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## **Syria's Fate Hangs in Balance**

*Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty*

As the Geneva peace talks teeter on the edge of failure, the UN-appointed mediator, Stefan de Mistura, must be a harassed, desperate and frustrated man. A resurgent Syrian government, with Russian support, has tasted success against the rebels and has vowed to consolidate its gains. At Geneva, conflicting sides are trading accusations that may well undermine the talks and lead to their collapse. While it may be too soon to tell, the rebel groups are sure to be feeling the heat of the intense bombing campaign by the Russian-aided Syrian government, especially in areas around Aleppo and Homs. The logjam in negotiations looks far from over, with the calls for a halt in airstrikes by the US and its allies being waved aside by Russia, which is determined to keep letting the bombs drop. The ground reality is that a no-holds-barred war continues, adding to the woes of a desperate humanitarian situation. Half of Syria's population has been displaced and over 250,000 have lost their lives, from a population of 11 million. The usual posturing by all sides is par for course in such negotiations – with the

assorted cast of characters from Syria refusing to end the Geneva deadlock. The Syrian rebel groups, opposed to the Assad regime, are demanding that Russia and allied Syrian government forces stop air strikes against rebel-held positions – a demand echoed by the US Secretary of State but refused by Russia. The Russian-led offensive, with the support of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the National Defence Forces (NDF), has led to the dismantling of the forty-month siege of the villages of Nubl and Al-Zahraby the jihadist outfit Jabhat-al-Nusra in the northern province of Aleppo.

It has taken the Russians four months of painstaking effort to roll back the rebels and jihadist forces and cut off their supply lines to Turkey. A broad swathe of the border region abutting Turkey has now been recaptured and is under SAA control. This also tightens the noose around Aleppo, leaving the jihadists isolated, with no escape route and supply lines from Turkey disrupted. With so much bloodshed and bitterness, it is not surprising that the Geneva talks have floundered. The protagonists have not even been able to gather in one single room across a table. It is normal for protagonists in a situation as complex as that in Syria, for the side on the defensive i.e. the anti-Assad rebel groups, to make extravagant demands for a complete ceasefire, release of prisoners and an end to air strikes. Their main backer, the USA-led coalition, has not been able to move the Russians or the Syrian

government.

The suspended talks may end in failure but the ground situation in Syria is growing increasingly more complex. Russia and Syria seem to be playing for more time using dilatory tactics at Geneva. The Syrian Army has been re-taking rebel-held territory and gaining the upper hand. These developments around the Geneva talks are taking place even as reports of an American ground intervention are circulating. In a deal with the Syrian Kurds, US Special Forces have taken over an airfield in northern Syria at Rumeilan, close to the border with Turkey and Iraq. American Vice-President Joe Biden has spoken of a “military solution” to take out “Daesh” or the Islamic State. The US Defence Secretary has already declared that the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division will be deployed in Iraq to fight the Daesh in Mosul and will also take on the Daesh in their headquarters in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa. The Rumeilan airfield is being upgraded to fly in equipment and weapons for the Kurds and other allied groups to take on the Daesh. The Saudis have also announced that they would be willing to send troops to Syria. Iran has derisively retorted that the Saudis dare not send troops and that doing so would spell the end of Saudi Arabia.

While more US Special Forces are likely to be inducted to bolster their compatriots, already in position in supportive roles in Iraq, it is the Iraqi security forces that are doing the bulk of

the fighting against Daesh. With the Russians, Iranians and the Hezbollah fighters on the ground in Syria, it seems unlikely that the USA will put 'boots on the ground' in any significant way in Syria – but might consider using the Kurds to take on the Daesh. This option, however, raises complications with NATO ally Turkey, for whom any cooperation with the Kurds that increases their military capability remains a complete anathema.

Turkey's role in the Syrian situation has always been murky. In cooperation with Saudi Arabia; it has supported anti-Assad rebels, jihadists and the Daesh to effect regime change in Syria. While the Turks are apprehensive about the Kurdish question, the Saudis are concerned by growing Iranian influence. Russian-Turkish relations have nosedived since the shooting down of a Russian fighter aircraft. Official Russian statements have become increasingly critical of Turkey and the latest salvo from the Russian Defence Ministry has blamed the Turks of mobilizing forces for the purpose of taking cross-border action into Syria. Aleppo's fall will provide the Kurds with a link to their brethren across northern Syria – a nightmare scenario for Erdogan. After being deluged with over two million Syrian refugees, an independent Kurdistan is a prospect Turkey considers with more than a little trepidation.

Turkey's ruling AKP party has already started talking about old borders being

irrelevant, signalling that Turkey may well ignore the Sykes-Picot borders that established the territorial boundaries of modern Turkey after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War. Earlier in February, Turkey denied Russian observation flights over Turkish territory permitted under the Open Skies Treaty (OST) without giving any reasons. This is being interpreted as Turkey's nervous reaction to camouflage movement of its forces along the border with Syria. Russia has, predictably, reacted with thinly-veiled threats. Any cross-border Turkish foray into Syria will be a dangerous escalation and might precipitate a conflict with Syria and Russia, apart from embroiling NATO into the conflict, though Turkey will have no grounds to invoke Article V of the NATO Charter, if it decides to move its forces into Syria and aggravate the conflict.

The Syrian cauldron is on the boil. Much depends on the ground situation which in turn impacts the Geneva peace talks. A post-Obama US Administration may well go down the road of pushing through a Partition plan and try to install a pro-Western government in a truncated Syria. Ending the ground war and creating safe havens are prerequisites for Syrian refugees to return home. This means uprooting the Daesh from its strongholds with the cooperation of all countries. The Russians have an opportunity to restore the writ of Damascus over the whole country but time is running out. If Turkey and Saudi



Arabia jump into the fray with their troops into Syria, the conflict can spiral out of control.

