initiatives of reaching to the countries of the region has enrolled it as a credible/influential player in the region. The first official visit of a Saudi King to Russia in October 2016, with an investment commitment of \$10 billion, speaks volumes of approving perceptions of the initiatives.

The quest for peace must ensure a just agreement that preserves the dignity of nations, their people, and their culture. The confidence of states with threat perceptions of asymmetric war/conflict should be boosted with economic engagements, security initiatives, and diplomatic dialogue. There is also a need to impress upon all belligerent nations that they have reached a 'hurting stalemate' through these indecisive attrition wars. There are already reports that Saudi Arabia wants to get out of Yemen. Mutual confidence building and the strengthening of the official armies of countries would help in mitigating their threat perceptions and, thus, breaking the security dilemma. Strategic and financial assistance must be made contingent upon a government's effort to disband paramilitary groups, which would substantially de-escalate otherwise bitter and intractable conflicts. The governments in the region have been facing the challenge of all pervasive terrorism, and should converge on dismantling their 'Frankenstein'.

Financial support and development efforts in the region would help to disarm and rehabilitate the militia. India is already doing some of this in stabilizing Afghanistan and engaging Iran. India is also contemplating holding military exercises with the Gulf countries with which it has signed security agreements. It needs to have more inclusive Indian Ocean maritime security with regional partners. Improving US-Russia relations, and the demotion of the Arab-Israeli divide are good signs for India to revitalize diplomacy to unite states and nations around shared values and interests in multilateral forums.

There is also need to counter and neutralize the discourse on the divine sanction for violence, and search for sanctity in preservation, peace, and reconciliation with plurality. India has been an influential contributor to the

global discourse of non-violence and non-alignment; it should continue to contribute and produce such narratives. Saudi Arabia's aim to showcase moderate Islam, and Iran's legacy of 'Dialogue Among Civilisations' are some of the emerging strengths of the region which India – in partnership of other countries in multilateral forum – can build upon to engage conflicting countries, boost their confidence, and enable them to shun para-militarism. While non-intervention is prudent on questions of regime change, which is best left to political process, facilitating intra-societal/intra-regional dialogue is a practical/positive approach toward the stabilisation of the region. India through different diplomacy/dialogue tracks can initiate mobilising states and civil society, religious scholars, intellectuals, corporate entrepreneurs, to foster development, reconciliation and efforts in post-conflict countries as well as facilitate rehabilitation of spoilers for enduring peace.

Notes

- ¹ The Security Dilemma, also known as the spiral model, is explained by a German scholar John H. Hertz in his book *Political Realism and Political Idealism :A Study in Theories and Realities* (University of Chicago Press, 1951) and a British scholar Sir Herbert Butterfield in his book *History and Human Relation*(Macmillian Press, 1951). They believe that attempts made by a state for its security are seen as offensive and as perceived threats by the other states, who respond with similar measures.
- ² Talmiz Ahmed, *Turmoil in West Asia: Sectarian Divide Shapes Regional Competition*, Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses, New Delhi, India, 2016
- ³ Talmiz Ahmad, *Children of Abraham at War: The Clash of Messianic Militarism*, Aakar Pub., New Delhi, India, 2011.
- ⁴ External Affairs ministers Sushma Swaraj said in August 2016, "In our diplomatic engagements in the last two years, you will therefore find that a major focus now is using international partnerships to advance domestic flagship programmes ... This tight meshing of domestic and diplomatic goals is in fact one of the hallmarks of the Modi Doctrine." <http://www.mea.gov.in/Speeches-Statements.htm?dtl/27314/Remarks+by+External+Affairs+Minister+at+the+launch+of+the+book+The+Modi+Doctrine+at+IIC+New+Delhi+August+13+2016>
- ⁵ Tim Shorrocks, "Diplomacy with North Korea Has Worked Before, and Can Work Again", *The Nation*, September 5, 2017.



India's Choices in the Middle East Today

Anil K. Trigunayat*

The Middle East is in a downward flux, and the present day conundrum has the potential to destabilise the region. This can have devastating impact on India which is in its close and extended strategic neighbourhood. While this situation may have been externally induced and exacerbated with the 2003 misadventure by the USA in Iraq – or for that matter in the backdrop of the so called Arab Spring, the NATO bombing of Libya, and the extended conflict in Syria – the Arab countries have also given wind to their deep seated intra-Arab and Shia-Sunni conflicts. The primacy for religious leadership and superiority in varying regional landscapes has also led to greater destabilisation and unpredictability. This could have disastrous ramifications for the countries themselves in the “Mutually Assured Destruction” syndrome.

