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West Asia in 2015

Rise of the Islamic State | Coalition against the IS | Efficacies of Strategies in countering the IS | Future of Iraq and Syria | Nuclear Deal with Iran | US and West Asia | Israel and Palestine | A Strategy for India

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This report is an updated and compiled version of his earlier commentaries for his column during 2014.

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IPCS Forecasts

West Asia in 2015

Amb Ranjit Gupta

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West Asia in 2015: A Forecast

Making predictions is a hazardous exercise; however, it needs to be ventured. 2014 was particularly bleak for the Arab world but as the year ended there were increasing indications that the situation will steadily improve through 2015 (See Ranjit Gupta, "Rise of the Islamic State: Implications for the Arab World," IPCS Commentary #4778, 15 December 2014).

In the ultimate analysis, improvement or deterioration of the situation in West Asia is going to be heavily dependent upon whether the nuclear negotiations with Iran succeed or not.

Nature of War and Coalition against the Islamic State in 2015

The battle against the Islamic State in particular and terrorism in West Asia in general will remain at the top of the geopolitical agenda of the governments of all countries of West Asia as well as of the United States. It is absolutely imperative that the Islamic State be defeated and therefore the battle has to be prosecuted with greater intensity. Since the US airstrikes started in September 2014, the Islamic State's rapid expansion and advance was stopped. 2015 is likely to witness a progressively increasing roll back in terms of the territory that the Islamic State controlled at its peak.

However, this cannot be accomplished by air strikes alone. Though an increase in the number of U.S. military advisers and Special Forces units, and their sometimes even leading Iraqis into battle can be foreseen, no significant deployment of U.S. combat soldiers is needed and any temptation to do so should be resisted. The numbers of Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces, already actively involved in the fighting, rising significantly and more airstrikes from Iran also – a few took place in the closing stages of 2014 are quite likely.

If Saudi Arabia could be persuaded to become more assertive across its border into Iraq's Sunni inhabited Anbar Province it could have a salutary effect by pressing the Islamic State from the rear also. However, the main brunt of fighting the Islamic State on the ground must be borne by Iraqis. Shia militias, Sunni tribals, Kurds and Iraqi government troops are likely to continue to be

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The deadline for the conclusion of the talks (with Iran) has been extended twice; this in itself is a sign that the contending parties intend to succeed which is absolutely imperative

cooperatively engaged in the common fight against the IS – the common enemy.

Ethnic and Sectarian Divides: Likely Positive Developments in Iraq during 2015

Ethnic and sectarian divides in Iraq had been progressively increasing from 2003. However, despite a great deal of bad blood between them remaining for the foreseeable future, the Iraqi government and leaders of these communities are likely to prevent these divisions from hardening into irrevocable separatism. Starting from 2015 onwards the processes of mending a broken

Iraq are going to move forward in a meaningful way.

Iran's Related Nuclear Negotiations: Towards a Successful Conclusion?

The other regional issue, one which has extraordinary geopolitical and geo strategic significance, both regionally and indeed worldwide, is the issue of Iran's nuclear program and the ongoing negotiations between it and the P 5 + 1.

The deadline for the conclusion of the talks has been extended twice; this in itself is a sign that the contending parties intend to succeed which is absolutely imperative because if they fail then the spectre of nuclear weapons proliferation in the region will loom ever larger and Iran will inevitably start playing spoilsport in the fight against the Islamic State and thereby plunge the region into even greater chaos; partly for these reasons the negotiations will most likely succeed even though the result is not going to be fully satisfactory to either side.

Will the Civil War in Syria come to an end?

If the negotiations on the nuclear issue (with Iran) succeed, the battle against the Islamic State will acquire additional vigor and the prospects of a political solution to the horrendous civil war in Syria will brighten considerably and we should expect to witness progress in that direction before the end of 2015. Peace talks between the Syrian government and the opposition initiated under Russian aegis and that of the U.N. Special Envoy are likely to gather momentum in 2015 and Iran would surely start playing an active role in that process too.

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Because the war against the Islamic State will be stepped up there would be an increase in the already very high levels of violence that has gripped Iraq and Syria in the past few years. In

addition it is very likely that the barbaric brutality exhibited by the Islamic State in carrying out mass executions and grim video publicity of beheadings, wholesale abduction and rape as it retreats, etc. will increase. This is a price which unfortunately will have to be paid.

Developments within Saudi Arabia: Entering Uncharted Territory?

There has been a lot of churning within the senior echelons of the Saudi Royal family during the past year two years with two successive Crown Princes dying within months of each other; and by the controversial appointment of a Deputy Crown Prince – Prince Muqrin – regarded dimly by many in the royal family as not being a true prince as his mother was not the dynasty founder King Saud's wife) in May 2014, a heretofore nonexistent position; uncharacteristically, this appointment did not receive unanimous approval in the Allegiance Council. A few powerful establishment Princes, like Prince Bandar, have been sidelined.

King Abdullah is now very seriously ill and will most likely pass away or become completely non-functional during the first half of 2015, rather an unfortunate happening at this particular time because he has been a strong and commanding figure. With Crown Prince Salman's fragile health, questions arise about the future stability of the policies of this family-run, oil-rich country apart from domestic consequences of potential discord with the Royal family.

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Oil prices have fallen precipitously in the past month and the Saudi Oil Minister has been reported as saying repeatedly and emphatically that it will not curtail production even if the price falls as low as \$25.00 per barrel. This is hurting all oil producers but in particular Iran in the region and Russia outside it; if this persists for long U.S. shale oil extraction could become unviable. If the nuclear negotiations with Iran do not succeed this low


oil factor may become a particularly strong aggravating factor in catalyzing a dramatic deterioration of the situation throughout West Asia.

Rest of the Arab World in 2015

Irrespective of the outcome of the battle against the Islamic State and the nuclear negotiations, the internal situations within many Arab countries are unlikely to improve particularly in Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Though there is a democratically elected government in Egypt it is even more authoritarian than previous authoritarian regimes and this will cause continuing domestic political unrest and increase in what the regime describes as terrorism. Libya has two competing national governments and parliaments and about two dozen different militant groups in contention with others controlling virtual Islamic emirates.



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Libya is likely to descend into a Somalia like situation. Yemen has a weak and increasingly ineffectual central government, the Shia Houthi rebels are in virtual control of the capital Sanaa and important Sunni majority neighbouring towns, the secessionist movement in the south is strengthening by the day even as the Al Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, ensconced mainly in southern Yemen, remains a dangerous outfit. A break-up cannot be ruled out but in that event the situation in both successor states is likely to deteriorate even further.

US and West Asia: Towards a credible role?

Notwithstanding, occasional public statements denouncing US policy in West Asia, US military involvement against the Islamic State, in great contrast to past decades, is welcomed by all regional states and will almost certainly contribute to a recovery of US credibility, influence and standing in the region which had fallen to historical lows. If the nuclear negotiations succeed, despite unquestionable Saudi anger and disappointment, the U.S. will once again resume its role as the indispensable power in the region as it has clearly exhibited in the fight against the Islamic State already.