*(The writer is a Distinguished Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi)*

## **A Saudi-Pakistan Rapprochement?**

*Aditi Bhaduri*

The New Year began with mass executions by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including that of the Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Al Nimr, on charges of political conspiracy and sedition. This is sparking global outrage, especially amongst Shiite communities, heightening tensions with Shiite Iran and exacerbating sectarian faultlines in an already inflamed region.

The executions, coinciding as they did with the lifting of the international sanctions regime against Iran as a result of the nuclear deal it reached with the P5+1, were widely perceived to be a testament to an increasingly vulnerable Saudi regime.

The Arab Spring that swept away some of the old totalitarian regimes in the region, ushering in violent change, has so far bypassed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) but since then the kingdom has been under severe domestic and external pressure. Its sole objective since then has become regime security

and its entire domestic and foreign policy has become geared to that end.

With the Russians playing an increasingly active role in the region again, a sanctions-free Iran and a receding US presence there, the hitherto risk-averse and low profile Saudis, have begun asserting themselves in the region, pursuing a more active foreign policy and diplomacy, while diversifying their security and foreign policy. Their active intervention in the civil war in Yemen as well as their support to rebel groups in the Syrian civil war bears this out.

Yemen is turning out to be a quagmire for the Saudi-led air campaign which began in March last year. Yet, after hundreds of air strikes, with thousands of civilians dead and many more injured and displaced, no end seems to be in sight, with the Houthi rebels backed by Iran still holding firm. In a press conference on 1st February, Brigadier General Ahmed Asiri, the military spokesman, said that the kingdom was now stuck in a “static war” against its southern neighbor.

Meanwhile, Russian and Iranian financial, military and political support have ensured that President Bashar Al Assad consolidates his position in Syria, the Islamic State (ISIS) has set its eyes on the kingdom, while tumbling oil prices, precipitated by the Saudis themselves, have put the welfare state under tremendous pressure. The emergence of a sanctions-free Iran now

threatens to tilt the balance of power in the region decisively in its favour.

There is an increasing sense of urgency for the Saudis to pin down Iran, counter the ISIS, while also reclaiming their leadership in the Arab and Muslim world for regional GCC and regime security. To that end it announced a 24-nation anti-terror coalition in December 2015 which included Pakistan in its midst.

On the diplomatic front, the year also began with a number of high profile bilateral visits between the two countries, beginning with that of Saudi foreign minister Adel el Jubeir, closely followed by Deputy Crown Prince and Defence Minister Prince Mohammed bin Salman to Islamabad and Rawalpindi.

There seems to be an attempt on the part of Saudis to rethink its relations with Pakistan, which had been greatly strained when the latter refused to send troops to aid the Saudi-led ten-nation coalition's military intervention in Yemen. Pakistan's refusal had shocked the GCC, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, with which Pakistan shares strategic ties.

Saudi-Pakistan ties in particular go back to the 1960s, with some Pakistani analysts noting that the Muslim League's ties with the Al Saud family pre-date the creation of Pakistan. Over the years the Saudis have heavily invested in Pakistan, with the latter playing a major

role in the kingdom's security and defence apparatus. Bilateral relations, as is well known, underwent a paradigm shift from 1979, with the Iranian revolution and the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and right through the Zia-ul-Haq years and Afghan jihad, when the Sunni-Islamic identity received a major impetus.

A 2010 Wikileaks cable said that then Saudi ambassador to US and currently the Saudi foreign minister Adel Al Jubeir had said "We in Saudi Arabia are not observers in Pakistan, we are participants."

As of January 2016 it is reported that Pakistan had nearly 1,200 military trainers and advisors in Saudi Arabia.

In particular the government of Nawaz Sharif, who has family ties with the Saudi royal family, and who had been given refuge in the kingdom after his government was overthrown by General Musharraf in 1999, is considered amenable to KSA and was expected to have met Saudi demands to send troops to Yemen. But on 10th April 2015, a joint session of Pakistan's parliament passed a resolution declaring that Pakistan will remain neutral on the Yemen issue.

Pakistan's decision of course stemmed from its domestic and geo-strategic interests – a long border with Iran, domestic sectarian violence, home-grown religious radicalism and

terrorism, and the army's own 'Zarb-e-Azb' military campaign against militant groups along the Af-Pak border.

What was still more striking was the opposition to the Saudi request amongst Pakistan's civil society, sections of the media, and even by religious groups like the Jamaat-e-Islami. Sectarian violence and terror attacks inside Pakistan had fuelled widespread anger at the Saudi funding of the mosque-madrassa nexus which was stoking religious extremism and sharpening sectarian fault lines within Pakistan.

The UAE drew first blood, with its Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Anwar Gargash tweeting ‘...the moment of truth distinguishes between the real ally and the ally of media and statements...the vague and contradictory stands of Pakistan and Turkey are an absolute proof that Arab security...is the responsibility of none but Arab countries’. In response, Pakistani twitterati had erupted in anger. The Saudis also let their displeasure known, though in more veiled terms. In an informal chat with *The Express Tribune* in Islamabad soon after, the acting Saudi Ambassador Jassim Bin Mohammad Al-Khalidi asked “How would Pakistanis feel if we do the same with you (as Pakistani parliament’s resolution) in the time of crises.”

