

**Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives**

Edited by Kanchi Gupta

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### Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives

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## **CONTENTS**

### [Editor's Note](#)

Kanchi Gupta

### [1. Introduction](#)

Anil Wadhwa

### [2. The Arab Spring: Four Years Later](#)

Jawad Kerdoudi

### [3. The Changing Middle East and the Crumbling Political Order: An Israeli Perspective](#)

Kobi Michael

### [4. Extremism and Terrorism, Challenges and Impact on India-West Asia Ties](#)

Ra'ed Fawzi Ihmoud Ihmoud

### [5. The Role of External Powers in the Middle East](#)

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty

### [6. The United States and its Allies on the Iranian Nuclear Negotiations](#)

Mehmet Yegin

### [About](#)

### **Editor's Note**

The first edition of the West Asia Conference was held successfully in March 2014 with active support from the Indian Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). The purpose of the conference was to bring together stakeholder opinions and perspectives from India and West Asia on the developments in the region and their global implications. ORF published a special report titled “Transformations in West Asia: Perspectives from Egypt, Israel, Libya, Qatar, Turkey and India” to collate the critical issues discussed during the interactions.

The conference was proposed as an annual event, and following the success of the first edition, ORF sought to broaden participation from both concerned regions to foster in-depth analysis of crucial developments in West Asia and their impact on India. The second edition, titled “Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives,” saw conversation on developments that followed the Arab Spring, which have created instability and political uncertainty throughout the West Asian region; fluctuations in the region's geopolitics because of the changing role of extra-regional powers; economic, political and strategic commonalities that have given rise to new avenues for cooperation between India and the region; and the growth of religious extremism and terrorism, which has emerged as another important dimension in shaping India-West Asia relations. The papers\* presented in this short volume represent these conversations.

The now annual ORF-MEA West Asia Conference—*Transformations in West Asia*—is a manifestation of Track II dialogue, seen as a tool to facilitate and supplement traditional instruments of diplomacy. The crystallisation of socio-political divisions as well as shifting power structures in West Asia has elevated the significance of constructive engagement between civil societies and non-governmental actors. Track II initiatives surpass any governmental blockages that may hinder broad-based communication, instead allowing for independent insights, the identification of emerging problems and the fostering of a deeper understanding between different actors.

These efforts find strength in not only generating new perspectives, but also promoting an exchange of ideas for the way forward. Track II dialogues seek to override challenges of mistrust by creating a platform for enhancing and harmonising synergies. Given the breadth of actors, positions and circumstances being faced in West Asia, the endeavour is that this

conference becomes, over time, a critical medium bridging the gap between opinions and discourses that span geographical, political, social, religious and economic borders in the region. It is ORF's hope to explore the interconnected and interlinked values and interests of the people of both regions through a sustained commitment.

*\*All are conference papers*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

[Address](#) by Secretary (East) at the Inaugural Session of Second ORF-MEA West Asia Conference in New Delhi (April 27, 2015)

Excellencies, distinguished guests, and colleagues,

It gives me great pleasure to address the Second ORF-MEA West Asia Conference, aptly titled 'Transformations in West Asia: Regional Perspectives,' in which we will discuss issues of topical importance for the region. I would like to thank our partner ORF for organizing this timely conference, which will help us understand the complex nuances of the evolving developments in a cohesive manner.

As you all are aware, India shares deep historical, cultural and civilisation links with the Arab world. The shared belief in anticolonialism, together with the staunch commitment to achieve, preserve and enhance international peace and security through dialogue and consultation, forms the basic framework of our cooperation. For India, West Asia is part of our extended neighbourhood. Continued peace and stability in the region is in our strategic interest.

To cite a few examples to highlight our deep engagement with West Asia, the region is home to more than seven million Indians, who contribute around \$40 billion in remittances annually. Our economic and commercial engagement with the region is around \$186 billion per annum (2013-14), making it the largest trading regional block. The region is a source for more than 60 percent of our oil and gas requirement, critical for our energy security. The Maghreb region is a major source of phosphatic and other fertilisers, a significant factor in our food security. The sizable Sovereign Wealth Funds of Gulf countries can offer significant platform for operations of Indian companies, particularly in infrastructure, important for our socio-economic development and 'Make in India' initiative. There is increased air connectivity and tourism prospects between the two sides (for example, 700 flights a week between India and UAE). India has also been participating in important UN peacekeeping missions in the region, especially in Lebanon, Syria and South Sudan.

The West Asia region, post-Arab Spring, is in a state of flux and uncertainty, which heightens the difficulty in fully assessing the overall impact of unfolding events. After over four years of Arab Spring, the earlier exaggerated expectations of progress towards democracy have turned out to be misplaced. On the whole, Arab Spring has exacerbated the regional fault lines, heightened regional rivalries with competing ideologies and skewed the regional balance of power. The surge of Islamic State (IS), which has gained control over large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, is threatening to jolt the geopolitical paradigm. The Iran nuclear issue has further compounded the crisis. The recent flare-up of fighting in Yemen and the ongoing civil wars in Syria and Libya only highlight the complexity and severity of the crisis. Militia infighting in Libya has seen Islamists pitted against tribal and pro-democracy rebel groups, thus threatening wider regional stability. There are a large number of foreign terrorist fighters in Syria and Iraq from around 83 countries. The easy mobility of extremists and rising number of foreign jihadis in the region has increased fears of the possibility of the spread of radicalism in the home countries of foreign fighters.

India's policy in the region remains guided by our traditional longstanding ties with the region and is non-prescriptive and non-judgmental. So far, despite the challenges, our bilateral relations with virtually all countries of the region have been progressing structurally and we have managed to insulate our core interests from the negative fallout of regional developments. India acknowledges that the future political discourse, taking into account popular aspirations in the countries, has to be determined from within, and without any external interference or influence. While India is not in the business of exporting democracy, promotion of democratic ideals may be in alignment with India's belief in these principles.

As far as policy options for India are concerned, we fully acknowledge that the complex challenges of the region require a multithronged approach, and hence our efforts to outreach to a whole cross-section of society, including think tanks like ORF, universities, academics and media towards a consolidated policy formulation. I will now delve into some key elements of our policy options:

(i) It needs to be understood that "old order neutrality" is not absence of decision-making or political passivity. India has been asked to play a more active role in the Middle East, but we need to assess this based on our strategic leverages and realistic consideration of our strengths and limitations. We would not wish to create parallel mechanisms that will affect our bilateral relations.

(ii) India remains cautious that our approach towards the region should not be misconstrued as being partisan or sectarian, as India has stayed out of any regional alliances based on

sectarian or other similar considerations. We need to be sensitive to the perceptions of our own religious and ethnic mix in the population. At the same time, given the sectarian volatility in the region, we should remain prepared for any fundamental/sectarian backlash coming from the region.

(iii) India needs to strengthen high-level G2G contacts with all the countries in West Asia, keeping in view our larger diaspora, energy and security interests in the region. There have been high-level state/official visits from some key regional countries over the last two years, including that of President of Egypt (March 2013); Prime Ministers of Iraq (August 2013) and Kuwait (November 2013); King of Bahrain (February 2014), Crown Prince and Deputy Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia (February 2014) and Emir of Qatar (March 2015). Our External Affairs Ministers have visited some key countries in the region, including Iraq, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, Tunisia and Sudan. Foreign Ministers of Oman, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt have visited India. This regular exchange of high-level visits has further cemented our bilateral relationships.

(iv) The Government is committed to protect the interests of Indian expatriates in the Gulf countries. These steps include, inter alia, working closely with the local authorities and employers, putting in place requisite institutional bilateral mechanisms, community outreach, initiating Indian Community Welfare Funds and rendering regular consular assistance. We have made concerted efforts to enter into bilateral Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), with all the major destination countries to enlist the commitment of the host governments to ensure better protection and welfare of Indian emigrants. There are MoUs with UAE, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Bahrain. An agreement on labour cooperation for domestic workers recruitment was signed with Saudi Arabia in January 2014.

(v) On Yemen, India has urged all concerned parties in the conflict to resolve their differences amicably and abide by the relevant UN resolution, the terms of the Peace and National Partnership Agreement and the outcomes of the National Dialogue Conference. India remains strongly committed to a stable, peaceful and democratic Yemen, which is in the interest of global and regional peace and security. India has successfully carried out the evacuation exercise for 4,741 Indian nationals as well as 1,947 foreign nationals from 48 countries through 'Operation Rahat,' which I was personally associated with over two weeks.

(vi) On Egypt, we have noted that the situation is slowly stabilising. We are encouraged at the progress in the implementation of the political transitional roadmap with the adoption of the new Constitution and conduct of Presidential elections. The holding up of Parliamentary elections at an early date will be important.

(vii) On Syria, India supports a UN-backed, Syrian-led comprehensive political settlement, taking into account the aspirations of the Syrian people. We firmly believe that there can be no military solution to the crisis. India participated in Geneva-II and has contributed financially towards humanitarian assistance and the destruction of chemical weapons.

(viii) On Israel-Palestine, there is no change in India's policy of extending strong support to the Palestinian cause, while maintaining good relations with Israel. India supports a comprehensive resolution of the Palestinian issue, leading to a sovereign, independent, viable and united State of Palestine with East Jerusalem as its capital, living within secure and recognised borders, side by side at peace with Israel, as endorsed in the Quartet Roadmap and relevant UNSC Resolutions. We have called on both sides to resume the stalled peace process. On Israel-Gaza conflict of last summer, India expressed deep concern at the loss of large number of civilian lives in Gaza. India pledged \$4 million at the Cairo International Conference on Gaza Reconstruction in October 2014. Apart from strong political support to the Palestinian cause at international, regional and bilateral levels, India has been contributing budgetary, economic and developmental assistance to Palestine.

(ix) On Iraq, the ISIS takeover of large swathes of northern Iraq and creation of territorial contiguity with north-eastern Syria has serious ramifications for the region, with heightened extremist and sectarian overtones. We have expressed our firm support to Iraq in its fight against international terrorism and efforts to preserve its unity and territorial integrity. We are hopeful that an inclusive political arrangement will help in easing the conflict. In view of the security situation, the government has assisted over 7,000 Indians in returning from Iraq. However, the safety of the 39 Indian nationals in captivity in Mosul remains a matter of foremost concern, and the government is making all efforts for their release.

