

## DEBATE

### ***Situation in West Asia: Implications for India\****

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

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

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

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

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

Syria is experiencing a peace process, led by Russia and backed by Iran and Turkey, which seeks to bring together the largest possible groups in the Syrian conflict to discuss and agree on constitutional arrangements that will resolve ideological and military contentions, and prepare the ground for national reconstruction. However, divisions between most groups are so deep that consensus-building has been a daunting challenge.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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