As a fallout of Pakistan’s decision, a number of Pakistani media personalities were arrested in KSA and UAE, and

Arab editorials were critical of Pakistan.

But considering the enormous Saudi stake in Pakistan's economy, defence and energy security, the damage control began almost immediately thereafter.

Even as Pakistan refused to send troops to Yemen, it assured Saudi Arabia that it would provide military assistance if its territory was invaded.

Soon after, in a rather unexpected move, a high-level delegation led by Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif, which included former National Security Advisor to Prime Minister Sartaj Aziz, visited Saudi Arabia to discuss and further clarify Pakistan’s stance on the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

*The Express Tribune* reported that while sending troops for Saudi Arabia would most probably be on the agenda for the talks, it was earlier decided that if the kingdom demanded troops for Yemen the Pakistan Army would be willing to work as part of a joint command as opposed to under Saudi authorities.

No doubt plans for the later anti-terror coalition, a hallmark of which is a formalised command and control coordination of the coalition's actions, in line with Pakistan's preference, floated by the Saudis were mooted then. The Saudis told the Punjab chief minister that they did not expect the government to take the issue to the Parliament since

they needed 'urgent' help from Pakistan.

The growing unease in Riyadh had prompted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif to soon lead a powerful delegation comprising Army chief General Raheel Sharif to the kingdom as part of a damage control exercise. After extensive discussions with King Salman, he reiterated Pakistan's stance on defending Saudi Arabia's territorial integrity at all cost. He also added that Pakistan would contribute to implement a UN Security Council resolution on Yemen

Meanwhile Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made a successful visit to the UAE and it was widely speculated in Pakistan whether strained Pakistan-GCC relations would pave the way for closer India-GCC ties, including in defence and security.

Back channel talks between the Pakistanis and the Saudis led to a softening of the Saudi position, symbolised by the new Saudi Defence Doctrine prompted by evolving geopolitical realities that meant the kingdom had to deal with security issues on its own now. Seen in the context of the US-Iran detente it was obvious that KSA needed countries like Turkey and Pakistan on board. Pakistan, moreover, enjoys the elevated status of being the only Muslim country in the world with nuclear weapons and as Adel el Jubeir recently stated: "Nothing was off the

table."

The announcement of the anti-terror coalition by the Saudis was preceded by a high level visit by Pakistan's Army Chief General Raheel Sharif to Riyadh, where a joint military exercise was conducted, and Sharif was intimated about the 34-member anti-terror Sunni alliance.

Explaining the Saudi decision and the role of countries like Pakistan in it, Saudi analyst Nawaf Obaid wrote: "To bolster the security of neighbouring states, power projection missions to demonstrate real military might will be necessary, and succeeding in these efforts is another tenet of this new Saudi Defence Doctrine. As the threats to the region increase, those missions are likely to become larger and more complicated. This is why the Saudis have put forth massive diplomatic efforts to pull so many states, especially the ones with powerful militaries, into the strategic fold, such as the Pakistani and Turkish armies. But having a large coalition of nations to call upon when power needs to be projected will also help the Saudi-led coalition ensure that when military might is deployed, it stands the best chance at success."

A coalition of this kind needs a country like Pakistan for another reason, which was articulated by the Saudi envoy in Islamabad to *The Express Tribune*: "....that Pakistan's support was crucial to

send a message to the people of Yemen that not only the Arab countries, but the rest of the Muslim world was showing solidarity with Saleh's legitimate government." An alliance with Pakistan thus helps Saudis to project not just an Arab identity, but a larger Muslim one.

Raheel Sharif on his part, eager to smooth over the fissures in bilateral relations, reiterated that any threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Saudi Arabia would evoke a strong response from Pakistan. Being a part of a coalition of 34 nations is also preferable for Pakistan, relieving it from the pressure to take sides. Moreover, a coalition against terror seems better aligned with Pakistan's own internal war against terror, and not aimed at any particular country, especially a fellow Muslim one. Fahad Nazer, a senior Saudi political analyst with the US-based JTG Inc., told Arab News that it was clear that Saudi Arabia has decided that given the unprecedented turmoil in the Middle East, it would be worthwhile to strengthen and deepen some of its more important bilateral relations. "The Kingdom's security and military relations with Pakistan are well established. While Pakistan has assisted Saudi Arabia in meeting its security needs, especially in terms of training for its military forces, Saudi Arabia has likewise provided Pakistan with vital economic aid."

Following the torching of the Saudi embassy in Tehran during protests

marking the execution of Sheikh Nimr, the Saudis severed all diplomatic relations with Iran. A flurry of high profile bilateral visits took place bringing the Saudi foreign minister and the Deputy Crown Prince and defence minister to Islamabad.

In a statement issued following his meeting with Saudi Defence Minister and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Pakistan's Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif said "Pakistan has also always expressed its readiness to offer its good offices to brotherly Muslim countries for resolution of their differences,"

Soon after, both Nawaz and Raheel Sharif embarked on an official tour of Tehran and Riyadh, attempting to mediate between the two rivals. While that may take some time, the constant assertions of protecting Saudi sovereignty is aimed at pre-empting physical attacks on Saudi Arabia while assuring Pakistan's support without jeopardising its relations with Iran. For the Saudis, this assurance serves to project a strong Muslim alliance.

But Pakistan is also deepening its alliance with Russia, and China, whose financial support helped Pakistan sit out the Yemen war, and expects economic and energy benefits with an Iran integrated once more into the global economy. The Saudis have also entered into strategic alliances with countries like India and China, while



reinvigorating their alliances with others like Egypt and Turkey. This means that even while effecting a rapprochement, both Pakistan and Saudi Arabia will also be seeking to diversify their foreign policy and defence partnerships.