Israel and Palestine: Repeat of 2014?

The complete absence of any visionary leadership on either side of the Israeli Palestinian divide, deep domestic cleavages amongst the Israelis and the Palestinians and the pressing preoccupations of Arab countries and influential world powers with other issues, will result in the lack of any meaningful progress of the Palestinian-Israeli imbroglio; in fact, there could well be a repeat of what had happened vis-avis Gaza in 2014.

India and West Asia in 2015

An earlier column (See Ranjit Gupta, "Looking West: Bridging the Gulf with the GCC," IPCS Commentary #4483, 2 June 2014) explained the enormous significance of the GCC to India's well being and security. Unfortunately, India's new government does not seem to be persuaded

by the column's rationale. West Asia has been almost totally neglected as never before since India's independence. This could have serious consequences for India.

Having said this, India has no specific role to play on the ground in the struggle against the Islamic State beyond offering full diplomatic and political support to the struggle against the IS. The danger of terrorist activities by Indian Muslims is exaggerated and to the extent that it exists it would be much more due to some being enticed by the notorious Pakistani spy agency, the ISI, than due to of the influence or activities of the Islamic State or Al Qaeda.

India's Muslim community – the third largest in the world - has an absolutely outstanding record of resistance to contagion by Islamic extremist entities, ideologies and movements. Therefore there is no great danger of radicalism of significant numbers of Indian Muslims by the latter and India's security agencies are quite capable of handling any such contingencies. A greater challenge is posed by possible consequences of the highly unfortunate rhetoric and activities of far right Hindu activists which the Prime Minister Modi will hopefully curb in 2015.

He has been an enormously dynamic leader with a particularly proactive and visionary foreign policy with lack of attention to West Asia being a conspicuous exception. Hopefully he would remedy this lacuna in 2015.

West Asia in 2014: A Review

I

The Islamic State

Rise of the Islamic State: Implications for the Arab World¹

Though it is going to take a long time to defeat the Islamic State (IS), and it must be defeated, some silver linings of the very dark cloud the IS represents are beginning to be hazily visible over the horizon.

Since the proclamation of the IS, strange things have begun happening in West Asia. The IS is not only against the Shia governments of Iraq and Syria but also of Iran; it is even more against the Sunni governments of the Gulf monarchies, in particular, Saudi Arabia, apart from the US in particular and the West in general; it is also fighting against al Qaeda and its clones and affiliates. The IS is against everybody. It has no allies.

It has thus succeeded in bringing about a heretofore difficult to imagine scenario: countries, entities and regimes traditionally antagonistic and hostile to each other find themselves engaged in a common war against a common enemy. Thus, we have the rather strange spectacle of seeing the US and Iran; Saudi Arabia and Iran; Saudi Arabia and Shia-ruled Iraq; the Assad regime and those sworn to overthrow it – Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and the US and assorted

¹ Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 15 December 2014. See <http://www.ipcs.org/article/iran/rise-of-the-islamic-state-implications-for-the-arab-world-4778.html>

Islamist extremist groups, and, Kurdish factions perpetually at loggerheads with each other and with the governments of the nations they are part of – all of them in the same camp warring against the IS.

This could have some very positive consequences in a region where hostile and conflictual relationships are endemic:

First, after the fall of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein-ruled government, sectarian and ethnic fissures came to the fore in Iraq in a manner that had never been the case before. Sunnis have been the traditional ruling element in Iraq throughout history, but since 2003 they have not only been deeply alienated but also deliberately humiliated. Therefore, the involvement of Shias, Sunnis and Kurds in the common fight against the IS is very encouraging and could be cathartic and therapeutic. This bodes well for Iraq's future since it had begun to appear that its being partitioned along sectarian and ethnic divides was becoming inevitable.

This enforced togetherness may finally persuade regional rivals Iran and Saudi Arabia and their respective allies to work together in the common and shared interests of fighting to eliminate Islamist extremism and sectarianism.

A third potentially significant consequence is that this will ultimately help to promote disenchantment of the average Muslim, particularly in the Gulf region, whether he is Sunni or Shia, with sectarianism and Islamist extremism, and make them realize that these ideologies are very dangerous for all Muslims.

The fourth potential consequence is that as the war against the IS progresses well, combined with the possibility of a deal between Iran and the P5 on the nuclear issue, all this may lead to real possibilities of a negotiated political solution to the civil war in Syria, which otherwise seems impossible to envisage.

The fifth flows from the fact that the intense rivalry between the IS and al Qaeda for control of the global jihadist movement is already causing intra-jihadist infighting and this can be expected to escalate throughout the region and this augurs well for the defeat of pernicious extremist and jihadi groups.

One consequence of the derailing of the Arab Spring has been the enormous strain on GCC unity, primarily due to Qatar taking a very different stance as compared to other GCC countries in relation to various Islamist groups. This was hampering the fight against the IS. The GCC Summit held in Qatar last week appears to have resolved the differences.

The IS experience should also make Arab regimes and their Western patrons finally realise that pandering to religion for short-term geopolitical gains only creates Frankenstein monsters that devour their own creators. The reality is that the leaders of the Arab world have long been in denial about their own responsibility for their problems; the outside world is constantly blamed. The fact is that in the post-World War II era more Muslims have been killed by Muslims than by all others put together. As per the Country Threat Index, among the 10 most dangerous countries in the world, 9 are Muslim countries and 6 of them are Arab countries.

These facts have to be squarely faced. Time has come for very serious introspection. The emergence of the IS has created that opportunity. Lasting peace in the Arab world will be possible only if an ideological battle is waged and won within Islam to change the poisonous mindsets that have enveloped much of the Arab world. Some positive indications are already evident in new approaches by GCC countries, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, both domestically and otherwise.

Arab countries being overwhelmingly Muslim countries, political Islam must be given space and legitimacy to function in domestic political processes; banning or prohibiting political Islam only leads to radicalisation of those elements of society that are more religiously inclined than others. Wide-ranging political reform processes must also start now, concomitantly with the execution of the war against the IS. Tunisia, where the Arab Spring started, has demonstrated that a new path is possible

Islamic State: The Efficacy of Counter-strategies²

The efficacy of the US strategy to defeat the Islamic State (IS) can only be meaningfully evaluated in the context of the current regional and international geopolitical configurations. It should be self-evident that there is no possibility at all of any political approach to successfully confront and overcome the challenge posed the IS. If the IS is not defeated, the whole system of nation states in West Asia will almost surely crumble. At the present critical juncture, given the ground realities in Iraq, Syria and the Arab world in general – and internal divisions amongst Arab states and between Arab states and non-Arab states such as Iran and Turkey – it should also be clear that there is no possibility of any regional military coalition being forged to take on the IS.