(x) Libya, in post-revolution period, is witnessing extreme divisive tendencies shrouded in tribalism, religious fanaticism, regionalism and more recently, extreme forms of militia violence. The intensified militia warfare and in-fighting in Libya, ongoing since July 2014, is of grave concern to us. The government initiated a detailed assistance plan for the safe exit of the Indian nationals trapped in the conflict. So far, of the 6,500 Indians at the time of the commencement of the conflict, around 3,500 have been evacuated. The remaining Indians, despite persistent Embassy Advisories, have refused to leave for economic reasons.

(xi) As for the external players, India believes that US, despite its pivot towards Asia-Pacific region, remains an important player for regional stability (i.e. fight against IS, security of Israel, Iran nuclear talks). Other countries have attempted to re-engage and may have gained in appeal as a counterweight to the West in the region. However, there are questions as to

their economic capability and sustainability. Some of these countries may be making a strong economic and military thrust in the region, including for consolidation of oil interests. But their readiness for a strong political role in the region remains to be seen.

(xii) On the Iran nuclear talks, India has welcomed the understanding announced in Lausanne between Iran and E3+3 on the nuclear issue. India has always maintained that the Iranian nuclear issue should be resolved peacefully by respecting Iran's right to peaceful uses of nuclear energy as also the international community's strong interest in the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme.

(xiii) On IS, India believes that the only solution to this threat can be through a larger political approach requiring a consolidated, rather than fragmented, perspective, including intelligence sharing; counter-terrorism; cyberspace cooperation for containment of outbound flow of foreign fighters into Iraq and Syria; developing a legal framework for fighting terrorism at national and international level (including early adoption of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism); tracking financial flows; and humanitarian assistance. So far, the efforts of IS to gain recruits from India have met with limited success, largely owing to our own pluralist society and inclusive democratic experience. There are reported to be a small number of Indian jihadi fighters in Iraqi-Syrian war zones, but the Government is taking measures to control this through immigration controls, intelligence sharing and liaising with state Governments.

(xiv) In view of the situation in the region, new areas of defence and security cooperation have emerged, which includes counterterrorism, intelligence sharing, piracy, money laundering, small arms smuggling and financing terror activities. Specific measures for strengthening institutional security mechanisms can include greater naval presence in the region, regular participation in Shared Awareness and Deconfliction (SHADE) meetings and stronger regional cooperation through naval assets in the Strait of Hormuz for protection of maritime trade.

(xv) India believes that political instability can be offset through greater economic engagement with the region. While India's regional trade volumes have increased, considerable untapped potential remains.

(xvi) The Indian diaspora in the region has become the most preferred workforce due to its hardworking nature and sense of dedication and commitment. Its contribution in the development of host countries has earned tremendous goodwill for India. It has also helped in furthering our bilateral relations with these countries.

(xvii) We will continue our efforts to further our mutually beneficial political, economic and security ties with North African countries—Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Sudan. New economic cooperation areas are pharmaceuticals, automobiles, infrastructure, power and renewable energy.

(xviii) We shall continue our cooperation with Somalia on antipiracy and the issue of hostages. Importantly, the last of the remaining seven Indian seafarers in captivity in Somalia were released in October 2014 after four years in captivity.

(xix) We have laid out a strong foundation for our relationship collectively with the Arab League, through the signing of a Memorandum of Cooperation and an Executive Programme in December 2013, covering the fields of political consultations, trade and investments, media and culture.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that India attaches high priority to its political, economic and security relations with the countries of the West Asia region. I remain optimistic that our bilateral relations with the countries in West Asia are poised to grow, given the enormous potential on both sides. However, the broader context in which we seek to pursue our vital interests in West Asia is fraught and unpredictable, making our task so much more challenging and daunting.

I look forward to hearing from the learned speakers on this pertinent topic and gain new insights on regional perspective.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

## **2. THE ARAB SPRING: FOUR YEARS LATER**

Jawad Kerdoudi

President, Moroccan Institute for International Relations

The Arab revolution that started in Tunisia in January 2011 spread like wildfire to other parts of the region, including Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The protests were marked by large-scale anti-government demonstrations across the region and were followed by a large bloody resistance by regime leaders. The revolts were successful in bringing about a regime change in Tunisia, where President Ben Ali fled the country; in Egypt, where President Mubarak resigned and was imprisoned by the next regime; and in Libya, where President Gaddafi was allegedly killed by rival militia forces. In Yemen, too, domestic dissent forced President Ali Abdullah Saleh out of power in February 2012.

In Syria, however, the events unfolded somewhat differently after the protests began in March 2011. The regime of President Bashar al-Assad has managed to hold on to power, largely due to the financial and military support provided by Iran and Russia. The revolt has essentially turned into a civil war with the emergence of armed Islamist opposition movements. In Bahrain, the Sunni monarchy, led by Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa, responded to the protests with strong military repression, which was heavily supported by Saudi and Emirati troops. Demonstrations also spread to other Arab countries, albeit on a much smaller scale. Algeria, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco and Oman also witnessed public dissent that was subsequently suppressed.

The causes of the Arab Spring were common across the Arab landscape. The actors of these revolutions were mainly young people from civil society, who were mobilised by the new technologies of communication, such as social media forms like Twitter and Facebook. They demanded the establishment of democracy, respect for human rights, social equality, economic and socio-cultural reforms and development, anti-corruption measures, as well as good governance. The populace also revolted against the monopoly of wealth and the grip of ruling monarchies and their families on social, economic, military and judicial institutions. Through these revolts, they expressed their suffering brought on by a repressive economic

regime marked by high unemployment, high inflation, poor social housing, widespread poverty and lack of access to basic social and health services.

These regimes, despite all their shortcomings, were supported by the West (Europe and USA), who tolerated them as an alternative to the potential rise of radical Islamist groups and political actors.

### **Political Consequences**

The political consequences of the Arab Spring were spectacular. The fall of dictators in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen was followed by significant political reforms in some countries, including in those that did not experience large-scale protests, such as Morocco, Mauritania, Jordan and Algeria. More free and transparent elections were held in several Arab countries. There was also an expansion of individual and collective freedoms with regard to expression, association and the press. Elected assemblies were put in place, and governments were formed.

But we must note that the Arab world is not monolithic and that each country has pursued its own path after its respective revolution. Thus, there has been a rise of Islamist parties in some countries after the elections. This was the case in Tunisia with the Nahda party, in Morocco with the Justice and Development Party (PJD), and in Egypt with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, apart from the PJD in Morocco, which was able to stay in power by entering into a coalition with other political parties, none of the other Islamist parties could make a lasting political mark in their respective countries. The Nahda party in Tunisia had to give up power after the assassination of several modernist political leaders. In Egypt, the presidential elections on 16 and 17 June 2012 were won by the Muslim Brother Mohammed Morsi. They later passed a new constitution on 22 December 2012, one that was more favourable to Islamist principles. Following several policy mistakes and the failure to improve the economic situation, a large anti-Morsi popular demonstration took place in Tahrir Square in Cairo, which enabled the Egyptian army led by General Al Sissi on 3 July 2013 to dismiss Morsi from the office of the President of the Republic.

Some of the Arab countries plunged deeper into a state of instability, as in the case of Libya, where successive governments could not hold on to Tripoli against the rising power of Islamist militias. Syria's bloody civil war has persevered for three years now. The armed struggle was further complicated by the emergence of the al-Nusra Islamist movement, as well as the rising security threat post the formation of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

Iraq is in a dire situation after the departure of US troops, with the rivalry among Shiites, Sunnis and Kurds having further crystallised. In both Syria and Iraq, there is the threat of an Islamic state in the form of a Khalifa (caliphate), proclaimed by the extremist group on 28 June 2014.

Other Arab countries, however, have experienced relative stability after the Arab Spring protests. In Algeria, parliamentary elections in May 2012 did not allow for the victory of the Islamists and President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was re-elected 17 April 2014, but in an atmosphere of political stagnation and lethargy. In Morocco, the situation is more stable due to constitutional reform and a multiparty government led by the PJD under the authority of the King. In Yemen, President Ali Abdullah Saleh was replaced by Vice-President Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi, but unrest continues: Following advances made by the Iran-backed Houthi militias against Hadi, a Saudi-led coalition has intervened with airstrikes and is trying to restore the legitimacy of Hadi's government.

In Jordan and Oman, some political reforms have allowed for the preservation of the regimes. In Tunisia, a new constitution was adopted 24 January 2014. The parliamentary elections in October that year led to the victory of the secular party Nidaa Tounes and the presidential elections two months later led the party's leader Beji Caid Essebsi, former minister in the government of long-ruling President Habib Bourguiba, to victory.

Concerning Palestine, the impact of the Arab Spring has not been positive. Instead, the Israeli government, unconditionally supported by the United States and led by the nationalist right-wing parties, has multiplied colonies in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and has made no concessions to the Palestinians. Worse still, the Israeli army attacked the Gaza Strip on 8 July 2014 in the form of air strikes and shelling, as well as ground and shipping operations, which caused thousands of casualties amongst the Palestinians and widespread destruction of their infrastructure.

### **Economic Impact**

The economic consequences of the Arab Spring were also different from one country to another. The consequences have been more severe in the Arab countries where there has been a revolution which led to a regime change. Indeed, the political instability and disorder caused a drop in production and economic activity in general. Externally, political instability led to a decline in tourism, trade and foreign investment. This led to an economic recession experienced in 2011 in Libya (-53.9%), Syria (-3.2%), Tunisia (-1.8%) and Egypt (-0.5%).

Libya has suffered from a considerable drop in production and export of hydrocarbons. Syria, due to political instability and the embargo imposed on it, experienced a recession in 2012 (-30%) and 2013 (-10%). Tunisia has experienced a decline in tourism, industrial activity and foreign direct investment. Egypt has seen lower tourism levels and adverse impacts on business and industry. Several nations also saw a deterioration in their respective current account balance of payments in 2011: Tunisia (-7.4%), Egypt (-2.3%), Syria (-1.2%).