*(The writer is with i24 News, New Delhi)*

## COMMENTARIES

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### **Why is Israel so cautious on the Islamic State? A recent war game explains why.**

David Ignatius

Let's say Islamic State fighters attack an Israeli military patrol along the Syrian border. They try unsuccessfully to kidnap an Israeli soldier, and they kill four others. A Jordanian border post is hit, too, and the Islamic State proclaims it has control of Daraa province in southern Syria.

How do Israel and other key players respond? In a war game played here last week, they retaliated, but cautiously. The players representing Israel and Jordan wanted to avoid a pitched battle against the terrorists — they looked to the United States for leadership. This simulation exercise was run by Israel's Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) as part of its annual conference. The outcome illustrated the paradoxical reality of the conflict against the Islamic State: Israel and Jordan act with caution and restraint, hoping to avoid being

drawn deeper into the chaotic Syrian war, even as the United States escalates its involvement.

“We all believe that keeping Israel out of the conflict is important,” said Brig. Gen. Assaf Orion, a retired officer who served as head of the Israel Defense Forces' planning staff. He led the Israeli team in the simulation. In the war game, Israel retaliated for the killing of its soldiers but avoided major military operations.

Jordan, too, wanted to avoid escalation. The players representing Jordan didn't want to send their own troops into Syria. They worried about refugees and terrorist sleeper cells inside Jordan. They hoped that the combined military power of Russia and the Syrian regime could suppress the conflict and evict the Islamic State from its foothold in southern Syria. They looked for U.S. leadership but weren't sure it was dependable.

Which left the United States. Gen. John Allen, the retired Marine who until recently coordinated the U.S.-led coalition's strategy against the Islamic State, to play the American hand. The United States viewed Israeli and Jordanian security as a vital national interest, he said, and would send its warplanes to retaliate against any attacks on its allies. U.S. military involvement, in the simulation and in reality, is increasing — partly by default of others.

If you don't like this simulated version

of the war, you may like real life even less. There's growing consensus that the Islamic State poses a severe threat to regional and even international order; one senior former Israeli official described the conflict with the caliphate as "World War III." But most players still want to hold America's coat while the United States does the bulk of the fighting.

A visit to Israeli military headquarters here confirmed that the war game was an accurate reflection of how Israeli military leaders see the conflict. Rather than attacking Islamic State forces along its northern and eastern borders, Israel pursues a policy of deterrence, containment and even quiet liaison, said a senior Israeli military official. He noted that if Israel wanted to mount an all-out ground attack on Islamic State forces in southern Syria and the Sinai Peninsula, it could wipe them out in three or four hours. "But what would happen the day after?" asked this Israeli military official. "Right now, we think it will be worse. So we try to deter them."

The Israelis don't want to disturb a hornet's nest in taking on the Islamic State. Is a similarly measured option available to the United States? Most Israeli officials say no. They argue that the United States is a superpower, and that if it wants to maintain leadership in the region, it must lead the fight to roll back the Islamic State.

The theme of the INSS conference was

that the rules of the game are changing in the Middle East. States are fragmenting; a self-proclaimed caliphate has taken deep roots in Syria and Iraq and now has a presence in many more countries around the world; a rising, still-revolutionary Iran is using proxy forces to destabilize nearly every Arab state; the old order embodied by the secular dynasties of the Mubaraks, Assads and Gaddafis is shattered.

Israelis disagree among themselves about nearly every political topic, but on the strategic picture, there is basic agreement: As the state system splinters in the Middle East, the instability in this region will be chronic, and it will persist for many years. Escaping this conflict will be impossible. So think carefully how you want to fight a war in what the senior Israeli military official called "the center of a centrifuge."

(Source: [\*The Washington Post\*](#), 26 January, 2016)

## **How Can War-Torn Yemen Find Peace?**

**Farea Al-Muslimi**

Few things are more damaging and futile than a war without clear goals or clear enemies. This is one reason why the war in Yemen still continues, and why the recent United Nations-sponsored talks in Switzerland failed.

Over the past few years, Yemen has gradually sunk into a civil and regional

conflict - the symptom, and not the cause, of which was the Houthi rebels' takeover of Sanaa in September 2014, followed by military intervention in March 2015 by a Saudi-led Arab coalition.

The recent fighting has destroyed Yemen, killing thousands of people and displacing more than two million from their homes. It has created a devastating humanitarian crisis, with more than half of the country's population classified as food insecure. The crisis in Yemen is arguably more straightforward and less internationally divisive than other regional conflicts, including the war in Syria. So why did the recent peace talks fail to generate a solution?

The main reason is that when all sides, both inside Yemen and externally, opted to go to war, they really did not have to. Historically, Saudi Arabia's influence in Yemen has been more powerful than that of the country's own rulers, and although a number of Gulf countries are at odds with former Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh, most of his family members live in the United Arab Emirates. The Arab coalition did not try diplomacy before going to war in Yemen - a war that has less to do with Yemen than with regional geopolitical rivalries. The latest round of peace talks failed because many of those involved do not know what they want out of the UN-mediated process, and because they do not believe it is in their immediate interests to have peace. After nearly a

year of war in Yemen, the cycle of business, economy and power now revolves around one main thing: war. Should the fighting suddenly end, many players from both sides would stand to lose. Understanding these possible winners and losers is key to future negotiations. The end of the war would result in four clear losers: the Houthis, armed groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Saleh and incumbent President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi. Each of these parties has a motive to impede the peace process.