Therefore, countries of the region have little or no choice but to have the US lead the fight against the IS even though Washington's military entanglements in the Arab and Muslim worlds have greatly adversely affected its credibility, influence and standing in the region; and have in fact been one of the primary causes of the rise of Islamic extremism. After all, the US has been the preeminent regional security architect for the past several decades and remains the major weapons supplier to regional countries barring Iran and Syria.

No other Western or non-regional country can do it or will even be willing to attempt to do it by themselves; even their involvement is predicated only on the US leading the war. Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, France, the Netherlands and UK too have joined in conducting airstrikes in Iraq. In a break from the traditional policy of not supplying arms to countries in zones of conflict, Germany will be supplying arms to the Kurdistan Regional Government in Iraq. Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have carried out airstrikes in Syria. There are varying accounts of Qatar's involvement. After doggedly refusing to allow any support for any military action in Iraq or Syria against the IS despite intense personal efforts by US President Barack Obama and the secretaries of state and defense, Turkey has reluctantly allowed the Free Syrian Army fighters and the Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga to transit its territory en route to Kobani to dislodge the IS from there.

² Originally published as IPCS Commentary on 4 November 2014. See <http://www.ipcs.org/article/peace-audit-and-ceasefire-monitor/islamic-state-the-efficacy-of-counter-strategies-4727.html>

The central feature of the strategy is to carry out airstrikes both in Iraq and Syria initially to stop the heretofore irresistible advance of the IS and to degrade its capabilities. This has happened in many sectors if not everywhere. The US and its partners have by now carried out a few thousand airstrikes. However, Obama has made it clear that there will be no American boots on the ground, meaning Americans in the tens of thousands will not be there as in the past. Such involvement will only exacerbate extremism. Another caveat is that combat activity must absolutely include the active involvement of regional countries. This is what the US has been implementing. Even though it is clear that the war cannot be won through via air strikes alone, the reality is that the world has no better alternative to this approach for the present.

So far, however, a Shiite coalition, of Iran, Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias and the Iraqi and Syrian governments, has been the main force arrayed against the IS on the ground apart from particularly valiant contributions by the Kurdish Peshmerga. Thus we have the strange scenario of seeing the US and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Shia ruled Iraq, the Assad regime and those sworn to overthrow it – Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US and assorted Islamist extremist groups, Kurds of different nationality groups and factions perpetually at loggerheads with each other, all in the same camp warring against the IS, tacitly cooperating with each other even if they more often than not publicly deny any open explicit collaboration. This is a part of the ground reality even if not a formal part of US strategy.

However, the fight against the IS cannot be compartmentalised. It occupies 2/5ths of the total territory of Syria and 2/5ths of the total territory of Iraq and is actually stronger in Syria; the border between the two countries has been erased. The IS cannot be defeated in Iraq without being defeated in Syria and therefore it will have to be confronted in Syria also. Despite recognising this as exhibited by the airstrikes in Syria, countries opposed to Assad are maintaining that they will not cooperate with Assad in fighting the IS and will continue supporting so called ‘moderate’ rebels by supplying arms. Such distinctions are completely arbitrary and subjective and have proven to be counterproductive. The US has promised \$500 million worth of arms and training is going to be provided to the rebels in Saudi Arabia. This will only exacerbate and prolong Syria’s civil war and undermine the dire need of a united response to the IS.

The coalition’s policy approach in Syria maybe alright as a temporary tactic, but strategically, it is completely counterproductive.

6 October 2014

War against the Islamic State: Political and Military Responses from the Region

Strange things are happening in West Asia. Those who created the modern jihad in an extremely misguided and immature tactical response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan are today at war with its most extremist manifestation, the Islamic State. The latter has also succeeded in bringing about the almost impossible - uniting countries and regimes deeply antagonistic and hostile to each other in a common war against a common enemy. The US and Iran, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Saudi Arabia and a Shia government in Iraq, the Assad regime and those sworn to overthrow it - Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US and assorted Islamist groups, all in the same camp warring against the Islamic State.

The Islamic State (IS), an extremist Sunni entity, is a particularly serious existential threat to the regimes of the GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, as its religious roots and those of Wahhabism are broadly the same. The rulers of the GCC countries know that if the IS succeeds in Iraq, a spillover into their countries is inevitable. The IS is thus a direct, immediate and strong existential challenge to the continuing rule of these regimes, something that has not happened before. After agonizing for weeks they have become active participants in a war against a Sunni entity in Shia ruled states. This is unprecedented and something that simply could not have even been imagined only a few months ago.

The IS is fanatically anti Shia; it is also the most potent threat to the pro-Iranian regimes in Iraq and Syria and to the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria. For these three reasons the IS is now the single most active and potent direct threat to Iran's influence and standing throughout West Asia. Iran is Iraq's ally and is the first and only regional country that has provided actual assistance on the ground.

The IS thus simultaneously poses the biggest strategic threat to both Iran and Saudi Arabia, though for entirely different reasons. For the first time since the Islamic Revolution in Iran these two countries face a common threat. They are the two key players if the war against the IS is to succeed. They have to find a way to cooperate. This is going to be difficult particularly as Saudi Arabia continues to attach priority to regime change in Syria which is absolutely unacceptable to Iran. A particularly important meeting was held between the Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers in New York on 21 September 2014. Statements made by them indicate that both countries recognize that they have to work together to confront the common enemy.

The Iraqi central Government has been opposed to the Barzani run Kurdish regional government and Iran has traditionally been opposed to the Barzani faction of the Iraqi Kurds. Shia militias have been fighting against the Kurds. The Kurds in Iraq, Syria and Turkey have never managed to put up a single united overall Kurdish front; indeed in Iraq they are divided in two rival groups. But in recent weeks all of them are now fighting together in many theatres against the Islamic State.

On 22 September, the United States launched air strikes against the ISIL in Syria and aircraft from Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the UAE also took part in the airstrikes while Qatar "played a supportive role". Arab states have continued to be involved in such air strikes since then. Iraq welcomed these airstrikes with great excitement and enthusiasm.

President Assad reacted by saying that Syria "supports any international effort in the fight against terrorism"; Syrian Foreign Minister was supportive saying that "Syria had been informed before the strikes by the United States". Analysts on Syrian State television said that these "air strikes did not constitute aggression as Syria was informed in advance." They have other reasons for feeling rather pleased because the US airstrikes inflicted significant casualties on the Khorasan group and the Jabhat Al Nusra, also fighting against the Syrian regime. Significantly, Syrian opposition National Coalition President Hadi Al Bahra said "tonight the international community has joined our fight against the ISIS in Syria."

Syria is very keen to be formally a part of the coalition against the IS but unfortunately the US and GCC countries are adamantly opposed to this even as they are tacitly cooperating with the regime directly and through Iran, in coordinating the airstrikes against the IS. Iran would have been happy to attend the meeting in Jeddah on September 11 and in Paris on September 15 to join the international coalition to fight the Islamic State but was not invited due to US opposition. There was no blistering condemnation from Iran which would have been the automatic reaction in the past. Iran has merely said that such actions do not have international legality.