While the Arab Spring in the past seven years has witnessed tectonic change broadly through overthrow of the well-entrenched regimes, the Gulf Monarchies – despite the rifts and inherent contradictions – have installed younger leaders in decisive leadership positions, be it in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, or the UAE. Three major economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are in an internecine blockade and turmoil since last year. And, to cope with decreasing oil revenues and the inherent discontent within the rigidity of the Saudi Society, Saudi Crown Prince Salman has already achieved some far reaching results through his reformist agenda and his Vision 2030. To make the country a more open and tolerant society, he has curbed the powers of the religious police, allowed women to drive, re-opened cinemas, and opened the country to foreign investment and tourism. His anti-corruption drive has detained a dozen or so princes from whom approximately US\$ 100 billion has been recovered as settlements. These are some of the visible deliverables. Of course, the Kingdom has yet to overcome the bias against its significant discontented Shia population that inhabits the oil rich areas, and wherein possibly lie the seeds of the next wave of the Arab Spring.

The onset of younger, ambitious and sometimes arrogant leaders has had its own problems as the consensus driven approach, despite underlying competition and tensions, has been missing, especially in the GCC. The situation has been further compounded with the new US Administration under President Trump which has been directly or indirectly nudging the Saudis by reversing

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the Obama outreach to Iran, and by the famous agreement by P5+1 being under threat. The GCC and Iran are also heavily armed as the major suppliers made hay while petro dollars burst the steams. On top of this, forces and bases from the USA, the UK, France, and Russia continue to pursue their geo strategic objectives – like fighting against the ISIS or counter piracy operations, arguably ensuring some stability in the region. This also has its flip side too as apparently tweets by President Trump during and after his Riyadh Summit emboldened the Saudis and Emiratis to precipitate the exceptional blockade against the tiny though gas rich Qatar which has been trying to internationally punch above its weight, thereby threatening the well ensconced Saudis – the religious head and custodian of the two Holy Mosques. However, for countries like India that wish to maintain the symmetry of benign cooperation, substantial potential challenges are inherent should things go out of hand. The equanimity in the regional and bilateral context will have to be confronted by hard choices.

Is India ready for this? This is the moot question.

India always had historic and civilisational links and interactions with the region – at least from the Indus-Dilmun and Mesopotamian times around 3000 BC through trade and intellectual exchanges. The Indian rupee was legal tender in the Gulf countries even until the 1970s. India's relations with the region have grown, deepened, and diversified over decades, although they have been tested, and sometimes even strained, especially during the 1973 oil crisis. But Indian equanimity and long term commitment to the region and its prosperity and stability was able to tide over the short-term hiatuses. India's policy of 'Look West' has been converted to 'Link West'. In recent times, high level exchanges have become frequent, which is clearly the way forward in the Arab world. India and Indians, despite the West Asia's misplaced empathic relations with Pakistan, enjoy tremendous good will and continue to be liked and respected by the people and governments in the Middle East as they are perceived as a stable and committed work force, contributing to the well being of the host countries. No wonder even in the GCC alone, there are over 8 million Indians and thousands of Indian companies and businesses, which make the region one of India's major trading partners. The region is also extremely important for India's energy security as almost 65-70 percent of our oil and gas requirements are met from there. In addition, the Indian Diaspora remittances contribute greatly to India's foreign exchange reserves. In recent times, the richer countries in the region have begun to see India as a reliable investment opportunity, and India is trying to veer the sovereign wealth funds

into investing over a trillion dollars in India -- one of the fastest growing major economies in the world. The countries in the region also look to India as a stabilising force, and would like to see more and more Indian security presence in the region. Hitherto, we have been somewhat reluctant.