The most obvious motive is attached to groups such as al-Qaeda and ISIL, which have thrived off the current chaos and instability, making huge strategic and territorial gains. For the Houthis, a state of war is arguably where they are most comfortable. If the conflict were to end, they would have to face serious questions over power-sharing that they currently do not want to answer. The Houthis, who have displayed a capability to sign a truce with one hand while holding AK-47s with the other, may be able to be guided back towards the peace process through pressure from Iran or Oman. Saleh, meanwhile, took a gamble by initiating the current conflict to improve his political position - but he did not foresee that it would escalate to this point. His strength now lies in his ability to manipulate those around him into seeing his support as indispensable.

A key to the success of peace

negotiations with Saleh and the Houthis is recognising them as separate entities with differing agendas. Saleh and his family are more vulnerable than the Houthis to pressure outside of the country. The UAE still acts as host to his family and some of his closest aides, a situation that could be used to exert pressure. Lastly, Hadi's mismanagement of the country was a key reason behind the current conflict - and the president surely realises that his allies, even more than his enemies, want him to step aside for any peace framework to succeed. Consequently, he has taken every possible step to drag out the conflict. Empowering his cabinet and his vice president at his expense will be key to the success of any lasting peace deal. The international community must make it clear that it will only deal with those who want to invest in peace in Yemen.

In addition, for Yemen to achieve peace, the Arab coalition must understand that it cannot win militarily, despite the billions of dollars in expenses already poured into the war. Any possible gains made by the coalition at the start of the conflict are being lost through its continuation.

What Yemen needs now is a dealer who can "redistribute the cards" and convince the various players to invest in peace. The UN tried this, but its approach has been weak and too easily mired in technicalities. In a recent meeting at UN headquarters in New York, just before the latest round of negotiations, a high-

level UN official was asked privately whether the organisation had seriously attempted to assess the lessons learned from the past four years. The response was a flat no. Regionally, the West can play a role in ending the conflict in Yemen by pushing for reconciliation between Saudi and Iran, and by halting their arms deals in the region. They cannot believably call for peace in Yemen while turning a blind eye to the destruction being wrought with their weapons, now in the hands of their regional clients.

(Source: [\*Carnegie Endowment\*](#), 21 January, 2016)

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## STATEMENT

### **Remarks by External Affairs Minister at the First Ministerial Meeting of Arab-India Cooperation Forum (January 24, 2016)**

**H.E. Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad  
Mohammad Al Khalifa, Foreign  
Minister of Kingdom of Bahrain,  
H.E. Dr. Nabil El Araby, Secretary  
General of the League of Arab States,  
Fellow Foreign Ministers, Ladies and  
Gentlemen,**

I am delighted to be here in Manama for the First Ministerial Meeting of the Arab-India Cooperation Forum. First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to our host H.E. Shaikh Khalid Bin Ahmad Mohammad Al Khalifa, Foreign Minister of the Kingdom of Bahrain, for the excellent arrangements made for this



meeting and the gracious hospitality extended to me and the members of my delegation. I also wish to thank my fellow Foreign Ministers and the League of Arab States for joining me in taking our relations to a new high.

Our meeting here today represents a real turning point in our ties with the Arab world. Today we seek to give new shape, direction and energy to our centuries old relations. Today we have the opportunity of translating the vision of India-Arab solidarity into concrete avenues of cooperation.

### **Excellencies,**

From time immemorial, our two civilizations have been at the forefront of human progress. From the Nile Valley to Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, the cradles of our common humanity sprung forth at the same time. And over the year our lands have been witness to momentous transformations that have shaped the world today. And our seas have given passage to millennia of contacts - our traders, monks and scholars have passed each other light when much of the rest of the world was in darkness.

So, when we gather today across this table we pay homage to our ancestors, and to their fortitude and courage. The seasonal winds of the Arabian sea and the winding caravans of the desert and the plain have been witness to the riches that we shared. Here on the coast of the Gulf, in Bahrain, much before our

nations were formed, your merchants returned with the spices and ornaments of the East, and our traders sought new markets and friendships.

And so, from the rock edicts of Emperor Ashoka found in present day Sharjah, to Indian artifacts on the Red Sea, to forgotten Arab and Indian traders who sailed to lands they had never seen before, not knowing whether they would ever return, the centuries of our interaction have instilled within us a profound respect for each other.

And we see this in our art and our architecture, our music and our food, in the literature that we write and the poetry that we recite. We find this all around us, in the pillared halls of the Diwan-e-Am in the Red Fort in Delhi, to the lyrical strains of the classical Hindustani Gharanas, to the *tehzeeb* or etiquette of our modes of interaction.

So I am not surprised when I know that the words for crop seasons in India – *kharif* and *rabi* – are derived from Arabic roots; or that the lotus is the sacred symbol of regeneration in India and Egypt; or that many distinguished families in the Arab world bear the title al-Hindi, or that Hind itself is a common name amongst women in the Arab world.

In the past millennium, it has been our intertwined histories that have pushed forward the boundaries of science and technology, of knowledge and human

progress. The early Islamic traveller Al-Biruni wrote of Indian-Arab interactions and our mutual philosophical journeys, and it was the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta who rose to high stature in the Courts of Delhi, even when the Caliphate of Baghdad, sponsored the translation of Indian works in subjects ranging from medicine to mathematics, agriculture and astronomy. So today is an occasion for us to celebrate our ancient bonds and deepen our modern partnership.