After doggedly refusing to allow any support for any military action in Iraq or Syria against the Islamic State despite intense personal efforts by President Obama and the Secretaries of State and Defense, hours after the first airstrikes in Syria Erdogan said in New York that Turkey was now considering a role that "includes everything. Both military and political...Of course we will do our part." The next few days should see greater clarity about Turkey's involvement.

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II

Iraq, Syria and Iran

5 May 2014

Elections in Iraq: Uncertain Prospects

The US' unilateral invasion of Iraq in 2003, the subsequent overthrow and execution of then President Saddam Hussein, and the complete dismantling of the Ba'athist state apparatus left an already emaciated Iraq – to over a decade of Western sanctions – in complete shambles. The US military occupation and rule could not prevent Iraq from degenerating into a completely fractured country with deep ethnic, regional and sectarian fault lines. The death toll in sectarian conflict and terrorist attacks is consistently rising, and has reached its highest levels since the worst of the sectarian strifes in 2006 and 2007; UN estimates suggest that 8,868 people were killed in 2013. According to the Ministry of Interior of Iraq, 1,666 people have died in the first quarter of 2014, and in April alone 1,009 people were killed. The figures might be higher given that data from the terrorism infested, Sunni controlled Anbar region haven't been included.

It was in this backdrop that the 29 April parliamentary elections – the first after the withdrawal of the US troops three years ago – were held. Given the grim, chaos infested aftermath of the so-called Arab Spring, it is a major accomplishment that the elections were held at all. Despite the aforementioned contexts, in many parts of the country and especially in Baghdad, violence was surprisingly low on the Election Day. According to Iraq's Independent Election Commission, there was a 60 per cent voter turnout and this should be considered a matter of considerable satisfaction, if not celebration.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, in power since 2006, is running for a third term. This year there was no Iranian push for a single Shiite coalition. Instead, there are at least three major Shiite lists, associated with Maliki, Ammar al-Hakim and the Sadristes respectively, apart from other smaller entities. There are many Sunni entities in the fray but they appear unable and unlikely to put up a united front. In fact, compared to the 2010 elections where there were 86 competing groups, there are 107 political groups in 2014. Also, contrary to 7,000 candidates in the 2010 elections, the 2014 elections have over 9,000 candidates. The increase in the number of candidates and lists can be attributed to defections and disintegrations among the bigger alliances. In 2010, Kurdish support finally tilted the scales in Maliki's favour but given the Maliki's steadily deteriorating personal relationship with the central government and the Kurdish Regional Government, this seems unlikely this time unless Maliki can pull off a magical eleventh hour coup. However, given Maliki's hold on various constitutional entities, he could manipulate events and entice support to stay in power.

Given the multiplicity of parties and factions in the country, it takes months to cobble together a government, and therefore, the world will have to wait for the final outcome; but it is difficult to envisage the wily Maliki being outwitted. Iraq needs a strong leader for the immediate short term and for all of Maliki's increasing authoritarianism and undoubted shortcomings as his many critics rightly contend, it's likely that no other contender would have done any better in the utterly chaotic situation the country was in. Regardless of what happens, there must be no foreign interference – the root cause of why the situation is so bad in the first place.

The US and Iran are the two most influential powers in contemporary Iraq. Though Maliki has not been the first choice of either party in the past, and he has shown that he is by no means a pawn of either; ironically both consider him an 'ally'. It is important that whoever emerges as the Prime Minister has the tacit approval of both the US and Iran; absent that, the situation within the country could become much worse. Having said this, it is not unlikely that this time around too, their backstage influence would likely be used ultimately in Maliki's favour.

Maliki successfully managed to hold an Arab League Summit in Baghdad in March 2012 – for the first time since 1990, and only the second time in the country's history. Significantly, the Emir of Kuwait personally attended the Summit, and was the only GCC leader to do so. Since then the relationship between the traditionally antagonistic countries has improved dramatically.

Earlier this year, Iran and Iraq announced that they have agreed to implement the historic 1975 Algiers Agreement to regulate their land and river borders and, most importantly, to dredge the Shatt-al-Arab river. Bilateral trade stood at \$12 billion in 2013, making Iraq one of Iran's, and Iraq is the most significant export market for Iran's non-oil trade. Furthermore, Iraq had stepped forward proactively to fill the breach when India's imports from Iran significantly declined due to sanctions. This is pragmatism not subordination.

Saudi Arabia is and will remain antagonistic towards any Shia dispensation in Iraq. Turkey's relations with Iraq have deteriorated a great deal, partly due to its direct oil and other dealings with the Kurdish Regional Government and partly due to Iraq being perceived as a willing and cooperative conduit for men and arms to aid President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Otherwise, Iraq has good relations with all other countries including India.

7 April 2014

Nuclear Iran: Will Obama Succeed?

Even though Iran had signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1967, it had been pursuing a clandestine nuclear programme since the mid-1980s, which became public knowledge in 2002 through defectors. The program was put on fast forward during President Ahmedinejad's period.

On-off negotiations with the IAEA and Western countries, an escalating sanctions regime particularly since 2006, Iran's economy sliding into deep depression rapidly, rising possibilities of Israeli military action, etc., failed to persuade the contending parties to reach any solution. A progressively deteriorating security scenario - post Arab Spring - in West Asia seemed poised to worsen further.

Oman as a Mediator

Oman has traditionally had a close relationship with Iran both during the Shah's time and after the 1979 Revolution and has acted as a conduit between the US and Iran. According to well founded speculation Oman had been mediating secret interaction between the US and Iran for several months before Rouhani's presidency. Sultan Qaboos visited Iran during 25-27 August 2013, three weeks after Rouhani became the President adding credence to reports that he had carried a communication from President Obama to Rouhani.

Developments under Rouhani

A moderate cleric, a quintessential insider and personally close to Supreme Leader Khamanei, Dr.Hassan Rouhani, with a more conciliatory approach to the world and greater transparency on the nuclear program, was elected Iran's President in June 2013 by an absolute majority after a 72% turnout.

Providing further reassurance to the US, Mohammad Javad Zarif, who spent 12 years studying in the US and is well known and liked in the West, was appointed Foreign Minister; he was made responsible for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. The choice of new incumbents for the Head of the Atomic Energy Commission, Ambassador to the IAEA and to the UN reinforced the positive message.

Syria, US and Russia: The Iran Angle

Despite intense criticism both domestically and internationally, Obama held back from military intervention after the August 21, 2013 chemicals weapons attack in Syria. On 9 September 2013 Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov proposed that Syria should agree to place its chemical weapons under international control, dismantle them, and agree to the destruction of the entire stockpile. Syria immediately accepted the proposal and acceded to the Chemical Weapons Convention on 12 September.

On 14 September, the US and Russia reached an agreement relating to the dismantling of Syria's chemical weapons arsenal. The implementation of the agreement is underway under the auspices of OPCW and monitoring of the United Nations. Since Syria is Iran's closest ally, Obama's commendable restraint was the absolutely essential reassurance that Iran needed at a critical juncture that the US is sincere in the overtures being made to reach a solution to the nuclear issue.