Although we have maintained excellent bilateral relations with all the countries in the region – including with Israel since 1992 – hitherto we had predicated this engagement on the basis of our policy on the Palestinian issue, both due to our historic stand and domestic compulsions which had been greatly appreciated by the Arab world. Of course, with the 2014 onset of the BJP Government led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, there was a definite concern among the Arab countries that India will surely bend towards Israel at the expense of the Palestinian cause and Indo-Arab relations. Apart from crucial relations – be it the concern for Diaspora welfare or energy security or the volume of investment – the fact that Prime Minister Modi's first visits were not to Israel but to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Iran. And the way in which Prime Minister Modi developed great personal bonhomie with the leaders of these countries, has cemented trust, put them at ease, and reinforced their interest in India. No doubt the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar – despite being on the opposing sides of the horizon – are themselves looking to deepen ties with India as it is also in their own interest. Of course, the two Prime Minister level visits with Israel within a span of six months have not dampened that spirit. This has also been possible as the countries in the Middle East, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE and several others, want to or have begun to normalise the relations with the Jewish state. They are supporting an American project which was clearly evident during the recent Jerusalem controversy when Jordan and Turkey were on the fore front to rally and oppose the USA and Israeli position that undermines the well-established principles and red-lines.

In recent times, de-hyphenation between Israel and Palestine has been witnessed, and India has been taking positions on the instant merit of the issues at hand whether through voting or abstention in the UN. Most recently, the declaration of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the announcement regarding the shifting of the US Embassy to Jerusalem did test India's resolve in the wake of its growing strategic relationship with USA and Israel. However, India voted against the US announcement which was consistent with its long stated principled position even though some of the right wingers decried it. Due to our own Diaspora, the Middle East has always been an extension of our domestic platitudes. C. Rajamohan of Carnegie India, has summed up India's predicament.

The left accuses Modi of abandoning India's traditional solidarity with the Palestinians. The right attacks the PM for not voting with Israel when the UN General Assembly strongly criticised the US move to shift its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. These rival arguments are probably a good indicator that the South Block may have found a sensible middle path (*The Indian Express*, 15 January 2018).

On the other hand, during his much awaited visit in January 2018 – only the second Prime Ministerial visit since the establishment of diplomatic relations between India and Israel – Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was categorical in his public reaction that “One vote will not affect the bilateral relations”. No doubt during the official discussions they would have raised this while explaining the Israeli position, and seeking India's appreciation and support for it. On the other hand, after a high octane visit of Prime Minister Netanyahu to India, the upcoming visits of Prime Minister Modi to Palestine along with the UAE and Oman in February 2018 will assuage the detractors who believed that during his visit to Israel, Prime Minister Modi had given a slip to Palestine. In fact, Prime Minister Modi's stand-alone visits to important countries is a well calibrated departure from the earlier approaches, and will do well in nurturing individual relationships while making India a reliable interlocutor. It is in this context, and the fact that USA has discredited itself, that most countries in the Middle East expect India to take the lead on regional issues, including the revival of the Middle East Peace Process. In Davos and in his other recent interviews, the Prime Minister has seemed to establish India as another pole of the multilateral system, and appears to be ready to take his pro-active foreign policy stance more seriously. We should be prepared to be viable stake holders in regional and global issues as they do impact us. India can be an honest and reliable broker of peace given its rising benign power status and objective point of view.

For any country – and this undoubtedly applies to India as well – enlightened self-interest is paramount. However, the pursuit of it does not necessarily discount the more robust role for India as almost all stake holders look at India from the perspective of regional balance as our engagement grows across the board. Our policy towards the region need not be predicated on their relations with Pakistan as they would indeed not like their Islamic ties impacted adversely even if the balance would tilt in favour of India. This has been witnessed with increasingly real counter terrorism cooperation with countries which have come clean on this score by capturing and extraditing several terrorists sought by India as well as by supporting India's ambitions at the high table of UNSC. Israel, of course, remains our major partner on

this front – be it cyber security, intelligence cooperation, counter terrorism efforts, and the supply of cutting edge technologies and equipment in defence and agriculture.