**Fellow Foreign Ministers, Ladies and Gentlemen,**

Ever since our Government assumed office in May 2014, we have paid special attention to our ties with the Arab world. We have also had extensive engagements, with various high level visits. In fact, our very first incoming visitor was the Foreign Minister of Oman in June 2014. And I started 2016 with a visit to Palestine, which was a follow up to the very successful visit of our President to Palestine in October 2015. Prime Minister Modi made a path-breaking visit to the UAE in August 2015. This was the first visit of an Indian Prime Minister to UAE after 34 years.

We received the Emir of Qatar in March last year. Apart from Palestine, I have also made bilateral visits to Oman, Bahrain, UAE and Egypt. I have also benefited immensely from the two deliberations we held with the Foreign Ministers of GCC countries on the

sidelines of the UNGA. We had the great honour of receiving Arab leaders from Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia during the 3rd India Africa Forum Summit held in New Delhi three months ago. And today's meeting reflects India's continued strategic engagement with the Arab world.

Just as today marks a turning point for India-Arab relations, we are also at a major turning point in history when the forces of terrorism and violent extremism are seeking to destabilise societies and inflict incalculable damage to our cities, our people and our very social fabric. For so long, the ties that bind India and the Arab world have provided prosperity, enhanced wisdom and enriched our civilizations. It is therefore imperative more than ever before that we stand together and recognize the danger to our world for what it is.

Many centuries ago, a young Indian ruler, in his quest for glory, laid waste to all the lands that he saw in pursuit of his Empire. On the battlefields of Kalinga, in Eastern India, after yet another victory, he witnessed the suffering of thousands of the dying and the maimed, and through it the futility of war, and was fundamentally transformed. The young Emperor Ashoka was to become one of India's most unique rulers, propagating non-violence, respect for all religions, the welfare of ordinary subjects, and the protection and care of

animals.

And so it has been that from the days of Mahavira and Buddha, India has sought liberty – whether political, personal or spiritual – through the power of non-violence. It is the spirit that animated the Mahatma in his quest for independence, and it is this spirit that has preserved India's pluralistic ethos and democratic values despite numerous challenges.

As the spectre of terrorism and religious hatred raises its ugly head across the world, particularly in those cherished cities of history, it is time once again to reach back in time and redeem the essence of our civilizational spirit. We must pledge to halt the physical violence that has spread like a plague. But we must recognize that we cannot do so without equally addressing the violence in our minds, a poison that has been spread by terror groups, harnessing the power of modern technology and social media platforms to infect our youth – those ideologies and beliefs that regard one's own brother as a stranger, one's own mother as accursed. We should not underestimate the power of this illusion, clothed in a false interpretation of faith.

Equally, we must delink religion from terror. The only distinction is between those who believe in humanity and those who do not. Terrorists use religion, but inflict harm on people of all faiths. Those who believe that silent sponsorship of such terrorist groups can bring rewards must realise that they have

their own agenda; they are adept at using the benefactor more effectively than the sponsor has used them.

None of us can afford to ignore the dangers of radicalization and indoctrination. We do so at our own peril, and that is why I believe India's model of unity in diversity offers an example for the world. We in India have citizens who belong to every existing faith. Our Constitution is committed to the fundamental principle of faith-equality: the equality of all faiths not just before the law but also in daily behaviour. In every corner of my country, the music of the azaan welcomes the dawn, followed by the chime of a Hanuman temple's bells, followed by the melody of the Guru Granth Sahib being recited by priests in a gurdwara, followed by the peal of church bells every Sunday.

This philosophy is not just a construct of our Constitution, adopted in 1950; it is the essence of our ancient belief that the world is family. Faith harmony is the message of the Holy Quran as well.

I will quote only two verses: *La ikra fi al deen* [Let there be no compulsion in religion] and *La qumdeen o qumwa li yadeen* [Your faith for you, and my faith for me].

We have seen repeatedly that terrorism does not respect national borders. It seeks to subvert societies through its pernicious doctrine of a clash of

civilizations. The only antidote to this violent philosophy is the path of peace, tolerance and harmony, a path that was illustrated centuries ago by Buddha and Mahavira and which was taken into the modern age by the Father of our nation Mahatma Gandhi. As he famously said, 'an eye for an eye ends up making the whole world blind.'

But not only do we need to condemn all acts of terrorism but we need to join hands regionally and globally to remove the scourge of terrorism completely. In this context, the passage of the Comprehensive Convention on International Terrorism in the United Nations will remove a significant lacuna in the global community's fight against this menace. We, who represent the stable and civilized world, must meet the challenge, or we risk destroying the most precious inheritance of our forefathers.

### **Excellencies,**

Beyond facing the common challenge of terrorism, India-Arab ties now cover a whole host of sectors. We have substantial common interests in the fields of trade and investment, energy and security, culture and Diaspora. Today the Arab world is collectively India's largest trading partner with bilateral trade crossing US\$ 180 bn. We source 60% of our oil and gas requirements from West Asia, making this region a pillar of our energy security. The Maghreb region is a major source of phosphates and other fertilizers

which contributes significantly towards our food security. The new and emerging areas of our cooperation include agricultural research, dry land farming, irrigation and environmental protection. In all of these we would be happy to share our experience with our Arab partners.

Over the last six decades India has made rapid strides in economic development which has placed us at the forefront of the global revolution in information technology, pharmaceuticals, and cutting edge research in the areas of nanotechnology and biotechnology. We are proud of our institutes of excellence which have made India into a knowledge and talent hub. We have always been ready to share our expertise in human resource development with our fellow partners on the road to development. We are even ready to provide tailor made courses to LAS member countries under the Indian Technical & Economic Cooperation (ITEC) programme and promote academic exchanges.