As Eisenhower after Korea and Nixon after Vietnam had done, Obama in his second term is determined to avoid new military engagements abroad and focus on rebuilding the nation's economy and international esteem. All American troops are likely to be withdrawn from Afghanistan before the end of this year. In his 2014 State of the Union address he said "In a world of complex threats, our security depends on all elements of our power ...including strong and principled diplomacy". The Obama Doctrine according priority to diplomacy bodes well for a troubled world and is also in sync with the American people's views.

Towards a geopolitical breakthrough?

All the above factors have made a substantive thaw between Iran and the West. There has been an unprecedented meaningful interaction between the two sides. On 26 September 2013, Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif met the Foreign Ministers of the P-5+1 on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly. On 27 September, President Obama spoke on the phone with President Rouhani and discussed Iran's nuclear program and said that he was persuaded there was a basis for an agreement.

Significantly choosing to speak in English, Iran's Foreign Minister outlined a detailed proposal to representatives of the P 5 +1 on Oct 15-16 at Geneva. All parties declared they were very satisfied with these first formal negotiations since the Rouhani's election. After intense 4 day negotiations, on Nov 24th morning agreement on an interim framework toward reaching a long-term comprehensive solution to Iran's nuclear program was announced. This came into effect from 20 January and is valid for six months. Under this deal, the IAEA has confirmed that Iran began curbing uranium enrichment, suspended its most sensitive nuclear development work, and placed its nuclear sector under heretofore unprecedented international scrutiny.

In return the EU and the US have eased some sanctions allowing limited increases in exports of oil and petrochemicals and released \$4.20 billion of Iran's frozen oil assets. The atmospherics of negotiations during January-March have remained very positive. In the meantime the Iranian Foreign Minister had a rare and encouraging one-to-one meeting with the US Secretary of State and similar meetings with the other five Foreign Ministers at Munich on the sidelines of the annual Security Conference in early February. The UK has posted a CDA in Tehran; Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Italy, Spain, Sweden and the EU Foreign Policy chief Katherine Ashton have visited Iran.

Negotiations are going to be difficult and challenging and success cannot be assumed but the world is on the anvil of a spectacular geopolitical breakthrough.

3 February 2014

Syria Today: Is Regime Change the Answer?

There are three aspects of the Syrian imbroglio: First, what was originally a political struggle has become a progressively more devastating civil war. Second, those fighting against the Assad regime have fragmented into several distinct and contending elements - the Western and Gulf countries' backed Syrian National Coalition, now the weakest of the opposition groups in terms of fighting ability; a large array of Islamist groups, many armed and funded by Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, significant numbers of whom have come together under two different Islamist fronts; the Nabhat Al Nusrah, an effective fighting unit largely composed of Syrians but an affiliate of Al Qaeda; and, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an Al Qaeda outfit, consisting mainly of Iraqis, the most extremist, brutal and effective fighting unit, whose agenda goes much beyond the mere removal of Assad and is the establishment of a fundamentalist Islamist Emirate. The involvement of so many different groups makes the possibility of any solution very difficult. Third, the active involvement of foreign countries - France, Iran, Qatar, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UK and the US; this has led directly to Syria getting to the point where it is now. The enormous complexity of the situation should be self evident.

Those advocating regime change need to seriously ponder over the fact that that the internal situation today in both Iraq and Libya is far worse than it was when Saddam and Gadhafi were in power. Intrusive military interventions by foreign countries in Libya and Iraq are not examples to be emulated but shunned. Indeed, externally encouraged efforts towards regime change in Arab countries must stop forthwith. Given the current ground realities in Syria and its diverse ethnic and sectarian makeup, regime change in Syria could lead to a much worse outcome than in those two countries, even the breakup of the country with deeply destabilizing consequences for the Levant as a whole.

In the past year Assad has regained a lot of lost ground. All other opposition rebels are now spending greater effort fighting the ISIL considering it a more detestable and dangerous enemy than the Assad regime. The very recent Turkish air strike on a convoy of the ISIL and Premier Erdogan's visit to Iran suggest that Turkey is rethinking its policy in Syria. There is increasing reluctance of Western countries' to aid rebels fearing that arms will fall into the hands of extremist groups. Thus, Assad is much stronger today vis-a-vis both his domestic and international adversaries than in June 2012 when the first Geneva conference "agreed on guidelines and principles for a political transition that meets the legitimate aspirations of the

Syrian people". It is now increasingly highly unlikely that Assad can be defeated on the battleground. Therefore, he is hardly likely to agree to his handing over power in a conference room. Pursuing regime change now is a no brainer.

Humanitarian issues such as ensuring that aid should reach the millions in dire distress and urgently attending to the desperate conditions of the 4 million plus internally displaced should be accorded top priority. The second priority must be addressing the growing violence much of which, for all practical purposes, has now morphed into pure terrorism. Geneva II can be said to represent the beginning of a peace process and an encouraging sign is agreement that the next meeting will be held starting Feb 10th.

Another hopeful feature of Geneva II was, in the words of UN mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, "there is of course agreement (amongst the fighting entities) that terrorism ...is a very serious problem inside Syria but there's no agreement on how to deal with it". Another good omen is that both sides of internal Syrian conflict observed a minutes silence together to remember those killed. Now that a door has been opened, the warring parties within Syria need to pursue these two issues on a priority basis. However, the boycott of hard line extremists suggests that in the unlikely event of any agreement, its implementation would be sabotaged. This is a risk that will have to be taken and should not become an excuse for no action.

Iran was not represented even though the UN Secretary General had invited it; the invite had to be withdrawn due to strong US opposition. Iran commands the greatest influence with Assad; Iran and Russia acting in tandem are the only two countries that can persuade Assad to make meaningful compromises. Iran's participation therefore is absolutely vital to the success of any conference on Syria.

An agreement amongst the main players – the patrons of the different contending parties within Syria: the P- 5, EU, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey - on a common approach is a prerequisite. Therefore a separate conference involving them should be held soonest possible complementing a resumption of the Geneva II talks on February 10. A priority subject should be taking on the ISIL and similar extremist groups head on.

III

Rest of the Arab World

13 January 2014

The Arab World: Trying Times Ahead

Though the spotlight on West Asia is understandably focused currently on the unquestionably exciting prospect of a welcome and desirable reconciliation between the US and Iran, which is more than likely to happen, contemporary ground realities and trends in large sections of the Arab World increasingly suggest that Islamic extremism, personified by al Qaeda and its affiliates in West Asia, is potentially an even greater destabilising factor than the standoff vis-à-vis Iran had been.

Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen

Though four dictators were overthrown as a result of the revolutionary turmoil in the Arab World, except in tiny Tunisia which is the only success story, the current situation in Egypt, Libya and Yemen is far more unstable than when the dictators were ruling. In Libya, a large number of armed militias have carved out fiefdoms which they control, with the central government becoming a nominal entity with its writ being virtually non-existent in vast swathes of the country. Libya is a Somalia in the making.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been Egypt's and the Arab world's pre-eminent Islamic entity known for its outstanding social and welfare services to the poor and rural populations in particular. It was elected to form the government which, after only one year in power, was overthrown by the army, albeit demanded by a very large number of protestors against 'Islamic' rule. Since then, every week dozens of its supporters and many Egyptian army and police personnel have been killed in clashes between them.

The Brotherhood has been banned once again - dubbed a terrorist organisation; this does not augur well for the prospects of political Islam which is natural and fundamental to the success of democracy in the overwhelmingly Muslim Arab countries. It is very likely that Gen Sisi, the present Army Chief and architect of the hard line against the Brotherhood, is elected the next President. All this will encourage support for extremist groups as the only alternative to dictatorial and Army rule.

Iraq and Syria

Syria is engulfed by a particularly devastating and destructive civil war. More than 1,20,000 people have been killed. Almost four million Syrians are refugees in neighboring countries and five million have been internally displaced. The dismantling of the Saddam regime led to the border between Syria and Iraq becoming porous; in the last year it has become nonexistent for all practical purposes - huge spaces between Baghdad and Damascus are controlled by many different groups of Islamist fighters of various hues, pre-eminent among them being the Iraq-based Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), an al Qaeda outfit.

Amongst Islamist groups fighting the Assad regime, the ISIL is the best armed and most effective. Some weeks ago it had established control over most of Aleppo which is Syria's largest city and in the process routed not only government forces but also of other rebel groups, and of the Western and Gulf countries' backed Syrian National Coalition and Syrian National Army. The ISIL consists only of foreigners, mainly Iraqis, and its brutality and single-minded commitment to the establishment of an Islamic Emirate has now caused other rebel groups, in particular the recently formed Islamic Front, and the Syrian affiliate of the al Qaeda, the al Nusra Front, to treat the ISIL as the major enemy rather than the Assad regime. It is ironical that after so much bloodshed Assad is likely to remain in power, but of an anarchic and shattered Syria. Iraq is rapidly slipping back into the anarchy that prevailed during 2005 to 2008.

After Arab Spring: Is the Situation Better or Worse Today?

Politics within all these countries is increasingly determined by the gun. Thus, the singularly inappropriately termed 'Arab Spring', hailed as the belated 'Enlightenment Moment' for the Arab World, has left it in a far worse situation than before. Islam in the Arab World and West Asia is at war with itself - between moderates and extremists; between Shias and Sunnis;

between pro-West Muslim countries (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, UAE) and anti-West Muslim countries (Iran, Syria, Lebanon).

Today, several countries of the Arab world have become a blood soaked cauldron of bigotry and hate torn by sectarian violence. If this fratricidal conflict continues, significant portions of Iraq, Libya, Syria and Yemen could become like the Afghanistan of the 1980s and early 1990s – a safe-haven and breeding ground for terrorists.

Should South Asia, especially India, be Worried?

Though the Arab countries themselves are the worst affected, adverse consequences for the US, Europe and the Indian subcontinent in particular, would also be very much on the cards. This is particularly so in the context of rising uncertainties as to what could happen in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of US troops. Pakistan has become a dangerous hotbed of extremism also. India needs to be particularly wary.

The world needs to proactively address the current mayhem in West Asia with a sense of urgency. The imperative need of the hour is that the United Nations takes the initiative to convene a conference of concerned countries and major powers to take on extremism in the Arab World and West Asia, including confronting the al Qaeda outfits headlong, militarily if need be.

IV US and West Asia

3 March 2014

Saudi Arabia-US Estrangement: Implications for the Indian Subcontinent

The Arab Spring strongly compounded Saudi Arabia's progressively increasing disillusionment with the US when, to its utter consternation and deep anger, the US failed to prevent the overthrow of Mubarak, a faithful ally for more than three decades. US criticism of Gen Al Sissi's overthrowing of the Muslim Brotherhood government of President Morsy and cutting off economic and military assistance added fuel to the fire.

The West's holding back of arms supplies to rebels fighting against the Assad regime in Syria and the US decision not to take military action against it for breaching a publicly announced red-line, the use of chemical weapons, added to Saudi Arabia's growing anger. After these disappointments, the sudden opening of negotiations on the nuclear issue with Iran, the rapidity with which an interim agreement was reached and the continuing pursuit of a thaw in relations with Iran represent in Saudi eyes a willful disregard of its security concerns and sensitivities. Saudi Arabia has maintained that no agreement will constrain the nuclear programme and Iran would still be able to make the bomb very quickly should it finally decide to do so.

From 2009, Saudi Arabia started sending signals from the King downwards and has more than once since then stated publicly that in the event Iran acquires the capability to make nuclear weapons, Saudi Arabia will do so also.

Pakistan-Iran relations have been witnessing a serious downturn in the past few months – Iran has threatened military intervention to secure the release of its security personnel and in the context of the continuing killing of Shias; Iran has cancelled the much flaunted gas pipeline, etc. A flurry of exchange of visits between Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are coincidentally taking place during this downturn. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud's sudden visit to Pakistan in January 2014 followed very soon thereafter by the new Pakistani Army Chief's visit to Saudi Arabia and now Prince Salman choosing Pakistan as the first country to visit after becoming Crown Prince and Defence Minister has prompted a lot of speculative commentary in the Western strategic community.

Those who closely follow Saudi Arabia's relations with South Asia believe that the Saudi Arabia-funded Pakistani nuclear programme and payback time may be approaching. Saudi Defence Minister Prince Sultan was given privileged and complete access to Pakistani nuclear installations in 1999 (and again in 2002) and soon thereafter Dr AQ Khan visited Saudi Arabia. US experts such as Bruce Reidel and Gary Saymore, who should know, say that a secret and long-standing agreement exists that Pakistan would provide the Kingdom with nuclear technology and weapons should Saudi Arabia feel threatened by a third party nuclear programme. This would inevitably invite strong reactions from the US and Iran and would also almost surely evoke strong opposition from China which would not want to jeopardise its overarching relationship with the US for an issue far removed from its core national interests. Both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have strongly denied any such intention and also reports that Pakistan will, at Saudi request, be supplying sophisticated weapons to rebels in Syria – this would greatly anger Iran but will hardly make a difference in Syria. However, both these contingencies are unlikely to happen.

It is far more likely that these visits are in the context of the domestic situation in Saudi Arabia. These are delicate and sensitive times in Saudi Arabia – Crown Prince Sultan and Crown Prince Nayef passed away in quick succession in October 2011 and June 2012 respectively; the King is in his mid-nineties and his health is fragile; Crown Prince Salman's health is not particularly robust; Saudi Arabia is approaching uncharted territory in relation to the succession to the throne. Massive unemployment, the popular appeal of the Arab Spring, Sunni Islamic extremism, Shia restiveness particularly in the oil-rich eastern provinces, are factors that present serious putative security concerns. Given the one-of-its-kind rather unique Saudi-Pakistan relationship, assertively Sunni Pakistan may be the perfect security partner to help meet internal threats. Western security partners cannot be used while Arabs will always be more problematic and risky.