Power equations in the Middle East are changing rather rapidly, especially in the last few years. Saudi Arabia felt short-shrifted and threatened; so did Israel, when the USA under President Obama was seen as veering towards their arch enemy, the Islamic Republic of Iran through the easing of sanctions and the signing of the Nuclear Agreement. Hence, in order to regain its primacy and to assert its regional power status as well as to ensure the new regime's unshakeable domestic hold, Saudi Arabia's adventurist Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman embarked on an expensive war and costly misadventure against Yemen. However, with the change in the US leadership, the Kingdom seems to have found an ally and admirer in the somewhat erratic approaches of President Trump. Under the garb of fighting the sponsors of terrorism and a nudge from the USA, the young princes of the UAE and Saudi Arabia – with the support of Egypt and Bahrain – broke diplomatic relations with - Qatar – and imposed an unprecedented economic blockade in June 2017. This has adversely affected all the economies. More importantly, the blockade has had exactly the opposite – and probably unintended – outcome as Turkey and Iran have become closer to Qatar by siding with it. A new player has emerged and a paradigm shift has occurred. Turkey has established its military base in Doha which also hosts the largest American base. Hence the continued rift has changed the complete power play dynamic while totally undermining the Gulf Cooperation Council which now appears to have a bleak future.

Having militarily succeeded in Syria, the Russians have also become major players in the Middle East. China has been trying to keep its fingers in the pie too, and has even offered to mediate between Qatar and the QUAD. While the old Sunni Islamic Alliance with the former Pakistani Army Chief heading it straddles along, a new military and security alliance between Saudi Arabia and the UAE adds further complexity. Signs of a thaw or the easing of tensions between Qatar and the QUAD are not on the horizon, and deterioration appears more likely. This ipso facto will have adverse implications for India, be it for the welfare of the large Diaspora or for that matter our energy security or investments. Hitherto, our policy has been to encourage a dialogue between the two sides without getting involved directly. It has even been accepted as such by all, and paid its dividends to us. But fence sitting has its limitations, and if the Turkey-Qatar-Iran nexus becomes more prominent and the Saudi-UAE axis becomes more demanding, we shall have to carve a balanced way

out to secure our strategic interests.

To conclude, in the near term, we will have to confront and carefully wade through the Riyadh-Tehran, Shia-Sunni, Doha-QUAD, Iraq, MEPP, Libya, and Syria crises, and compete for viable influence with the waning interest of the hyper power, the USA, as well as the ambitious agendas of China and Russia not only in the Middle East but also the Saudi and Chinese extensive interests and investments in the Maldives which has its own security imperatives for us. The Gulf Countries have been seeking greater Indian involvement and presence in the defence sector, and have even been looking to India as an alternate security provider. They are even looking for services for training, and experts for re-employing retired military personnel, apart from some Indian lethal and non-lethal equipment. Although we do have exchanges, the training of the officers from Middle East countries, our naval ships making ports of call, and the signing of some standard defence agreements, the time has come to think of up scaling our engagement. Perhaps we should even set up some base like facility may be in the non-controversial Oman. This will also help in keeping trading sea lanes open as well as in our counter piracy operations. Therefore, in my view, our policy has to adjust, evolve, and adapt to emerging and fast changing equations with requisite speed and response so that our strategic interests and continued relevance and reliability are ensured through a pro-active approach, especially as we step into the driving seat of an extra regional power matrix.

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Understanding Changes in West Asia: Implications for India

Sujata Ashwarya*

Since the uprisings in Tunisia eight years ago, the West Asian region has been enmeshed in a complex web of multiple crises. These crises – of nationalism, of identity, of modernisation, and of development – have been long in the making and existed at the subterranean level. They have now come to the fore, challenging prevalent notions of politics and society in unprecedented ways. The established arguments of the previous decades that spoke of the ‘passing of traditional societies’ have collapsed, as the uprisings have created a context for the assertion of traditional forces, represented by religious, sectarian, tribal, and ethnic affiliations. Traditional identities have proven to be much more resilient than previously believed.

Understanding the Changes in West Asia

Nationalism is under attack and crumbling under the onslaught of traditionalism. Sectarian and ethnic assertions have split societies – supplanting nationalism as the dominant ideology – and provoked civil wars in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon as well as widespread unrest in the Gulf monarchies. In Syria and Iraq, the resurgence of traditionalism is evident in the fact that their politics has become entirely sectarian. After the removal of Ba’ath as an Arab, modern, and secular party in Iraq, nationalism ceased to be an issue, as the Sunnis and Shias battled it out to preserve their political supremacy. The Shias perpetuated discrimination against the Sunnis to protect their newly won political power, and the Sunnis fought hard against the Shias to reclaim their political pre-eminence.