Other Arab countries have not suffered too significantly from the Arab Spring. For instance, in 2011 Morocco saw an economic growth of 5%, Jordan, 2.6% and Algeria, 2.4%, while there was no change in the economic situations of Gulf nations.

### **What Next for the Arab World?**

Following this period of political unrest experienced by the Arab world since 4 January 2011, what are the conclusions that we can draw at the political and economic level? First of all, the Arab countries have shown, like all other peoples of the world, the desire for democracy, equality, respect for human rights, and economic and social development. The Arab world saw the fall of some dictators; other authoritarian regimes have been able to maintain their power by using financial prowess to placate populations and keep peace.

One surprise of the Arab Spring has been the rise of Islamist parties. These parties, who were persecuted under previous authoritarian regimes, had previously made concerted efforts towards providing services for the marginalised communities that continued to be deprived by their respective rulers. Therefore, when free and transparent elections were organised, these parties won most of them. But once in power, they lacked, on the one hand, discernment and advocated a revival of Islam in the entire society, and skill, on the other hand, to improve the economic situation. Their inability to organise themselves as economic providers eventually led to their eviction in Egypt and, to some extent, in Tunisia. What complicated the situation was the emergence of radical Islamists, who claim that they will restore the Islamic Khalifa.

The political outlook for the Arab world should first aim to engage with the radical Islamists. The moderate Islamists are, in most Arab countries, a real force and can form the groundswell for establishing an agreement between the radical and modernist parties, as was done in Morocco and Tunisia. It is dangerous to eliminate radical elements entirely, as was the case in Egypt, because it will lead to unrest and violence in the future. In all Arab countries, we must promote democracy, which alone can create grounds for stable and long-term development.

Economically, Arab countries must ensure stability, that is to say, eliminate budget deficits, avoid high debt, ensure low inflation and maintain, as much as possible, substantial foreign exchange reserves. They must especially reduce the unemployment rate, 13% on average currently, but 29% among the younger age groups. To solve this unemployment problem, they must reach an annual economic growth rate of 6%, promote small and middle enterprises, and fight against the informal sector. Another recommendation is the expansion of the middle class, which is at present too small of a socio-economic group in most Arab countries.

The state should withdraw from some economic sectors and become more involved in other areas, such as education, health and social housing. The state has to become a regulator and should encourage the private sector and competition. It should reduce the compensation funds that increase the budget deficit and lower the capacity of government investment. Finally, the state must ensure proper funding for private companies, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises.

The Arab world is no longer at crossroads. The only path open to it is of modernising its political and economic structures that will allow it to cope with globalisation and carve a share in the 21st century. Otherwise, it risks greater marginalisation, with more suffering and troubles. We must ensure that the Arab Spring will not turn into an Arab Winter.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

### **3. THE CHANGING MIDDLE EAST AND THE CRUMBLING POLITICAL ORDER: AN ISRAELI PERSPECTIVE**

Kobi Michael

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#### **Introduction**

The Middle East is now entering its fifth year of tempest that began as a protest by young citizens and liberal groupings seeking to rid themselves of the oppressive regimes in their countries, with the great expectation of an “Arab Spring” of freedom and democracy. This Arab Spring, however, quickly evolved into an Arab upheaval that served to strengthen the Muslim Brotherhood and intensify disintegration of the present regional order based on recognised nation-states and international boundaries. In so doing, it has strengthened and facilitated the troubling spread of radical Islamic forces that are currently challenging the regional and world order and seeking to establish a new one.

Troubling instability in the security, political, economic and social realms marks the current reality of the Middle East. The impact of this instability is not limited to the Middle East alone but has also spilled over into the international system, forcing Western countries to contend with waves of jihadist terrorism and immigration of a scope and character that threaten the fundamental values of Western societies.

The United States has thus far been unable to formulate a relevant and effective policy of response and intervention, and its conduct in the region has raised doubts and a sense of mistrust among its allies. The weakness of the US has had an impact on the international community, which has found it difficult to reach agreement regarding mechanisms of intervention in the regions of conflict in the Middle East. The weakness of the international community and the renewed rivalry between the US and Russia have facilitated and intensified escalation and deterioration, accelerating the weakening of nation-states and increasing fragmentation. This, in turn, has served to strengthen Islamic jihadist forces and deepen the intervention of external actors, with an emphasis on Iran as the force leading the radical axis in the arenas of conflict.

The Middle East is also becoming a region of renewed rivalry between the US and Russia. Considerable tensions between the two powers and disagreements over issues and other disputed regions, such as Ukraine, have motivated Russia to develop a competing agenda that is oppositional to the American agenda in the Middle East. In some sense, we are bearing witness to a new incarnation of the Cold War in the Middle East. This has made it even more difficult for the international community to achieve agreement on the means of intervention in areas of conflict, instead transforming said conflicts into elements that further fuel and fan the flames of rivalry between the superpowers into an escalating force of regional instability.

The more than four-year-long upheaval in the Arab world and the absence of a horizon for stabilisation and achievement of political agreement between rival camps are indicative of the weakness of civil society in Arab countries. The period of upheaval has effectively only added to this weakness. In the absence of a strong and developed civil society, it appears that Arab societies in the crumbling countries will find it difficult to institute processes to rebuild functioning states. The region will continue to suffer from chronic instability, which will also be exported to the international system.

### **Prominent Attributes of the Regional Reality that Have Emerged in the Shadow of the Arab Upheaval**

The emerging regional reality is characterised by the following ten major attributes:

#### *Disintegration of the Political Order*

Arab nation-states, such as Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq, were ruled for decades by authoritarian leaders. During this time, these rulers succeeded in maintaining state stability through: a) State institutions, armies, and security and intelligence apparatuses, ensuring survival of the regime through oppression of the civilian population; b) the exclusion of groups, tribes and sects (such as the Houthis in Yemen, the Sunnis and the Kurds in Syria, the Sunnis in Iraq and certain Bedouin tribes in Libya); and c) the management of the country's domestic and foreign affairs. This involved the suppression of subversive forces, including jihadist terror organisations that posed a threat to the regime. State leaders took care to nurture the legitimacy of their rule and the illegitimacy of subversive forces using national identity, which they also attempted to cultivate despite shaky historical, ethnic, religious or cultural foundations.

The political order that for decades had existed as an oppressive national fiction crumbled in a regional domino effect that began in Tunisia at the beginning of 2011. In the absence of a functional infrastructure and tradition, and a commitment to society and state as opposed to

merely 'leader' and 'regime,' these states crumbled, and the alternative regimes set up in their stead were unable to establish sufficiently broad legitimacy for their existence.

### *Peripheral Regions as Frontiers*

The nation-state that had functioned as distinct territorial units with state mechanisms of control and consolidation ceased to exist as such. The central government in these countries lost control of peripheral regions and focused their efforts and resources on ensuring survival in the areas surrounding the capitals and large cities. Peripheral regions have thus become frontier regions, attracting jihadi terrorist groups that have based their organisations and activities in these uncontrolled areas. Deadly mass terrorist operations have been exported to large urban centres in crumbling states and into the region, and are undermining stability and security in both the states that were disintegrating in any event—further accelerating the process—in the broader arena.

### *The Spread of ISIS and Radical Jihad*

The civil war that developed in Syria and the fragility of Iraq has resulted in the spread of ISIS in northwest Iraq and northeast Syria, its establishment throughout a broad territory, its control over the population in this territory, and the mass murder—in some cases, on par with genocide—of all non-Sunnis and all Sunnis ISIS leadership classifies as infidels. The violent and bloody seizure of conquered territory has been accompanied by the sophisticated use of a media strategy, based on extensive use of social networks. ISIS also continues to instil terror in the civilian population and cultivate a widely held sense of accomplishment in the remaining areas of the countries (Syria and Iraq), in the region as a whole and in the international community.

### *Network Jihad in the Making*

ISIS's successes have attracted other jihadi groups in the region to join its ranks in an effort to bring about an Islamic revolution they expect will be followed by the establishment of the Islamic State. This process is reflective of a new phenomenon of "network jihad": Jihadist terrorist groups in the Middle East are accepting the authority of ISIS as a parent organisation, mobilising themselves to achieve its goals, operating in its name, and swearing allegiance to the group's leader and self-defined Caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. This network terrorism has expanded the scope of jihadist murder and helped challenge the existing state and regional order.

It has also accelerated the obfuscation of borders and further intensified the sense of accomplishment in the populations throughout the region. This latter is also true for many

young people in Western countries, whether Muslims or Muslim converts, or simply anarchists or nihilists, who are in search of a path and purpose in their lives and want to extricate themselves from the state of alienation in which they live.

### *Egypt as an Exception*

The tempestuous winds that swept across the Middle East even succeeded in destabilising Egypt, the historic, symbolic and undisputed leader of the Arab world. However, as a result of its governmental tradition, its distinct Egyptian identity, and the failure of the Muslim Brotherhood to be an effective alternative to the military national leadership despite winning elections, the state system was able to regain its composure and stabilise itself, despite the extremely complex challenges it continues to face.

### *Iran, its Hegemonic Aspirations and Proxies*

The Arab upheaval in Syria marked a turning point from a regional perspective, as the danger posed to Assad's regime also emerged as a threat to the vital strategic interests of Iran. Tehran regards the Alawite regime in Syria as a representative and base of support for the radical Shiite camp it is leading in an attempt to establish regional hegemony. In this context, Iran could not remain on the sidelines; in order to ensure its vital interests in the region, it has mobilised itself completely, openly and in a declared manner to come to the assistance of the Syrian regime. To this end, Iran has also mobilised Hezbollah, its protégé and proxy and Syria's ally. As a result, the very present and future existence of the Syrian Alawite regime now depends on the grace of Iranian and Hezbollah support, and the goodwill of Russia with regard to the provision of arms and support in the international community, particularly in terms of preventing all American and European attempts at humanitarian intervention involving the use of military force against the regime.

### *The Sunni-Shiite Split in the Arab World*

The involvement of Iran and Hezbollah in regional conflicts has not stopped in Syria. Both have also maintained an active presence in Iraq, and active Iranian involvement has also reached Yemen, Libya, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. In actuality, the Arab upheaval has become a tool and a justification used by the Iranians to expand Shiite spheres of influence. Iranian involvement has served to escalate and broaden the Sunni-Shiite split in the Arab world.