Crown Prince Salman also paid a highly satisfying three-day visit to India during which an MoU on defence cooperation was amongst agreements signed which build upon the relationship spelt out in the Delhi Declaration of 2006 and the Riyadh Declaration of 2010, both landmark, path-breaking documents signed personally by King Abdullah with the Indian Prime Minister. These established a wide-ranging strategic partnership.

An Indian defence minister had paid a first-ever visit to Saudi Arabia in 2012. In contrast to Pakistan, the interaction with India is in the context of tentative beginnings of a potential reorientation of Saudi foreign policy to move away from complete and total dependence on the

US. Prince Saud Al-Faisal, the Saudi Foreign Minister, had given a thought provoking speech in Manama, Bahrain, on 5 December 2004. The subject was 'Towards a New Framework for Regional Security'. He said, inter alia, that "the international component of the suggested Gulf security framework should engage positively the emerging Asian powers as well, especially China and India." Since then, this theme is increasingly reiterated by leading Saudi personalities.

V

India and West Asia

2 June 2014

Looking West: Bridging the Gulf with the GCC

For a potential global power like India clearly relations with China and the US are exceedingly important. Relations with Japan have acquired great strategic significance. Israel is a very valuable defence and high technology partner and the relationship deserves high priority cultivation. Russia and the EU will remain important partners. Africa and ASEAN countries have their respective intrinsic importance. The new government has already exhibited phenomenal foresight in inviting the heads of State or government of SAARC countries to the Prime Minister's swearing in ceremony, thereby emphasising the primary importance of the immediate neighbourhood.

The media and think-tanks have been busy making recommendations. However, no mention has been made at all of the absolutely enormous strategic importance of the six GCC countries – Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE - to India. In fact, if the baskets of strategic interests that India has vis-à-vis different regions of the world are compared, the GCC countries would be near the top of any theoretical hierarchy, ranking different regions from the perspective of India's national well-being and national interests for the immediate future. This region is also the heartland of Islam.

The Western media and even many governments have deliberately projected a negative image of the new Prime Minister as being anti-Muslim. This falsity must be contested. This further underlines the importance of the relationship with the GCC countries. The Islamic dimension has acquired strategic significance from an altogether different context also arising from violence associated with Islamic extremism. Therefore, there can be no two views that India needs to have the best possible relations with the GCC countries; this is of the highest strategic importance. Every country has a list of priorities and clearly for India nurturing this relationship must rank amongst the very top. This is substantiated in the following paragraphs.

For India to become a global power it must grow at 8-10 per cent annually for the next three-four decades. The assured availability of adequate energy resources will be the key factor. Two-thirds of India's total oil imports are from the Gulf region, with half of the total being from the GCC countries. Despite having a special relationship with Pakistan, none of the GCC countries ever stopped oil exports to India or even threatened to do so through the different Indo-Pakistani wars. They voluntarily stepped in to make up the shortfalls whenever supplies were temporarily disrupted, eg in 1990-91 and in 2003. Saudi Arabia is the largest supplier of oil and Qatar the largest supplier of gas to India.

India's total trade with the GCC countries in 2012-13 at US\$159.14 billion made them India's largest regional trading bloc by far. This has been India's fastest growing trade relationship. The UAE is India's largest trading partner – just India's exports to the UAE are more than India's total trade with each of the countries of the world except with China, the US and Saudi Arabia; Saudi Arabia is India's fourth largest trading partner and also the largest supplier of oil to India – just India's exports to Saudi Arabia are more than India's total trade with such important countries such as France, Thailand, Italy, Russia, Israel, etc.

The GCC countries are home to more than seven million Indian passport holders. They are the source of very substantial inward remittances, totaling about US\$30-35 billion last year. For a democracy, the domestic political implications of the safety and welfare of such a huge Indian passport-holding community being located abroad in a cohesive politico-geographical but a potentially volatile area, is, by itself standalone, an extremely important factor.

Despite Pakistan's strenuous efforts, anti-terrorism cooperation from Saudi Arabia and the UAE has been particularly noteworthy. Both these countries have made combating violent Islamic extremism a priority policy objective.

Some GCC countries have absolutely huge Sovereign Wealth Funds, some of which they wish to invest in India – but India needs to create an investment friendly environment which the new government is already committed to doing.

It merits mention that in the overall process, the potential hurdle of the special relationship that has existed between the GCC countries and Pakistan, particularly between Saudi Arabia and the UAE and Pakistan, has been skillfully bypassed. Neither has India's close defence relationship with Israel been a hurdle.

It is possible to create virtually irrevocable symbiotic strategic bonds with the GCC countries by India contributing to providing food security for the GCC countries - a preeminent strategic priority for them. GCC countries, flush with funds, could get strategically involved through large scale investment in India's agri-food economy. In return, India would benefit enormously in the food sector too apart from ensuring its energy security. A detailed proposal has been submitted to the Ministry of External Affairs.

When relations are excellent, there is an understandable tendency on the part of the political leadership to take the relationship for granted. The new government can ill-afford to do so. No Prime Ministerial visit to the UAE has taken place since 1982. This glaring lacuna must be set right in 2014. It is important that there should be a bilateral meeting with the Saudi King or head of delegation at the annual G20 meetings on a regular basis.

4 August 2014

India and the Conflict in Gaza

The creation of Israel in Palestine was a Western venture to expiate their guilt for their historical ill treatment of the Jews, and, at the time it was finally done, also to implant a permanent base for safeguarding their own interests for the future in the vital West Asian region. The Western 'divide and rule' policies and the arbitrary drawing of boundaries were at

the heart of imperial control of colonised peoples and territories. The legacy thereof continues. Unfortunately, history and international relations are not about fairness but about the exercise of power in one's own interest.

Meanwhile, Israel has become fully integrated economically and politically into the international comity of nations. Many non-Western countries, including China and India, have developed a strong relationship with Israel. The leading Arab country, Egypt, and Jordan have had diplomatic and stronger than merely normal relations with Israel for decades; Turkey had exceptionally close relations with Israel until a few years ago; so did Iran under the Shah; Oman and Qatar have had quasi-diplomatic relations with Israel; Tunisia and Morocco have had interactions with Israel; several GCC countries, and Saudi Arabia in particular, have encouraged an increasingly close working relationship between their intelligence services and that of Israel's, especially over the past three-four years.

The current hostilities in Gaza are essentially a war between Hamas and Israel and not a war between Israel and Palestine; that is how governments of many Arab countries as well as the Palestinian National Authority are viewing the conflict; and they, not excluding Fatah, are also treating it as an intrinsic element of the current strong confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot, and its Arab opponents. Egypt and Saudi Arabia consider Hamas a terrorist organisation. In strong contrast to each of the earlier such confrontations, except for Qatar's support, Hamas is politically isolated in the Arab world this time. Another stumbling block is that Hamas does not officially recognise the existence of Israel. The uncomfortable truth is that each of these parties, without exception, is cynically pursuing its own broader geopolitical agenda.