From the initial national uprising for democracy, the current situation in Syria has devolved into open sectarian warfare between Sunni factions and the Alawi (Shia) regime, and ethnic Kurdish assertion with external powers such as Turkey, Iran, Russia, the USA, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, playing one side against another and contesting the outcome. The civil war in Syria has thrown up a seemingly absurd situation wherein an anti-Ba’ath regime in Iraq

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supports the Ba'ath regime in Syria. However, this makes sense if looked at through the prism of traditionalism: it is one Shia regime supporting another in their joint struggle against the region's Sunnis.

Lebanon's multinational 'contract' has been gravely challenged by Hezbollah's involvement in the civil war in Syria. The Syrian conflict stoked a resurgence of sectarian violence in Lebanon, with many of Lebanon's Sunni Muslims supporting the rebels in Syria, while many Shias have supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad. In Yemen, where parties have changed sides frequently with the changing course of the civil war, the fault line remains sectarian. ShiaZaydis and Sunnis fight for pre-eminence backed and incited by co-religionists across the region.

Even the seemingly placid monarchies of the Gulf are experiencing an interrogation of their social contract in the protests on the street, and more powerfully in cyberspace. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain have tried to paint the turmoil on the street in sectarian colours, accusing Iran of fomenting trouble to take the focus away from their failings of governance. A wave of attacks on Coptic Christians in Egypt has questioned the inclusivity of the nationalism cherished by its secular elites.

Nationalism's crisis is rooted in the state formation in the Arab world in particular, and the entire West Asia and North Africa (WANA) in general. The victorious European powers at the end of World War I organised the former territories of the Ottoman Empire along supposed 'national' lines, believing that they were the "world full of nations...ready to emerge... under the banner of self-determination."¹They assumed that, with the creation of new states, people would shun primordial affiliations and nationalism, as a new creed would hold sway.

However, despite the attempt of political elites to define the new states in European terms, traditional identifications thrived alongside the idea of nationalism, which suppressed the development of the alternative notion of political legitimacy. People never wholly identified themselves with the concept of nationalism propagated by the states which were artificial creations of the colonial powers and which enforced it top-down by their iron-fisted rulers. When any autocrat in the region fell in the wake of the Arab uprisings, people openly identified with religion, sect, or tribe. It is hardly surprising that the Islamist parties won the first free and democratic elections in Egypt and Tunisia. When people were accorded a real opportunity to make a choice, they did so in favour of religious forces.

In a society that remains mostly traditional, social and political identity in the Arab world is about group affiliations.² In West Asia, as Suad Joseph writes, “persons are deeply embedded in communities, in the family, in ethnic, racial or social groupings.”³ In reality, West Asian societies had never been anything but a conglomeration of communities. Before the advent of modern states in the region, the Ottoman society was a mosaic of groups upheld by the notions of the *millet* (community) and *dhimmi* (protected people). Groups command the loyalty of individuals over and above the state. Once the fear of authoritarian governments disappeared, countries in the region started to break up into traditional ‘groups’.

No sooner had Saddam Hussein been removed from power, the tribes of Iraq went to war with each other. The Kurds asserted their ethnic identity by demanding secession, and the Shias having gained control from the Sunni elites followed a sectarian political agenda, thus tearing the country apart. In Syria, the struggle of individuals against the oppression of the regime dramatically turned into a sectarian (Shia-Sunni) and inter-ethnic (Kurds-Arabs and Kurds-Turks) civil war. Libya and Yemen irretrievably disintegrated into tribal and sectarian conflicts. The massacre of the Yazidis in Iraq and the Copts in Egypt are burning examples of the assertion of a particular group identity against another group.

For the most of the 20th century, the secular elites of the Middle East supported the broader process of modernisation in their states. With the West as a point of reference, “modernisation entailed the adoption of Western-style political institutions, codes, and economic models.”⁴ However, the experience with modernisation was not a pleasant affair for all, and the model of progress offered by secular modernisers failed to improve the poverty of the masses, not least to rival Western material wealth and success.

The modernising regimes, beset with external and internal conflicts, remained fastidiously authoritarian, and refused to risk policy measures that could affect real developmental transformation. West Asian states fell into a similar trap as other state-run economies in post-colonial countries. A bloated and incompetent bureaucracy deepened the economic crisis resulting from the strategy of protectionism and import substitution.