Indeed, it now appears that the cards have been reshuffled and that these divisions now crisscross one another, with state-based divisions traversing lines of Shiite-Sunni division and vice-versa. Iran's growing involvement has increased the fear of the Sunni regimes in the

region, including Turkey, and has led Saudi Arabia to establish an Arab coalition to intervene militarily in Yemen against Houthi rebels, who enjoy Iranian backing and military aid. The religious split has become a political and military rivalry between Saudi Arabia, as the leader of the Sunni Arab world, and Iran, as the leader of the Shiite Muslim world.

### *The Irrelevance of American Strategy*

In the course of the Arab upheaval, the irrelevance of the American strategy has become particularly conspicuous. During this period—at least in the eyes of US allies in the Middle East (Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel)—the US has appeared incapable of understanding the essence of the challenges, the nature of the actors and the emerging context. According to its critics, the US has been backing the wrong forces (for example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and Qatar and Turkey with regard to the conflict between Israel and Hamas in the Gaza Strip), has refrained from intervening in places where it should have intervened (such as Libya, and particularly Syria), and has resigned itself to the whims of its Turkish ally, which has refused to cooperate with the Americans and has operated in ways that have worked against American interests. The US policy, led by President Obama, has been perceived as a manifestation of American weakness and has enforced a problematic US credibility with regard to the depth of its commitment to its allies.

This weakness has intensified particularly in light of the US position on the Iranian nuclear programme.

### *Russian Participation*

In the above context, Russia has attempted to fill the vacuum left by the US, and has viewed the situation as a strategic opportunity to expand its influence in the region, all the while challenging the US as well as making use of levers of influence with the potential to advance Russian interests in other arenas.

### *An expanding Turkish role*

ISIS's area of operation borders on Turkey and has had a direct impact on Turkey's strategic interests in the region. Turkey regards itself as a regional power in competition with Iran and fears a split within the country as a result of stronger Kurdish national sentiment. Iraq's Kurdish autonomy, and the apparent joining of forces of the Iraqi Kurds and their Kurdish brethren in Syria, has raised levels of Turkish anxiety and restlessness.

Turkey is concerned by the prospect of a stronger Iran but, at the same time, is making efforts to avoid measures that will constitute an excessive challenge to ISIS out of fear of sparking an ISIS response against Turkey.

Turkish interests, alongside the hegemonic aspirations of its charismatic leader President Erdogan, are leading Turkey to implement an independent policy which, in many cases, is disconnected from the policy of NATO and that of the US. Turkey has been cooperating with NATO in an extremely limited capacity and in some cases has refrained from cooperation altogether, despite being a NATO member. Such Turkish conduct, in the absence of a determined American response, has weakened the status of the US in the region, and has transformed Turkey into an even more significant actor attempting to expand its influence in a number of other arenas as well, such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (with an emphasis on the Gaza Strip). Turkey has not bothered to conceal its support of Hamas, a daughter movement of the Muslim Brotherhood, which constitutes a challenge to Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who view the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas as a serious threat.

The upheaval that is currently gripping the Arab world is resulting in some of the most serious humanitarian crises that the region has known in recent decades. This is particularly so because of the large populations that have been uprooted and the migratory processes that have become prevalent both within the region and from the region outward. This migration is economically, socially and politically significant. It has become a destabilising influence in countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, a serious humanitarian problem in Syria, and an intensifying source of trouble for Muslim communities in the Western countries seeing an influx of refugees.

The regional reality that has emerged from these years of Arab upheaval, in light of the trends described above, has resulted in the emergence of five axes or camps:

1. A radical axis led by Iran;
2. A jihadist axis led by ISIS;
3. A monarchical Sunni axis led by Saudi Arabia;
4. A Sunni Muslim axis inspired by the Muslim Brotherhood and led by Turkey; and
5. A nationalist axis led by Egypt

Some of these camps engage in cooperative efforts and maintain alliances with one another (as in the case of the Egyptian and Saudi axes), while tension, hostility and violent conflict characterise others. The increasing number of actors, trends and conflicting interests involved in the current reality of mounting instability has pushed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the sidelines with regard to the actors' true interests (as opposed to their obligatory declarative statements). This has raised frustrations and disappointment in the Palestinian camp, which

is currently attempting to change this reality and extricate itself from the situation through internationalising the conflict. Internationalisation efforts have taken the form of a unilateral Palestinian strategy aimed at petitioning the involvement of international institutions in the conflict to increase the delegitimisation of Israel and force it into a corner. It is doubtful whether these Palestinian efforts will indeed serve to improve its reality and strategic chances. It is also difficult to imagine a situation in which an independent Palestinian state could be established without an agreement with Israel. Indeed, the current Palestinian efforts to tarnish and delegitimise Israel may serve only to reduce the chances of returning to the negotiating table and moving forward on the political process.

### **The Essence of the Evolving Challenge**

The evolving regional reality is characterised by two main complementary and mutually reinforcing trends: the disintegration of the nation-states and expansion of the failing states phenomenon on the one hand, and the intensification of jihadist terrorism on the other. Jihadist terrorism has unique attributes that make it a cultural and intellectual challenge of significant influence. Its most prominent distinctive characteristics are its global, transnational and murderous nature, and the fact that it is network-based, has access to the weaponry of state armies and possesses significant media capabilities (with an emphasis on social networks).

Contending with the phenomenon of failing states and jihadist terrorism is no simple matter. It encompasses complicated strategic challenges requiring complex processes of learning, cooperation between different actors, determination, financial resources and leadership. Moreover, efforts must be made simultaneously. We cannot assume that these challenges can be dealt with in a systemic manner. Doing so necessitates alternatives to the existing paradigms, which have been found to be irrelevant. The formulation of alternative paradigms requires attending to a number of important questions:

1. Is it correct to think in terms of state-based order in all places? Has the time come for reorganising the area/region on ethnic grounds, or perhaps to think in terms of weakened federations?
2. How can we establish an alternative system of alliances and cooperation?
3. How can we reduce the chances of the production of failing states?
4. How can we reduce Iranian influence in the various arenas of conflict?

Without a doubt, the list of questions that must be considered is never-ending, and the efforts and investments required to deal with this complex and ongoing process are great and intertwined. Most importantly, we may also have to get used to the idea that not all human problems are necessarily solvable; some may be situations we need to learn to live with and to manage more effectively using a strategy of damage control.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

#### **4. EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM, CHALLENGES AND IMPACT ON INDIA-WEST ASIA TIES**

Ra'ed Fawzi Ihmoud Ihmoud

Researcher and founder of Third World Institute for Research and Studies

##### **Identifying Concepts**

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has been occupied for the past decade dealing with terrorism and extremism, a topic which has become a part of the main discourse on the region.

It is very important, as a first step towards addressing challenges emanating from the rise of terrorism and extremism, to identify the terms being used; otherwise, the diagnosis will be insufficient and we will fail in eliminating these phenomena comprising of political, economic and social attributes. Simply said, extremism is the hyperbolic standpoint that goes beyond acceptable political, social and religious limits. Therefore, extremism is connected with opinions and thoughts, regardless of whether any professed ideologies are right or wrong. An extremist group is strongly attached to a belief system, and disregards all others. Terrorism, on the other hand, is the shift from having extreme opinions towards their violent implementation. In other words, someone who can be considered or identified as an extremist is not necessarily a terrorist, but almost all terrorists are necessarily extremists.

Extremism, unlike terrorism, is not punishable as a crime because the law does not impose penalty on ideology or intentions, and consequently, steps to address the two are necessarily different. Extremist ideology is responded to with counter-thought and dialogue. Terrorism requires direct action, although it is still important to revise the ideology of terrorists, since the majority of them reached this stage because of a hyperbolic ideology. Without identifying the reasons behind their actions, we will continue to walk in circles without finding solutions to this growing phenomenon.

The rise of terrorism and extremism has led to the rise of many radical groups, such as the al-Qaeda organisation in Asia and South Asia, Daesh, Boko Haram and Jund al-Sham. More recently, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the al-Qaeda leader, in light of his quarrel with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, established a new sub-organisation named al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent or

“Jamā‘at Qā‘idat al-Jihād fī Shibh al-Qārrah al-Hindīyah,” and assigned Asim Umar, a former commander in the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, as its Emir.

Classifying the currently growing number of organisations with Islamic backgrounds according to their activities as either terrorist or extremist organisations is no easy task. For instance, many pundits, scholars and politicians have classified current violent groups, such as Daesh and al-Qaeda, as jihadi Salafist organisations. Other religious theorists, however, reject such classification due to their understanding that jihad and resistance, especially against foreign occupation, are core sacred values that should not be denoted as terrorism. Religious scholars, such as Sheikh Ali al-Halabi, senior Salafist scholars and imams thus say that these organisations should be categorised as ‘infidel Salafists’ or ‘Salafi al-Takfireen.’

Likewise, it is very important to distinguish between the activities of the Palestinian Hamas movement against the Israeli occupation from those of other radical groups, like Daesh or al-Qaeda groups, which use violent means to address their goals.

In the same context, scholars argue about where, for instance, al-Nusrah Front should be classified, since it calls itself an al-Qaeda affiliated group—the al-Qaeda in Syria/the Levant—but has become more of a local Syrian organisation with merely a Syrian agenda. In the same vein, several al-Qaeda groups in Syria and Iraq are no longer foreign or Arab organisations as they used to be in Afghanistan, but have instead become local groupings with local agendas with an extreme ideology. Demonising these types of resistance organisations is therefore a big mistake.

Clear definitions will further help in classifying different non-government organisations and their positions before they are made to seek government approvals to freely exercise their duties and work. Many opposition groups that called for reforms following the Arab Spring were, for instance, accused of being terrorists, despite the fact that they had never engaged in any offensive or violent actions. ‘Black lists’ issued by nations and adopted by others do not help.

The revolution in Syria, for instance, continues to lose ground because of incorrect interpretation and classification of many organisations as part of black lists denoting terrorist organisations. The US black list, for instance, listed the al-Nusrah Front as a terrorist organisation in 2012. This resulted in restricting the group’s coordination with other resistance groups that started to distance themselves from it, despite its significant role against the tyrannical Syrian regime. Some Arab countries, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have listed the Muslim Brotherhood and its branches as terrorist organisations in their respective black lists.