The minimum fundamental requirement for meaningful forward movement on the Palestinian issue, including the lifting of the Israeli economic blockade of Gaza, is substantive unity amongst the Arabs. The Arab world has enormous financial clout which has never been concertedly used for the Palestinian cause. In the absence of this, the rest of the non-Western world cannot meaningfully pressurise Israel.

It is all these factors that have made possible Israel getting away with the extreme brutality of its current onslaught on Gaza.

This broad brush backdrop must be kept in mind in evaluating India's policy in relation to ongoing events in Gaza.

What is the objective of a foreign policy? It should primarily be to promote and protect the country's national interests, national security and national welfare. An important guiding principle must be to avoid taking stances that will have zero impact on realities on the ground but which could adversely affect important bilateral relationships. Though difficult, emotion and ideological biases must be eschewed.

The establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992 was a right decision courageously taken by the Narasimha Rao Government as part of a sorely needed revamp of India's economic and foreign policies. Since then, Israel has emerged as a particularly important defence equipment supplier and a multi-sectoral hi-tech partner of vital strategic significance. However,

this has not come in the way of India maintaining excellent relationships with Arab countries in general; and with the GCC countries, in particular, the latter developed mainly in the past decade and a half. This relationship is in fact India's most spectacular foreign policy success. Meanwhile, India continues its strong traditional support for the Palestinian cause consciously, deliberately and rightly. There is no contradiction in simultaneously pursuing these approaches that are politico-strategic imperatives for India.

In the context of the current crisis in Gaza, India has maintained complete continuity with past stances in relevant international fora and in statements made by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). Nevertheless, India's reactions and policies have come in for strong domestic criticism focused on two counts: first, regarding mention of the use of rockets by Hamas in the MEA spokesperson's statement of July 10. In 2008, when Israeli retaliatory actions killed 1417 Palestinians in a much shorter conflict, it was mentioned in the MEA spokesperson's statement on 27 December 2008. Both times, these statements accorded factually with observable ground realities.

Another reason for criticism is rejection of a demand for a Parliamentary Resolution; there was neither a demand nor any initiative for a resolution when the UPA government was in power. It is wrong to politicise issues of national interest. Adopting resolutions on foreign policy issues should be avoided as it does not promote solutions but only constrains governmental flexibility and options. However, discussions in the parliament should not be prevented.

There have been demands to stop buying military equipment from Israel. This would hurt Israel only marginally but will be an utterly devastating self-inflicted wound on ourselves; and no Indian government has or should consider such an utterly absurd and irresponsible proposal.

India's stance is highly unlikely to adversely affect relations with important Arab countries as these are based on symbiotic mutually beneficial pragmatism, not emotion.

7 July 2014

India in Iraq: Need for Better Focus

Though Iraq has been a particularly good and politically supportive friend and had episodically been the top oil supplier to India in the past, relations perforce started losing momentum in the wake of the US policies after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait; finally, India lost interest in Iraq after the US invaded it in 2003 – so much so that there was no Indian ambassador in Baghdad from 2005-2011.

Iraq has suddenly dominated Indian public attention for the past month with India's 24x7 TV news channels orchestrating a shrill campaign highlighting the woes of the families of 40 Indian construction workers abducted by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) after they took control of Mosul and of 46 Indian nurses posted in a hospital in Tikrit; and pillorying the government's alleged "failure" to protect and/or rescue its nationals.

The Indian public needs to be made aware of ground realities because of which these things happen.

The 39 construction workers are in a war zone and their exact whereabouts are not known. Since neither the territory, nor the captors, nor the evolution of developments are under Indian control or influence, the government is inevitably completely dependent on others – governments of friendly countries who may have local influence; central and regional governments in Iraq; national and international humanitarian and relief agencies; tribal leaders; militants themselves or other individuals or entities who have influence with the militants etc for their safety and return to India. Efforts have been continuing on a 24 hour basis with such entities – that is the best that any government can do. That is how the rescue of the nurses was secured. India and Indians have always enjoyed enormous goodwill in the Gulf region in particular and in the Arab world in general. This is one of the reasons why Indian nurses were not ill-treated and released. If, despite all efforts, the workers are harmed the government should not be blamed.

Not a single country, even those with extremely competent intelligence agencies and foreign ministries, and those that intensively interact with Iraq on a daily basis, had anticipated the blitzkrieg of the ISIL in taking over the Sunni provinces of Iraq. The consul general of Turkey in Mosul and 23 other consulate personnel were abducted and are yet to be rescued. 100 Kurdish school children have been missing for weeks. Numerous others of many nationalities are missing. Therefore, there was nothing that the Indian government or the embassy could have done to prevent the abduction of the Indian workers.

Suggestions that they could have been evacuated in anticipation of events made in hindsight completely ignore how the real world functions. They themselves would not have wanted to leave having made large payments to recruitment and travel agents in India. Suggestions that the commando operations can be mounted to rescue them are completely irresponsible.

Exactly 10 years ago something similar had happened. Three Indian truck drivers were kidnapped in Iraq in July 2004 while working for a Kuwaiti company that ferried supplies to the US military in Iraq. An Indian diplomatic team was sent to Baghdad and successfully negotiated their release – they had been captive for 41 days. While negotiations were underway, India witnessed similar frenetic TV coverage as now. However, within a few months of their release, the drivers were back in Kuwait. When interviewed on TV, the same family members who had earlier complained about and criticised the government aggressively said that the men had to earn a living for their family members!

This team had learnt to its great surprise that as many as 20,000 Indians were working in Iraq, many of them in various US military camps, the attraction obviously being the high salaries being paid for duty in war zones. In the context of the kidnapping of the drivers, the government banned the movement of Indians to Iraq for employment, which continued till May 2010. This was lifted after a public demand and hence the trouble now.

All this highlights the sad fact and national shame that 67 years after independence, millions of Indians have to go abroad to work in conditions that are conducive to their easy exploitation. In the short term, it is difficult to see how this can be prevented. However, one domestic issue needs to be addressed proactively with a sense of priority which unfortunately no government in the past has done: the nexus between the recruiting and travel agents in India and employment agents in the Gulf countries – the main reason for the exploitation of Indian

workers. This unsavoury nexus must be broken and stricter regulations must be stringently enforced.

Last week the ISIL announced the establishment of an Islamic Emirate, which in due course, they hope, would include India. However, there is no reason for major concern because the ISIL is going to be extremely busy in Syria and Iraq to stave off defeat ultimately. However, the Caliphate could be an ideological beacon for misguided or unemployed Indian Muslim youth; however, ultimately causes and remedies thereof lie with the Indian government and civil society, not outside India.