Despite a brief period of benefit from the oil windfall of the 1970s, underlying structural problems persisted. Modernization also engendered rapid population growth, and urbanisation stretched the socio-economic fabric even further. Urban sprawls with poor service and insufficient employment became a cauldron of frustration and despair. In effect, people started to equate

modernisation with the failure to achieve significant rises in living standards, deprivation, and undignified existence.

While the "economic failure disembedded the hegemony of the modernising secular state and inevitably produced a counter-hegemonic force in Muslim societies,"⁵ the recrudescence of Islam provided a radical political alternative. The Islamists stepped in where states failed, providing services in the social sector – health, education, housing, and even banking services – at the local level. Besides, they offered the warm embrace of community and worship in the neighbourhood, not only to the deprived but also to the alienated professional groups in cities.

Thus, religion as an agent of stability and efficiency captured the domestic political scene, even as authoritarian regimes tottered in the face of the popular uprisings. While incorporating the demands of the people in their agenda – participatory and accountable governance, and economic betterment – the Islamists armed with the legitimacy of having delivered in the past, cruised to victory in democratic elections, conspicuously in Egypt but more modestly in Tunisia.

When the Western Middle East watchers erupted in surprise at the victory of Islamists in the elections post-Spring, they missed the fact that religion had been making significant places in the socio-political life of Middle Eastern societies for more than four decades. The Islamists "appealed to an identity and a set of values that many in the Middle East shared and understood,"⁶ making the Islamists far more popular than their secular counterparts.

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* reproached colonial writers of accentuating cultural 'otherness', it has become 'politically correct' to talk about the universalism of ideas and values. West Asian societies place a much larger emphasis on religion, ethnicity, and tribalism than Western societies do. A framework of analysis that gives importance to such cultural specificities allows the 'right' to people to be 'other' in their culture, time, and space.⁷ Thus, to see West Asian turmoil through the prism of culture and tradition makes better sense.

The current crisis in the Arab world is animated mainly by economic concerns. Beginning December 2010, as the uprisings spread across the Arab world, economic factors behind the protests became apparent. The inability of the authoritarian regimes to control rising poverty, cronyism, corruption, and youth unemployment spurred the anti-government demonstrations of the Arab Spring, indicating that the political and economic depredation of the region is inextricably linked.

In the larger Arab world, the successive wave of protests emboldened by the successes in the North African region, are animated by similar drivers: demographic realities, failures of state policies, and demand for representative government⁸ linked to three significant deficits in the Arab world: the freedom deficit; women's empowerment deficit; human capabilities and knowledge deficit relative to income.

The uprisings marked the most severe challenge to authoritarian rule in the Arab world. Fearing similar revolts on their soil, Gulf countries and others [Jordan and Morocco] resorted to gratuitous distributive schemes without any meaningful political reforms. Largesse accompanies the crackdown on dissent, and even stricter control on expression and assembly. Free debate in the social media on political change is virtually impossible, and the arrest and detention of activists who question the functioning of the regimes are a common occurrence. More recently, the arrest of a Saudi activist, Noha al-Balawi, for questioning the normalisation of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel, is a case in point. In one video clip widely circulated on social media, al-Balawi had described normalisation as the acceptance of the occupation, that is, Israel's continued control of Palestinian land.

While gender empowerment is a critical aspect of human freedom, the Arab region ranks just above sub-Saharan Africa on the gender empowerment score. According to a World Bank report, there are a complex set of economic, social, and legal factors that constrain women's ability to engage in the public sphere on an equal footing with men. This includes insufficient jobs and preference for men, restrictions on mobility underpinned by legal frameworks and socio-cultural norms, and regulations that restrict work and political participation. The report highlights the importance of reform to stem the harmful impact of such exclusion of a potentially large workforce from the Arab economies.⁹ For the protestors of the Arab uprisings, economic betterment and political representation were equally important.

Although the revolutions were not gender-based calls, women were an integral part, and in some places, critical players in the Arab uprisings. The toppling of the old traditional regimes meant that there were calls for old practices to be ended and with that came the call for the end of traditional patriarchy, the norm for many of these Arab societies.¹⁰

Also, acute knowledge deficits in the Arab world include weak systems of scientific research and development. A 2011 World Bank report on higher education in the MENA countries pointed to three primary issues facing governments in that area: increasing access to higher education, financing

university studies, and preparing young adults for the job market.¹¹ The inability of the Arab systems to develop skills commensurate with the demands of the labour market feeds into youth unemployment, one of the primary reasons behind the recent uprisings in several Arab countries.