## **Reasons Behind Increasing Extremism and Terrorism**

There are several reasons and factors behind the increasing role extremism and terrorism are playing in the activities of some groups in the region:

- The rise and fall of the Arab Spring movement, that toppled the ambitions and dreams of many groups and individuals waiting for years for a peaceful change in their political regimes;
- The rise of sectarian polarisations—the Shiites' growing role at the expense of Sunnis and Iran's rising influence as a counter to Saudi Arabia's regional role has brought this traditional divisiveness to the forefront of regional conflicts;
- The increasing role of non-Arab players in the politics of the Arab world, replacing traditional roles assumed by the Arabs;
- Israeli's continued aggression, particularly after the 2006 war against Hezbollah, which created a rising sentiment amongst the Arab populations that they should not wait for their regimes to defend their rights, liberate their occupied lands or grant them political and economic reforms. A small group such as the Hezbollah, and not a regular army, succeeded in opening a new horizon for the Arab nation-state and its civil institutes and political parties. It succeeded in humiliating the biggest and strongest country in the region, Israel, without waiting for their long-awaited rescuer. This gave nation-states confidence in their capabilities and led to them trust their own ability to defend themselves and determine the course of their future.

This thinking was enough to motivate the Arab public to bring about the Arab Spring protests, and force a change in the functioning of regimes. They organised themselves in an effort to stand against occupation, and most importantly, move towards bringing about deep political and economic reforms that could eradicate poverty, illiteracy and put nation-states on the track of political reform and democracy.

## **Challenges from the Rise of Extremism and Terrorism**

The following are some of the challenges that stand before the countries in West Asia and their relations with other regions such as South Asia.

### *Security and Political Challenges*

#### *Internal challenges*

- Conflicting opinions: Many political and opposition groups can easily fall within the realm of extremism. For instance, many young activists have been categorised as terrorists due to their association with the Muslim Brotherhood;
- Conflicting priorities: The priority now for many states is combating terrorism at the expense of other priorities, such as promoting human rights and advancing political and economic reforms;
- Extreme dependency on security institutions in securing borders as well as running political internal and external affairs;
- The waning role of one united national identity and the rise of sub-identities;
- The rise of minorities who call for self-governance or independent state entities;
- The challenge to the establishment for a democratic civil state, although such calls have been put on the backburner in some cases, such as in Jordan and in Egypt after the takeover of President Sisi; and
- The waning role of civil and moderate institutes, in particular, which has led to an absent role of moderate religious scholars and imams, and the lack of one united religious Sunni reference, which in turn enables the rise of different interpretations, such as a variety of fatwas.

All these factors have led to the rise of conflicting and misguided religious terms which are often misinterpreted, manipulated and used out of context.

### *External challenges*

- The increasing number and kinds of non-state players, including the rise of multinational political organisations, which has made many countries in the region deal with these non-governmental institutions according to their own interests;
- The challenge of reaching a peaceful settlement on Palestine, which is generally the pretext for all radical and terrorists groups;
- The waning role of political Islam: Almost all western countries believe that there are no moderate wings within political Islam and thus identify all political organisations with Islamic backgrounds as extremists. And yet, it would be impossible and wrong to neglect those who manage to come to power through polls. In addition, Islam is part of this region's history and an important component of its structure. Moreover, it would be difficult to trust our newly elected, immature political parties' experience while democracy is still weak and fragile; we

would have to live in a vacuum in almost all aspects if the Islamists were pushed away from our political lives. In short, extremism can only be dealt with by using ideas from the same box of thoughts that the extremists take from. Therefore, the presence of moderate political Islam, which co-exists peacefully with democracy, is more important now than ever;

- The waning role of the region in world politics, the extra-regional dependence on energy alternatives (shale) and the US-Iran deal have plunged the region deeper into chaos, especially given a lack of concern from global powers for the deterioration of security in the region (the US's changing strategy towards Iran is based on the idea that the US administration believes that they can depend mainly on Iran to face the Sunni extreme radical groups which constitute the most important threat to US interests in the region. The US fears that the activities of these Sunni groups will try to reorganise their forces and strike US interests in the region and elsewhere);
- The lack of any regional coordination to face extremism and terrorism and the selective approach in dealing with terrorists groups; and
- The increasing role of semi-government militias, as is the case in Iraq currently.

### *Economic Challenges*

These include a refugee crisis, poverty, unemployment and the retreat of investment opportunities. Indeed, many joined radical groups due to the failure of state institutions in providing citizens with a basic standard of living, a failed privatisation process, increasing corruption, lack of economic reform have and have further only played a major role in cementing the claims of extremists, who themselves offer financial incentives to recruits.

### **Partnering with India to Confront Extremism and Terrorism**

This section looks at the challenges resulting from the rise of terrorism and extremism that could inform India's relationship with the countries in the region.

India has special relations with the Arab countries, the GCC countries in particular. Traditionally, these relations were based on the principle of non-alignment or positive impartiality, whether on issues of common concern or international interests. India-West Asia ties also evolved with economic relations between the two sides flourishing. However, the countries in this region are connected and close to or at the heart of local and global terrorism.

The issue of combating terrorism has thus become a part of India-Arab ties. Cooperation over counter-terrorism measures has evolved, particularly with Saudi Arabia, due to both countries' proximity to the threat. Saudi Arabia is also important because of its relations with

India's traditional rival, Pakistan. The latter is seen as Saudi Arabia's arm in Asia. India believes that its internal security concerns depend on Pakistan and on developments in the Middle East.

This has pushed India to build security relations with some Gulf Cooperation Council states to combat terrorism and organised crime. An extradition treaty, for example, has been concluded with the UAE and Saudi Arabia. India also attended a conference on terror in 2004 in Saudi Arabia and backed Riyadh's suggestion to set up a regional centre to combat terror, in addition to other measures.

Thus, both sides are interested in unifying efforts and institutionally cooperating to combat terror, extremism and all kinds of radicalism, such as through encirclement or drying up funding sources.

India has space and potential to contribute more to the security of the region and be a leading player in the regional security calculus for the following two reasons:

1. Energy Security: India's sustained economic growth will strongly depend on continued energy supplies from the Gulf at reasonable prices. India will be one of the largest importers of energy by early 2020, and most of its oil supplies will come from the Gulf (at least 70 percent). The security of energy is connected to regional and Gulf security, and any interruption of oil supplies from the Gulf will have disastrous consequences on the Indian economy.
2. Maritime security: Energy security is associated with maritime security because of the growing economic and strategic connection between the Indian Ocean and both the Arab Gulf and the Arabian Sea. The Arab Gulf is one of the most important geostrategic regions in the world. A sixth of the global oil production passes through the Hormuz strait. This strait links the largest oil-exporting region in the world with the Indian Ocean, through which it imports its energy supplies and conducts trade.

The challenge of combating terrorism will be a significant component of India's future relations with the region. Issues of common concern between India and the Arab world are greater than the concerns that set them apart, like individual relations with Israel and Pakistan. Cooperation in dealing with the challenges of terrorism and extremism should be an added value in their relations, but should not drive ties. The common ground for India-West Asia ties should be an ethical vision based on the right to self-determination and rejection of the occupation of Palestinian Territories, as well as the reinforcement of trade relations between both sides that have existed for centuries. The fact that there are around 180 million Muslims in India, a large minority backing the Arab issues, should not be exploited to

implicitly threaten India's relations with the Arab world. The Muslim population should be utilised to reinforce India's support for Arab causes. Moreover, there are around seven million Indians working in the Gulf states, a significant source of hard currency to India (estimated around \$70 billion) and it is afraid of losing remittances if it does not back Arab interests, which will negatively impact India economically and socially. However, again, these labourers should be seen as factors that reinforce ties, not the grounds on which the relationship is based.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

## 5. ROLE OF EXTERNAL POWERS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty

Distinguished Fellow, ORF, and former diplomat in the Indian Foreign Service

*“The Middle East has been the chrysalis of three of the world’s great religions. From its stern landscape have issued conquerors and prophets holding aloft banners of universal aspirations. Across its seemingly limitless horizons, empires have been established and fallen; absolute rulers have proclaimed themselves the embodiment of all power, only to disappear as if they had been mirages. Here every form of domestic and international order has existed, and been rejected, at one time or another”*

- Henry Kissinger, “Chapter 3: Islamism and the Middle East: A World in Disorder;” *World Order: Reflections on the Character of Nations and the Course of History*, 2014

The Middle East, or West Asia, is currently in the throes of another major power shift, as regional and extra-regional powers seek to interfere, intervene and influence developments in the region currently marked by state failure, civil war, terrorism and the rise of the Islamic State, which seeks to establish a new Caliphate. In this geopolitical landscape the ongoing turmoil will induce fundamental changes that will impact on the regional and global geostrategic balance of power. The final contours of the outcome are still unclear, but whatever the final outcome, it will affect its global standing and influence in the decades to come.

The Middle East had a long and illustrious history before the arrival of Islam. After the spectacular Arab expansion in the aftermath of the arrival of Islam, Arab dominance in the Middle East and North Africa was first challenged by the Christian Byzantine Empire based in its capital at Constantinople, and later by an extra-regional non-Arab people, the Seljuk Turks, migrating conquerors from Central Asia. While the Byzantine Empire, despite huge territorial losses to the Arabs in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, managed to stop further Arab expansion into Europe, the Seljuk Turks went on to subjugate most of the Middle East after conquering Persia. They captured Baghdad in 1055 and went on to overrun Syria or As-Shaam, Palestine and the Hejaz area of the Arabian Peninsula. Thereafter, they pressed on relentlessly, capturing Egypt from the Fatimid Caliphs in 1169. The Seljuks vanquished the Byzantine military and conquered

Anatolia and ruled the Middle East for the next two centuries before breaking up into smaller sultanates. The Seljuks, however, planted the seed for the future rise of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia.