Similarly, we stand ready to partner all of you in areas such as Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), automobiles and Small and Medium Enterprises, biotechnology and space. At a time of global economic slowdown, India has emerged as a bright spot for the world economy. We are today the fastest growing major economy in the world. Our growth, I believe, offers significant opportunities for our LAS partners. The Sovereign Wealth Funds



of Gulf countries can be profitably employed in India's burgeoning infrastructure sector. The next India – Arab Partnership Conference in Oman this year can be a real game changer in terms of deepening our economic partnership.

### **Excellencies,**

Beyond Government to Government interactions, the bedrock of our relationship is provided by people to people ties. Over 7 million Indians reside in this region and there are 700 flights a week between India and UAE alone! A vast number of people in the Arab world enjoy our films, listen to our music and relish our cuisine. I am confident that the 3rd India-Arab Cultural Festival to be held in India this year will further promote our cultural contacts and cooperation. We also look forward to closer engagement between our civil society and community organizations.

### **Excellencies,**

India and the Arab world face common challenges and have similar opportunities in their quest for peace, prosperity and stability. Today, through the Manama Declaration and the Executive Program for 2016-17, we have taken an important step towards addressing those challenges and utilizing those opportunities.

The famous Egyptian poet Ahmed

Shawky, a friend of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, once remarked that the revolution of souls severs our chains, and that the revolution of minds removes mountains. Through the friendship of our civilizations, through the partnership of our nations, I am confident that we can move mountains in our common quest for a safer and more prosperous world.

Source: [Ministry of External Affairs](#), Government of India, 24 January, 2016

## **MEDIA WATCH**

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### **UN seeks to restart Syria peace talks but opposition threatens boycott**

The UN said on Monday it would issue invitations for marathon Syrian peace talks to begin this week, but opposition groups signalled they would stay away unless the government and its Russian allies halt air strikes and lift sieges on towns.

Source [France 24](#), 26 January, 2016

### **Iran, China vow tighter ties as Xi visits**

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday hailed a “new chapter” in relations with China after talks with President Xi Jinping, who is touring the region to boost Beijing's economic influence

Source [France 24](#), 24 January, 2016

### **IS group halves fighter's salaries**

The Islamic State jihadist group has announced plans to halve the monthly salaries of its members in Syria and Iraq, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights monitor said Tuesday.

Source [France 24](#), 20 January, 2016

### **Iran has met obligations under nuclear deal, IAEA says**

The UN nuclear watchdog said in a report released Saturday that Iran had complied with its obligations under a nuclear deal reached with six world powers in July, paving the way for the lifting of sanctions.

Source [France 24](#), 17 January, 2016

### **UN chief warns Syria that starving civilians is a war crime**

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Thursday warned all sides in the Syrian conflict that the use of starvation as a weapon was a war crime, as the second convoy carrying food and aid to residents reached famine-struck Madaya.

Source [France 24](#), 15 January, 2016

### **France says it will recognise Palestinian state if new peace effort fails**

Foreign minister Laurent Fabius says France is trying to convene an international peace summit to work towards a two-state solution fails

Source [The Guardian](#), 30 January, 2016

### **Pro-Assad troops retake territory near Latakia stronghold**

Troops loyal to the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, backed by intense Russian airstrikes, have retaken strategic territory near the government's stronghold of Latakia, scoring a key victory before possible peace talks in Geneva.

Source [The Guardian](#), 25 January, 2016

### **John Kerry reassures Gulf states over US relationship with Iran**

The US secretary of state, John Kerry, has met Gulf state ministers to ease their concerns about warming US relations with Iran and seek agreement on which Syrian opposition groups should be represented at upcoming peace talks

Source [The Guardian](#), 23 January, 2016

### **Islamic State holding estimated 3,500 slaves in Iraq, says UN**

Islamic State militants have enslaved an estimated 3,500 people in Iraq, primarily women and children from the Yazidi community, a UN report says.

Source [The Guardian](#), 19 January, 2016

### **Rouhani hails 'new chapter' in Iran-France relations**

Iran and France share a responsibility in the fight against terrorism, French President François Hollande said Thursday, speaking during a landmark visit to Paris by President Hassan Rouhani that was dominated by trade

and business deals

Source [France 24](#), 29 January, 2016

### **Saudi-led coalition to investigate claims in Yemen**

The Saudi-led coalition said on Sunday it has launched a new independent team to investigate charges of possible abuses against civilians in the Yemen conflict.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 31 January 2016

### **Israel approves mixed-sex Jewish prayer site at Western Wall**

The Israeli government approved on Sunday the creation of a mixed-sex plaza at Jerusalem's Western Wall to accommodate Jews who contest Orthodox curbs on worship by women there.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 31 January 2016

### **Saudi, Turkey back Syrian opposition irrespective of talks**

Saudi Arabia's and Turkey's foreign ministers said on Sunday that their countries backed Syria's opposition whether they continued with the Geneva peace talks or opted to discontinue negotiation in a press conference.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 31 January 2016

### **U.N. appeals for \$861 million humanitarian aid for Iraq**

The United Nations launched an appeal on Sunday for \$861 million in international humanitarian assistance to help millions of people in Iraq who are

suffering from war and displacement.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 31 January 2016

### **Israel would consider talks with Palestinians**

Israel would consider a French invitation to peace talks with the Palestinians, but believes France has made a mistake by saying it will recognise a Palestinian state if the talks fail.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 31 January 2016

### **France considers recognition of a Palestinian state**

France will recognize a Palestinian state if its efforts to revive Israeli-Palestinian peace talks at an international conference fail, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius said

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 30 January 2016

### **Dutch to join US-led airstrikes against ISIS in Syria**

The Dutch government said that it plans to join the U.S.-led coalition targeting militant group in Syria with airstrikes. The Dutch have formonths been carrying out air raids in neighbouring Iraq using four F-16 jets.