Unemployment rates in the WANA region have remained high particularly among youth (15–24 years), with an average rate of 22 percent for young males and 39 percent for young females.¹² The region is facing a demographic bulge in which youth aged 15-29 comprises the most substantial proportion of the population. These young people, frustrated with the lack of jobs, have been at the forefront of anti-government protests.¹³

When Arab governments strive to improve educational access to all, they will also have to look at creating an increase in opportunities in the job market, which has only recently embraced participation by women.

The end of this youth bulge trend, for most states of the Arab world, will not occur until 2030. ... Years after the Arab Spring has become a memory, the Arab world will still face the central challenge causing unrest and dissatisfaction.¹⁴

Implications for India

Scholarship on the impact of the above transformative changes accompanied by large-scale social and political turbulence has focused on two questions:

- How does the turmoil in the West Asian region compromise India's internal security?
- How would the turmoil affect India's energy security given that 60 percent of oil and 37 percent of gas imports come from West Asia?

The emergence of ISIS in Iraq, a consequence of the sectarian policies of the Maliki government, caused great trepidations in Indian policymaking circles. Many expressed the fear that its Sunni jihadist ideology would attract and radicalise Muslim youth in India. However, the impact of ISIS in India has been at best, limited. Out of the 180 million Muslims in India, which is the second largest population of Muslims in the world after Indonesia, only 75 are known to have joined ISIS. Statistically speaking, this is so minuscule that one can say India has produced almost no recruit to the ISIS. Neither are there recruits to the 'global jihad' or jihadist groups around the world – there are no known Indian recruits to al-Qaeda, Taliban, Abu Sayyaf, or any such groups.

One explanation is that Indians Muslims (at least, outside Kashmir) feel they have a stake in the political system. Even though they may suffer discrimination, they are nonetheless engaged in the process of bargaining and negotiations through the democratic process and, therefore, do not feel the need to adopt the course of violence. Even the Salafis in India, the so-called Ahl-e Hadis, are committed to the Indian state, and readily participate in electoral politics.¹⁵ Most importantly, Islam in India, strongly influenced by heterodox ideas of Sufism, has imbibed a syncretic culture, having existed with the Hindu majority and other religious minorities in the Subcontinent for centuries.

The anxiety that the radical Islamic upsurge in West Asia will have manifestations in India is unfounded, mainly because feelings of disenfranchisement and political exclusion is absent among the Indian Muslims as compared to Muslims in other countries. The above reasons may well explain the absence of sectarianism, the starkest upshot of the upheaval in the region. A Shia-Sunni split in response to the sectarian violence in the region is unheard of in India, as Indian Muslims remain invested in issues that are of immediate concern to them. While Shia and Sunnis may differ on the question of whether a Ram temple could be built at the disputed site in Ayodhya – daggers are not drawn over who would win the sectarian war in West Asia. The Saudi-Iran rivalry has not split India in the way it has done the region.

Secondly, India's access to oil and gas of the region is secure despite the turmoil in West Asia. When, in 2011-12, sanctions prohibited India from importing the necessary quota of oil from Iran, the Arab countries of the Gulf quickly came to its rescue. India imported more crude oil from Saudi Arabia and Iraq during the period of the sanctions, and then promptly went on to buy more oil from Iran once the sanctions eased. Qatar was able to ship a steady supply of LNG to India under the 25-year contract, and there has not been a disruption in supply due to the regional upheavals. The invisible hands of demand and supply have held fast and secure in India's energy relations with West Asian countries.

Changes in the region go far beyond new inter-state rivalries, the realignment of states in the regional balance of power, or the prosecution of proxy wars by Saudi Arabia and Iran. They represent fundamental changes in how people conduct social relations and how they understand their position vis-à-vis their state. The assertion of tradition in the region has shown that changes are not going to be linear – traditional society has not passed with the “destruction of old ways of life by the sweep of modernity.”¹⁶ Despite

the proximity to modern lifestyles, traditional societies of the region have shown a propensity to hark back to primordial tribal affiliations, ethnicities, or religious denominations.