The Mongols were the next extra-regional power to assault the Middle East in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, sacking Baghdad in 1258 and advancing close to the borders of Egypt. The Mamluk Turks of Egypt established their sway over the region after routing the Mongol army at the battle of Ain Jalut, situated south of the Sea of Galilee in the Jizreel valley in modern day Israel. The Mamluk Turks gained control of large territories and became the main power in the Middle East, along with other minor Turkish sultans. The battle of Ain Jalut is celebrated by Muslim historians as the saviour of Islam in the Middle East against the marauding Mongols. This historic battle stopped the Westward expansion of the Mongols.

By the early 15<sup>th</sup> century another extra-regional power, the Ottomans, rose in Anatolia. They captured the Byzantine capital Constantinople (Istanbul) and by the 16<sup>th</sup> century, had subjugated much of the Middle East, bringing the region within one empire and under one ruler since the Arab Abbasids in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. The Ottomans were to remain in the Middle East for over 400 years till the First World War, though not without frequent uprisings for independence by Ottoman governors, Arab feudal lords and huge territorial losses to the European colonialists.

European inroads into the Middle East began with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1789, followed by British outposts in 1799 in the Arabian Peninsula, the French conquest of Algeria in 1834 and subsequent settlement of French people in the country. The British administrative occupation of Egypt followed in 1882, then came Italian occupation of Libya in 1910, and the tussle for influence between Britain and Russia began in Iran, as part of the "Great Game" in Central Asia.

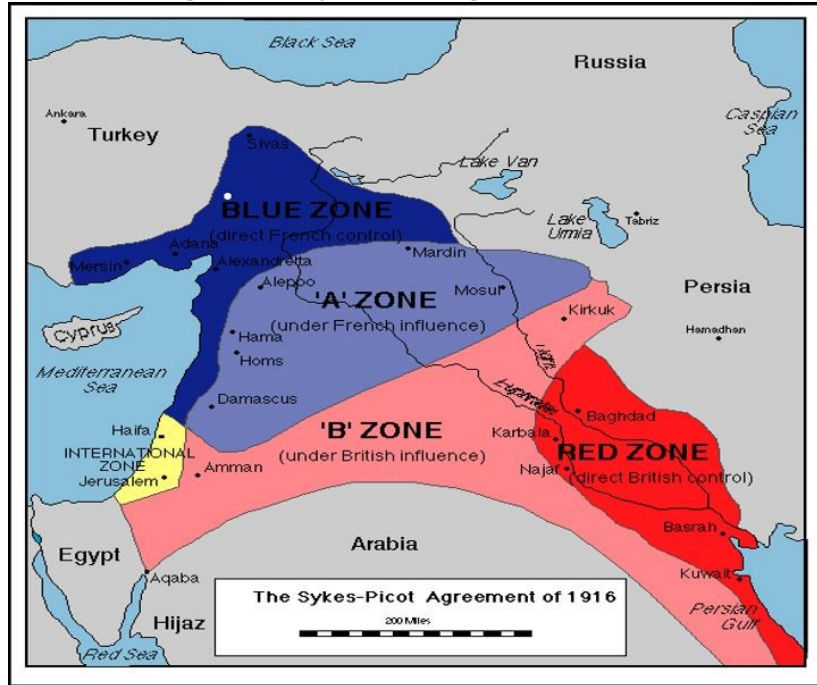
**Figure 1: External Powers in the Middle East**



European colonialism brought with it influences that would change the Middle East forever. Like elsewhere, new technologies, new education and new organisational methods were planted into the soil of the Middle East by European colonialists. This also helped the rise of Arab nationalism, first directed against the Ottomans and then against the European colonialists. The Ottoman Empire retreated and shrank under the onslaught of the colonialists, and European colonial administration gobbled up increasingly more territory in the Middle East.

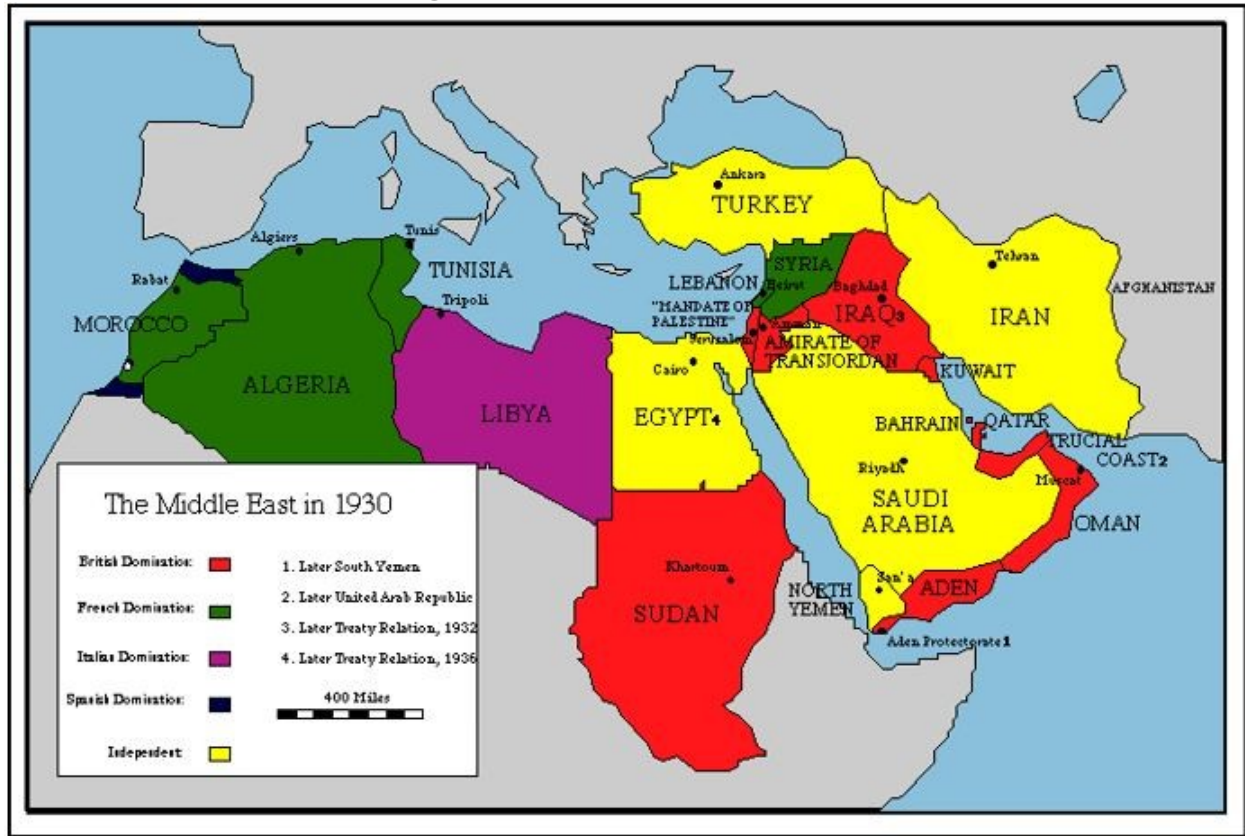
The First World War sealed the fate of the defeated Ottoman Empire. The victors Britain and France, the predominant powers behind European colonialism in the Middle East, carved up erstwhile Ottoman ruled territories. The Hussain-McMahon (Hussain bin Ali was the Sheriff of Mecca and Sir Henry McMahon was the British High Commissioner in Egypt) correspondence created the basis for British-Arab collaboration to fight together to oust the Ottomans from Arab lands in return for Arab independence. But what followed was the Sykes-Picot pact, the Balfour Declaration, and the creation of the mandate system under the League of Nations that brought Palestine, Transjordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq under colonial administration, in addition to other areas of the Middle East. The 1917 Balfour Declaration promised the Arabs independence and the Jewish people a homeland in the Middle East in return for their cooperation in defeating the Ottomans, thus betraying the Arabs in true colonial tradition. The British promised the same land to both the Arabs and the Zionists. With the rise of Kemal Ataturk in Turkey, the old order collapsed as Ataturk abolished the Caliphate, bringing down the curtain on the Ottoman Empire and declaring Turkey a republic in 1926. Turkey then began its journey as a modern and secular nation.

**Figure 2: Sykes-Picot Agreement, 1916**



The Middle East, as we know it, took shape during the decades beginning 1920s to the 1940s and beyond, when several countries gained independence after over 1,000 years of non-Arab domination.

**Figure 3: The Middle East in 1930**



The discovery of oil, the establishment of Israel in 1948, the Palestinian demand for their homeland and an independent state, the CIA-backed overthrow of the Mossadegh government in Iran, the 1956 Suez War, American intervention and the ensuing Cold War again underlined the continuing role of external powers in the geopolitics of the region. European colonial influence in the Middle East receded with the withdrawal of Britain and France after the brief Suez War, triggered by the nationalisation of the Suez Canal by Egyptian President Nasser, marking the rise of Arab nationalism and assertion of independence. The Soviet-US Cold War contest was played out with full vigour, as these external powers practiced interventionist foreign policies in the Arab-Israeli wars of 1948, 1967 and 1973. Soviet-US competition gave Arab states the opportunity to play one superpower against the other. The 1967 war was a milestone and the 1973 war triggered the oil price war. The humiliating rout suffered by Arab armies at the hands of the Israelis gave Islamists fresh encouragement to pillory and criticise the ruling regimes, and exhort Arabs to return to “true Islam” to regain their lost glory.

The oil price war brought in a fresh new dimension to the geopolitics of the Middle East and saw enormous wealth creation in the oil-producing states that transformed primitive economies into powerful regional players. It underscored vulnerabilities of energy security for all countries and exposed the limits of superpower domination. The 1979 Camp David accords between Israel and Palestine, brokered by the Americans, again underlined the important role of an external power. The overthrow of the Shah, an important cornerstone of American Middle East policy, by an Islamic revolutionary regime in Iran, changed the political dynamics of Middle East forever. The Iran-Iraq war was encouraged by the Western powers to bog down the new regime in Tehran for years, which caused enormous damage and embittered Iran so acutely that this anti-American feeling lasts to this day in Iran, where the US is still referred to as the “Great Satan.” The new Iranian regime articulated a vision of global Islam, a recurrent theme in Islamic history and a failed vision since the rise of Islam. A new form of this vision has now emerged again in the Middle East with the announcement of the Islamic State and a Caliph in Iraq-Syria.