Source [Alarabiya.net](#), 30 January 2016

### **Demirtas: Turkey's Kurdish conflict impacting Syria, migrant crises**

The leader of Turkey's pro-Kurdish opposition said conflict in the country's largely Kurdish southeast had grown into an international problem, feeding

into war in neighboring Syria, and urged allies to do more to push for a ceasefire.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 28 January 2016

### **Yemen's Houthis detain activists, journalist in Sanaa**

Yemeni security officials say Houthi rebels have detained a number of activists and critics including a local journalist in the capital, Sanaa. Detentions come shortly after the Houthis released three Al-Jazeera journalists they kidnapped in the western city of Ta'ez.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 28 January 2016

### **Syrian opposition arrives in Geneva for peace talks**

A delegation representing Syria's main opposition umbrella group arrived in Switzerland on Saturday to attend U.N.-mediated peace talks aimed at ending the five-year-old conflict.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 30 January 2016

### **U.N. says Syria ignored most of its requests to deliver aid**

The Syrian government in 2015 ignored most United Nations requests to deliver humanitarian aid to some of the 4.6 million people in hard-to-reach and besieged areas and only 620,000 received help.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 28 January 2016

### **EU considers sanctions for Libya peace 'spoilers'**

The EU is considering sanctions against several Libyan figures for undermining efforts to form a national unity government, a key first step towards bringing peace to the war-torn country, European sources said.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 27 January 2016

### **Canada confirms lifting of Iran sanctions**

Canada has confirmed for the first time on Tuesday that it plans to lift its sanctions on Tehran and said that if Airbus is allowed to sell to Iran, then its aircraft maker Bombardier Inc. should be allowed to export there as well.

Source [Alarabiya.net](http://Alarabiya.net), 27 January 2016

### **Yemen PM returns to Aden to re-establish govt**

The Yemeni prime minister and his Cabinet returned on Monday to the southern port city of Aden, months after he was targeted in a suicide bombing that forced them to leave the country.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 25 January 2016

### **State will make no concessions during talks: Syrian official**

A senior official in Syrian President Bashar Assad's ruling Baath party says the government will not make any new concessions in future peace talks.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 24 January 2016



## **NATO ‘discussing’ use of surveillance jets in ISIS fight**

NATO member states are discussing a request to use the alliance’s AWACS air surveillance aircraft in the battle against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), an official said Friday.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 22 January 2016

## **EU confident Turkey to get 3 bn Euro refugee aid despite delay**

EU foreign affairs Chief Federica Mogherini on Monday expressed confidence Turkey would soon receive a package of three billion Euros (\$3.2 bln) for mainly Syrian refugees, despite a delay of almost two months since the funds were agreed.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 25 January 2016

## **Syria picks U.N. envoy as chief negotiator for peace talks**

Syria’s U.N. envoy will be the regime’s chief negotiator in upcoming peace talks, a government source said Thursday, as a dispute over the opposition’s representatives threatened to delay the negotiations.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 21 January 2016

## **Israel begins construction on Jordan border fence**

Israel has begun construction on a security fence along its border with Jordan, the defence ministry announced Wednesday, its latest such barrier intended to keep out illegal migrants and

militants.

Source [Al-arabiya.net](http://Al-arabiya.net), 20 January 2016

## **After President’s trip, Sushma to visit Palestine, Israel**

External Affairs Minister SushmaSwaraj will visit Israel and Palestine on January 17-18 to strengthen India’s engagement with the two countries and to pave the way for Prime Minister NarendraModi’s visit later this year.

Source [Indian Express](http://Indian Express), 13 January, 2016

## **India attaches top priority to ties with Israel: Swaraj**

External Affairs Minister SushmaSwaraj on Monday said India attaches the highest importance to its ties with Israel as she called on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to discuss the entire spectrum of the relationship

Source [The Hindu](http://The Hindu), January 19, 2016,

## **Kerry: U.S.-Saudi friendship stronger than ever**

Secretary of State John Kerry on Sunday said that the United States friendship with Saudi Arabia “is stronger than ever” and that the two would work together to try to end wars in Syria and Yemen.

Source [The Hindu](http://The Hindu), January 24, 2016

## **U.S. lifts sanctions; Iran comes in from the cold**

The United States on Saturday removed a wide range of sanctions against Iran after International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed that Tehran has met its commitments to roll back its nuclear programme.

Source [The Hindu](#), January 17, 2016

## **Shiite militias in Iraq aggravate sectarianism: Saudi envoy**

In an interview with Iraq's Al Sumaria TV on Saturday, Saudi Ambassador to Iraq Thamer Al Sabhan said the HashidShaabi, a coalition of mostly Iranian-backed Shiite paramilitary groups set up in 2014 to fight Daesh, should leave the fight against the militants to Iraq's army and official security forces in order to avoid aggravating sectarian tension.

Source [Gulf news](#), 24, January, 2016

## **Nearly 400,000 Syrians starving in besieged areas**

As aid agencies prepare to deliver food to Madaya, on the outskirts of Damascus and two other besieged towns in Idlib province, an estimated 400,000 people are living under siege in 15 areas across Syria.

Source [Aljazeera](#), 10 January, 2016

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