If our own experience is any mirror to what we might expect in the region, the primordial will exist with modernity, even competing with it in the social and political sphere, not unlike the defining role of caste, ethnicity, and religion in the social and political lives of the Indian people. Key leaders of the region have talked about reclaiming Islam from the extremist groups and retrieving its moderate elements – an indication of a kind of *modus vivendi* with religion we can expect to see in the region in the future. The contours of the political system, and the place that traditional identities will occupy in that order, will be worth watching. Arab uprisings and the popular demand for change provides an opportunity to interrogate our socio-political development, experience with modernity, and the resilience of tradition, providing insights into our developmental failures. The persistence of poverty and unemployment, as well as the divisive impact of religion and caste to inclusive nation building, are issues worth examining in the Indian context.

Through democratic and pluralistic institutions, India has been able to develop a civic culture. The existence of a vibrant civil society ensures people's participation in the decision-making process, thereby increasing their stakes in the secular and modernising nature of the state. In the Arab countries, the absence of participatory governance and authoritarianism has hindered the development of a social contract between the state and people: since the state and government are 'not theirs', the people have invested precious little in incorporating the ideas handed over to them by state authorities. Thus, a tension between the rulers' vision of the state and those of the masses has remained a constant source of conflict in West Asia.

However, a renegotiation of the social contract is already underway in West Asia, even as old mores continue to exist. While women in Saudi Arabia can drive once they get legal sanction this summer (2018), and Riyadh has also lifted a 35-year *ban* on commercial movie theatres, and granted women access to male sporting events, Saudi authorities have also issued harsh jail terms against two human rights defenders despite reforms touted by the Kingdom. The process of change, both social and political, has been set irrevocably into motion by the uprisings. Its pace appears slow but sure, evoking Zhou Enlai's cryptic assessment of the 1789 French Revolution: "It is too early to say."

Regional policymakers will also need to pay much closer attention to the multiple economic crises of the region created by the monocultural economy, high subsidy regime, and shortage of employable skills in the domestic labour market. They will need to develop diverse national economies based on skill enhancement and job creation.

To tackle the youth bulge and unemployment, in addition to women's participation in the workforce, localisation of labour will be an essential consideration towards sustainable growth beyond the 2030s, an increasingly popular concept in the region. In this context, it is important to remember that more than 4 million Indian migrant workers, both skilled and unskilled, inhabit the Gulf region and, since 2011, have been the single most significant senders of remittances back home to India, valued at more than US\$64 billion.

The retrenchment of Indian workers in high-skilled jobs could become a real possibility once the economic diversification – high on the agenda of all the countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – gets underway. Building a skilled labour force that is capable of continuous enhancement would be an integral part of the economic transformation. India needs to be cognizant of the impending changes in the Gulf labour market, and plan accordingly to avoid unemployment for these workers. It implies that our economy would have to develop a continuous capacity to absorb returning skills and labour.

Notes :

¹ Malcolm Yapp, *The Making of the Modern Near East 1792-1923* (London: Longman, 1987), pp. 350-351.

² Asher Susser, "The resurgence of neo-traditionalism," *Fathom Journal* (Winter, 2015), <http://fathomjournal.org/the-resurgence-of-neo-traditionalism/>

³ Suad Joseph, "Gender and Civil Society: An Interview with Suad Joseph," in SuhaSabbagh (ed.), *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 1996), p. 203.

⁴ Aminah Beverly McCloud, Scott W. Hibbard, and Laith Saud, *An Introduction to Islam in the 21st Century* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), Section 6.1.

⁵ See Simon Murden, *Islam, the Middle East, and the New Global Hegemony* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner, 2002), p. 135.

⁶ "This one-sentence explanation of ISIS is brilliant," *Vox*, December 3, 2015, <http://www.vox.com/2015/12/3/9837782/isis-one-sentence>.

⁷ Asher Susser, "The "Arab Spring": The Origins of a Misnomer," Foreign Policy Research Institute, April 27, 2012, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2012/04/the-arab-spring-the-origins-of-a-misnomer/>

- ⁸ Toby Dodge, "Conclusion: the Middle East after the Arab Spring," *LSE Report*, http://www.lse.ac.uk/IDEAS/publications/reports/pdf/SR011/FINAL_LSE_IDEAS__ConclusionsTheMiddleEastAfterTheArabSpring_Dodge.pdf, p. 1.
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