The Middle East is in a situation of instability and transition. In the post-Cold War era the great powers have focused on their individual national interests, as the global struggle of the Cold War receded as the central arena of contestation between the two blocs.

## **The US**

The end of the Cold War left the US in a position of unparalleled influence and power, giving it unprecedented freedom to act, as it did to reverse Saddam Hussain's invasion and occupation of Kuwait. It also enabled the US to station its military forces in the Arabian Peninsula and provided the impetus to find a solution to the Israeli-Palestine issue in the Camp David Accords. The NATO-led assault on Libya, popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt—the so-called “Arab Spring” movements— political rumblings in other Arab states, and the disastrous and unwarranted second American invasion of Iraq in 2003 were cataclysmic events that hastened the pace of geopolitical changes in the old Middle East. The sectarian genie came out of the bottle in Iraq and has now become one of the main cleavages in the region. In recent times regime change policies of the US have instigated the civil war in Syria and rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. American self-sufficiency in oil and gas, brought about by new fracking technologies that have unlocked the potential of shale oil and gas has led to waning of American strategic interest in the Middle East, which is today afflicted by state failure, civil war and political transformations induced by the homegrown “Arab Spring.” Though primarily directed at authoritarian governments, the political upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt are also a manifestation of protest against external powers that have intervened, occupied, ruled and manipulated Middle East politics for over a thousand years after the fall of the Abbasid Caliphate.

The US will continue to exercise the dominant external influence in the Middle East but at a less visible level, both by choice and constraints of exercising power in a rapidly changing geopolitical landscape. The Iranian nuclear deal is a classic example of a conscious choice made by the US with the backing of other P-5 powers and Germany. The US pivot towards Iran will bring about fundamental changes in the power equations in the Middle East, as Iran, inevitably and eventually, will emerge as a powerful country in the region given its potential and influence in Iraq and Syria and over Hezbollah, Hamas and the Shia crescent. This outcome has worried Israel considerably as is evident from the utterances of Prime Minister Netanyahu. Israel's unique status as a nuclear weapon power with a powerful conventional military force will not be eroded, but Israel will be challenged by Iran. Furthermore, the peace process is unlikely to make any progress as the sectarian conflict, Iran, Yemen and the continuing confrontation with the Islamic State divert attention of Sunni Arab countries away from the Palestinian issue. Indeed, the civil war in Yemen and the bombing of the country by a Saudi Arabia-led coalition of Arab countries has shown that these latter may be willing to depend less and less on a American security cover they have enjoyed for many decades. Arab countries will make their own pivot towards Russia, China, India and Japan as this process unfolds.

## **Russia**

Russia has tried to restore its influence in the Middle East where its principal interests are political and economic, as well as fighting terrorism. Russia senses a threat from the jihadis in the Russian Caucasian areas where Muslims live. In the two Chechen wars in 1994 and 1999, jihadi fighters from the Middle East and South Asia fought the Russian army. Islamic movements have established roots in Russian Tatarstan and Central Asian states. Like the other great powers, Russia, too, has to tread a thin line managing competing goals. The Russia-Iran relationship is a classic example, wherein Russian concerns of revolutionary Islamic penetration have been balanced with Russian assistance to the Iranian nuclear programme, although Russia has never supported Iranian effort to acquire nuclear weapons. Russia has built a complex web of relationships with Arab and other countries, like Turkey, a NATO member and a historical rival. Russia-Turkey commercial and energy ties have soared to around \$35 billion in value. Russia has also developed impressive commercial relations with Iran and Egypt. With other Arab countries like Algeria and Syria, Russia has had a durable arms supply relationship. Russia spearheaded the deal to remove chemical weapons from Syria in 2013, boosting its position with its Arab allies. Russian ties with Israel and Saudi Arabia have also blossomed.

Russia, therefore, has positioned itself as a key external power whose cooperation is vital for any resolution of the region's outstanding problems. The Iran nuclear agreement is the most recent example of Russian collaboration. Yet, Russia did not back away from announcing that it will lift the ban on delivery of S-300 surface-to-air missiles after the first framework agreement on the Iranian nuclear deal in April 2015. In November 2014, Russia announced a deal to build two nuclear reactors for Iran (with an option of six more), two weeks before the deadline for the Iranian nuclear talks. It is likely that these Russian moves helped Iran negotiate a better deal.

Russian concern about low oil prices has conditioned its moves in the Middle East and its interest will surely lie in pushing up oil prices. Russia is critically dependent on oil revenues and finding ways of reducing supply must engage Russian policymakers. The Iranian nuclear deal is not good news for higher oil prices. But if Russia is hoping for some way to push up oil prices, its ambition will be tempered by China, which has emerged as another external power with the capacity to influence developments in the Middle East, particularly against oil price shocks.

## **China**

China as an external power has built strong relations with Arab countries, Iran and Israel. With Turkey, China's relations have come under strain because of the treatment of the Uighurs in China's western Xinjiang Autonomous Region, who have kinship ties with the Turks. Chinese investments have brought with it an increasing profile and clout in the region. Israel is China's third largest trading partner and the second most important source of defence technologies. China's desire to play a larger role in the Middle East will be tempered by its dependence on oil. Around 3.1 million barrels of the 6.2 million barrels that China imported in 2014 were sourced from the Middle East, making it the largest importer of oil from this region. For the oil exporters in the region, China, Japan and India have emerged as the principal buyers of oil at a time when the US has become self-sufficient in oil and gas. This oil supply relationship is likely to strengthen, with China and India still growing and consuming larger amounts of oil. Chinese ties with the Middle East will grow stronger with the overland Silk Route (One Belt One Road) and the Maritime Silk Route initiatives. China is currently debating how to extend and integrate the Silk Route initiatives with its ties to countries in the Middle East. The Asian Infrastructural Development Bank (AIIB) has already drawn in several Middle Eastern countries, including Israel, and the Bank's investment will strengthen China's economic and commercial role with the region.

China is not burdened with any colonial historical baggage and has not become entangled in the region's disputes by avoiding taking sides. It has navigated a more neutral position on the Palestinian issue, the salience of which has taken a downward turn. While China has gradually upped its role as security provider by sending naval ships for anti-piracy operations, and Chinese nationals were evacuated from conflict-torn Yemen by Chinese navy ships, Beijing still remains wary of stepping into intraregional conflicts. President Xi cancelled his visit to Saudi Arabia and Egypt in April 2015 after the Saudi-led airstrikes on Yemen.

China's role in the region can be seen more as a potential in the future rather than an immediate overhang. China is still unwilling to expend blood, sweat and money on intraregional political conflicts because it is loath to take sides. It is therefore still marginal in terms of relative influence, though it does care about the Middle East because of growing energy dependency and Islamist elements inspiring and training Muslim insurgency in western China. China has consequently upped its engagement with the region in terms of ministerial visits, closer ties with the Arab League, showing the flag on visits by naval ships and bringing in several countries of the region into the AIIB project. China's dilemma will be to balance its ties with Tehran, its largest trading partner, and Riyadh, its major oil supplier.

Asian powers like China, India, Japan and the Republic of Korea are still marginal players in the politico-security domain of the Middle East. All are dependent on energy supplies from

the region and therefore deeply concerned about stability of supply. India enjoys good relations with Arab countries across the board and has also moved into a privileged relationship with Israel. India's navy has shown the flag in the region's waters and assisted in anti-piracy operations. But the main security provider is the US, ensuring the flow of oil to the rest of the world. The US will remain the primary security guarantor in the future with its naval presence and military bases in the region. It will also remain the main interlocutor in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, though it is tempting to visualise a multilateral approach as seen in the P-5+1 talks with Iran that have brought about the nuclear deal. The Israel-Palestinian conflict has largely been the domain of the US and European powers. No other extra-regional power has been able to play a significant role in this conflict. But there are growing signs of Chinese-Russian convergence and coordination in the Middle East with regard to Syria.

In Syria and Iraq, the combination of state failure, civil war and the rise of the Islamic State has created the most severe crisis in the region. Regional and extra-regional powers have created such a mess that there seems to be no cohesive approach in dealing with the Islamic State. There is no attempt by regional powers to find a solution. All they can do is to fund and support disparate groups, which has ultimately led to the rise of extremist groups that now have territory and revenues to expand their depredations in the region and beyond. A political decision in favour of regime change in Syria has led to a cul-de-sac, and no external power has the inclination or the will to change course except to let regional players get sucked into the quagmire and wait for the final outcome.

The Middle East will remain the happy hunting ground of regional and extra-regional powers in the years to come. There are very few points of convergence among great power politics and policies in the Middle East in this era marked by huge uncertainties, shifting loyalties, even new political boundaries and the persistence of Islamic extremist ideology. On the surface every power wants terrorism defeated but at the same time, regional and extra-regional powers do not hesitate to exploit extremist groups to further their individual geopolitical goals. The Middle East is poised to become anew a laboratory of great power politics and balance of power maneuvers. The first few rounds of this new "Great Game" is playing out. There is more to come in the decades ahead.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

## **6. THE US AND ITS ALLIES ON THE IRANIAN NUCLEAR NEGOTIATIONS**

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The United States and Iran came to a consensus on the Iranian nuclear deal, making it possible to further negotiate towards a more comprehensive deal by the end of June. The US aspires to make a deal that will delay Iran's production of nuclear weapons threshold to at least one year, limit its nuclear programmes, and permit the regulations to continue for at least 10 years.

It would not be wrong to say that the framework agreement satisfied nearly all of the objectives put forth by the US. The conflicting comments made by both parties should not be perceived as their inability towards resolving complications. Instead, they should be viewed as separate players using their own methods to persuade their publics in favour of the deal.

In order to decipher US's response to these deals, it is essential to look at the approaches from the perspective of different actors. The fundamental actors in the US are the public, the Congress and President Barack Obama, who is arguably the chief advocate for the finalisation of the agreements. Obama placed himself against other key actors and took up considerable risks by going against them to proceed with the Iranian negotiations. A great many actors are skeptical about the results of the deal and are of the mindset that it will impair US interests and put the US and its allies at a disadvantage. Consequently, Obama must not only convince Congress and the public that these concerns can be solved with diplomacy, but he must also demonstrate that a settlement with Iran is possible.

Tough resistance from the opponents of the nuclear deal put President Obama in direct contact with the proceedings of the negotiations. Despite frequently declaring the likelihood of failure, the persistent investment Obama put toward the deal's success attests to its prominence for him. The nuclear deal was a top priority on Obama's agenda as he meticulously tracked its developments and progress step by step. Similar to former American President Nixon's contracts with China, this deal carries the potential to be one of the last few marks Obama engraves in history before departing from the Oval Office. Therefore, this "compromise" is of great significance in Obama's political legacy. If successful, this

multilateral peaceful negotiation will be a vital foreign policy accomplishment during Obama's presidency.

### **Importance of the Democrats in Congress**

Congress is the key actor in making the Iranian nuclear negotiations a reality in the US. It is clear that if the Congress does not approve of the deal, it will not be embedded into the US system. If it remains "Obama's deal," it is possible that the next US President could reverse the negotiations. Only if the Congress accepts the negotiations will the deal be made permanent in the US. Furthermore, Congressional sanctions may not be repealed without its consent.

The Congress's first move to emphasise its role in foreign policy was to ensure its say in the matter. The Senate passed a bill, which Obama finalised by signing to not allow the lifting of sanctions within the month that the Congress reviews Obama's deal. The Congress could not be expected to stand back in the decision-making of such a momentous deal.

The Congress, however, faces pressure of opposing an agreement that embodies the success of diplomacy. The Congress is in a difficult position because it has chosen to hinder a peaceful, diplomatic compromise that was reached without military intervention. In fact, if the Congress does not approve the deal, it would be very challenging for the US to persuade its allies to enforce their sanctions once again. If the US cannot re-establish its sanctions peacefully, it would have to use military force, which would not be internationally accepted. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Congress would prefer not to put itself or the US in that position.

Partisan politics and lobbies could influence the Congress to differ from the expected outcome. It is apparent that Republicans are against the nuclear talks. The Republican Party would not prefer Obama to accomplish a historical success before the 2016 presidential elections. This appoints the Democrats as the key decision-makers in the Congress. It is impossible for the Republicans to override Obama's veto power on their own. To further complicate the situation, there are Democrats who are against the nuclear deal. The Republicans could be expected to take a partisan stance, while the Democrats are likely to support Obama. Whether or not Obama gains his own party's support will determine the result of the negotiations.

In terms of the public's reaction, a large proportion of the American people are in favor of the nuclear deal talks with Iran. According to Washington Post and ABC News polls, 59% of the participants support the Iranian nuclear deal, while 31% oppose it. Quinnipiac University's survey done on 1 April revealed that from those surveyed, support for the deal from Florida,

Ohio and Pennsylvania is 63%, 68% and 65%, respectively. Based on these statistics, the US public backs the removal of sanctions in exchange for nuclear limitations. The approval exhibited in the swing states such as Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania demonstrates that candidates should support the nuclear talks in order to succeed in the 2016 presidential election. The possibility of a candidate who supports the Iranian nuclear negotiations winning the elections permits a promising future for the deal to continue after the Obama administration. There might be unexpected turns in the future, but currently it is more likely for the deal to be finalised and accepted.

### **Turkey's Positive Look**

The changing of America's quarter century-old policies will surely induce reactions from the region. The negotiations are the main source of these reactions. From the US allies in the region, Turkey responded optimistically to the deal with Iran, while Saudi Arabia objects to it. Turkey has been against the alternative diplomatic route of military intervention from the very beginning. Turkey was previously against involvement in Iraq, and now it condemns intervention in Iran. Turkey has even backed Iran's peaceful nuclear power production deal to not allow the issue to be the pretext of a forceful intervention.

This is not the first time Turkey has been an advocate for diplomatic solutions. Turkey was a broker during a swap deal with Brazil in 2010. Thus, Turkey encourages both limiting Iran's nuclear weapon production and lifting sanctions on Iran. Both are in Turkey's advantage. The lifting of sanctions will allow Turkish firms to advance and benefit in trade. The burden on Turkey's energy sector, a large portion of the government's budget, will decrease. Especially in these two aspects, Turkey will benefit from these deals, furthering the economic and energy ties between Turkey and Iran.

On the other hand, Turkey worries that Iran's quest for hegemony in the region could lead to instability and confrontation with neighbouring countries. Iran's rise to power brings with it the likelihood of countries in the region taking actions against Tehran in an effort to prevent the spread of its influence, as most recently seen in the case of Yemen. It is extremely implausible that Turkey will join the race for hegemony on the Iranian side—Turkey's attempt to acquire influence in the region would be perceived as Neo-Ottoman ascent. After the Arab Spring, Turkey is aware of the unfavourable consequences of such actions and will thus favour an equal and fair partnership with all the Middle Eastern states, rather than attempting to move towards a hegemonic stance.

It is critical to indicate that Turkey is not attempting to join the nuclear power race either. The minor difference that nuclear weapons would make to Turkey's deterrence capacities does

not seem worth the massive cost that nuclear development would generate for the Turkish economy and the country's overall stability. The consequences of developing nuclear weapons are apparent, and Turkey's integrated economy would be greatly damaged under sanctions from other nations. Moreover, as a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member, Turkey is already protected under Article 5 of the treaty and NATO's nuclear protection. Under such circumstances, it would be an irrational move on Turkey's part to take place in a competition for nuclear weapons production.

Therefore, Turkey has a favourable stance on the nuclear compromises in the deal, notwithstanding concerns for regional stability. For this reason, tension between Turkey and the US has not escalated during these negotiations. Although the Turkish-American alliance may not be as strong as it was in the past due to unrelated reasons, the Iranian nuclear deal certainly has not exacerbated it.

### **US Balance Between Iran and Saudi Arabia**

On the other hand, a tremendously distinctive picture emerges in the context of the framework when Saudi Arabia is brought in. Saudi Arabia's opposition to the Iranian nuclear talks, along with other principal strategic differences, is pointing to the demise of the American-Saudi alliance. The US-Saudi Arabia relationship has consisted of oil trade agreements, political advances against mutual enemies and partnership for regional stability. Yet, today it seems that the foundations on which this alliance has been established have either completely disappeared or, to a large extent, lost their significance.

Recently, the most observable alteration in the US.-Saudi Arabia alliance is undoubtedly America's declining reliance on Saudi oil. The Obama administration's increasing focus on and development of local sources has weakened the US's dependence on external sources of energy.

The strength of this partnership was founded in Cold War realities, when both joined forces to counter the common Soviet threat. With the demise of the Soviet Union it is palpable that the US no longer has to bear the burdens that come with its alliance with Saudi Arabia. The US does not wish to face risks or be entrapped in policy choices due to its relationship with the Middle Eastern nation. As conditions change, the US is beginning to feel overwhelmed with the military and political weight that its alliance with Saudi Arabia carries. Saudi Arabia's domestic policies and authoritative rule could also be factors provoking a growing distance between Washington and Riyadh.

However, it cannot be inferred that the US wants to completely sever its ties with Saudi Arabia. Areas that the two countries could cooperate in still exist, and Saudi Arabia's influence in the Middle East and the Islamic world appoints it as a crucial ally to the US. Washington is not completely isolating Riyadh, but it is choosing to collaborate with the kingdom at its own terms. At the Camp David Summit in mid-May, Obama declared that he would not abandon the Gulf nations in case of an invasion or attack on said states. Obama also guaranteed its American allies military and missile assistance and protection. But he did not meet the council's expectations of institutionalised security arrangements but merely conveyed military support verbally.

Riyadh's apprehensions are not only regional, but also personal to a certain extent. Saudi Arabia believes that once the nuclear deal comes into effect, Iran will advance and further current destabilisation in the region, backed with its regained financial power with the end of the sanctions regime. As long as regional competition does not reach a point where Saudi Arabia acquires nuclear weapons, the American government will, however, remain indifferent. Obama's emphasis that the biggest threat to Saudi Arabia comes from within—as the Obama administration now takes a stricter stance on reforms—instead of Iran has also agitated the Gulf countries.

In short, it is likely that the US will cease to be Saudi Arabia's ally but it will not completely align with Iran either. The US will cooperate with the two sides whenever it finds it necessary. According to the US, the regional and domestic political conflicts that take place should remain the responsibility of Iran and Saudi Arabia. Many believe this struggle will bring forward additional complications, whereas the US takes the view that the Iranian-Saudi power struggle will bring a balance in the region as long as it does not conflict with its own interests.

For instance, US siding with Saudi Arabia in the case of Yemen could be seen as a final association with the kingdom to steady the instability in the region. Eventually, America would no longer constantly take sides to balance power. Excluding the Yemeni conflict, the US no longer wants to constantly affiliate itself with either side to readjust the regional power equation, but rather wants to remain on the outside while the two create a balance on their own. Obama anticipates that the US will not be required to interfere in every conflict that occurs in the region.

The options for Saudi Arabia as the US disengages are limited. A route Riyadh could take would be to collaborate with other countries, primarily Russia and France. However, opportunity to form a relationship with Russia, a close ally of Iran, is narrow. An alliance with Russia would accomplish nothing more than constraining the former's ties with Iran. With

regard to France, as demonstrated earlier when Riyadh claimed it would turn to France and threatened incoming US's F-15 sales, Saudi Arabia could pursue dialogue with France. There is some evidence that the formation of such a relationship is already in the process. French President François Hollande stated during the Gulf Cooperation Council summit, at which he was an honorary guest, that France would not hesitate to utilise military force to protect its allies. However, it is unclear what the aftermath of these 'symbolic messages' will bring to the Gulf other than multibillion dollar contracts with the French.

Furthermore, there exists the possibility that the US may respond to Saudi actions (for instance, King Salman's refusal to attend the Camp David summit) in a way that disadvantages the kingdom. Because Saudi Arabia's military is equipped with American weaponries, Saudi Arabia would be crippled if the US were to stop its supply of weapons. The US officially breaking ties with Riyadh could encourage Iran and its allies to take up a more threatening role in the region. Thus, Saudi Arabia's symbolic reaction does not unsettle the US nor does it persuade it to forego forward movement on the Iran nuclear deal to temper relations with Saudi Arabia.

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

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