

Recent Developments in West Asia : Implications for India*

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West Asia has been the world's most volatile region since World War II, witnessing more conflict and wars than any other region. Besides this, contentious discourse, extremism, sectarianism, and violence of the most brutal type seem to have now become the new normal for the region. Dangerous instability is spreading at an alarming speed.

This cannot but be a matter of increasing concern for the world. West Asia is the world's largest repository of oil and natural gas, and the world's fastest growing economies – China, India, Japan, Korea and the GCC countries – are heavily dependent on these energy resources. Moreover, extremism is now rampant in the region, and the potential for it spreading in the neighbourhood and beyond is becoming an increasingly realistic and frightening prospect.

Apart from all this, there are other important reasons which make West Asia, particularly the Gulf region comprising six GCC countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Iran, and Iraq important for India. More than 7 million Indians live and work in the Gulf region. In a democracy like India, their safety and welfare is of overriding political importance, as was exhibited by the frenzied 24/7 media coverage of stranded Indians in Iraq a few months ago. India receives US\$ 35 billion as remittances from these Indians every year, which supports the livelihood of many millions of Indians back home, apart from boosting the country's foreign exchange reserves. India is dependent for over 70 per cent of its oil and gas supplies on the Gulf region. The Gulf region is also India's largest trade partner by far - US\$ 181 billion in 2012–13.

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With Islamic extremism surging in the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have provided excellent anti-terrorism cooperation. No other region in the world has such a basket of strategic interests impacting India's national well-being and national interests. These reasons make it essential for all students of international affairs in India to take an active interest in happenings in West Asia.

This essay focuses on the evolving situations in Syria and Iraq, the new scourge of the Islamic State, the Israeli onslaught on Gaza, and also a little bit on the ground realities in Iran. It attempts to explain why the situation is what it is in broad terms, without going into minute details. While there is a huge information overload and several strongly partisan commentaries on these subjects making objectivity and impartiality somewhat difficult, this essay attempts to avoid personal, emotional, and ideological biases.

Syria

What began in March 2011 as a peaceful protest movement for internal political reform – and as part of what was then prematurely and optimistically termed as the 'Arab Spring' – ended up progressively mutating into a devastating civil war. This was initially due to the Assad regime which cracked down on the protestors harshly; later, it escalated mainly because of the involvement of foreign countries – particularly France, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, UAE, UK and the US who decided to supply arms and money to the protestors to oust Assad, while Iran and Russia helped the regime with weapons and other strategic and political support. Later, the Hezbollah (the Iranian protégé operating out of Lebanon) joined in with the active involvement of its fighters. According to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the civil war has caused the death of 191,369 persons, overwhelmingly civilian, as of end April 2014. More than 6 million have been internally displaced, and about 3 million are refugees in neighboring countries. These numbers will keep increasing as the hostilities continue on a daily basis across the length and breadth of the country. However, those fighting against the Assad regime have, over time, fragmented into many distinct and mutually hostile groups. They are now spending greater time and effort fighting the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), an extremist militant group considered to be a more detestable and dangerous enemy than the Assad regime.

A few months ago Assad was re-elected as President for another 7 year term. It was an election conducted by the regime in the midst of a civil war,

and could hardly be considered free and fair. Nevertheless, this is the new and significant ground reality. The talk of a negotiated settlement under UN auspices through the Geneva conference process seems to have died down completely.

Meanwhile, a particularly important new development has taken place: the establishment of an Islamic State encompassing some of the areas of Iraq and Syria in June this year. This has dramatically changed the dynamics of the future evolution of events in both countries, completely altering the course they have been on in previous years. It has now become absolutely imperative even for Assad's opponents - such as the Western powers and the GCC countries - to concentrate their future energies on confronting the highly dangerous Islamic State. The supply of money and weapons to the rebels has been affected due to the fear that these would ultimately fall into the hands of the ISIS. For all these reasons, it is highly unlikely that Assad can now be defeated on the battleground. Moreover, the pluralistic, multi-hued, secular Syria that existed prior to March 2011, is now history. It would be impossible to recreate it again. With its infrastructure in shambles, its economy ravaged, and civil war conditions likely to be continuing in the foreseeable future, Syria will be a chronically unstable nation, heavily dependent on foreign assistance even for daily survival.

Iraq

Iraqi history affirms the self-belief of the Sunni segment of its population: that despite being a minority, it is the 'natural' ruling element of the country. In the aftermath of the US invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, developments in the country turned this historical reality on its head. For the first time in centuries, Iraq has been under Shia rule, and that too in an unabashedly sectarian manner. The seeds of today's scenario were sown by the 2003 US invasion and military occupation of Iraq. The first two decrees Paul Bremer (the US Governor of Iraq), ordered the wholesale dismantling both of the Baathist Party (which was virtually synonymous with the State), and of the Iraqi Army. Demobilized, the suddenly and sullenly unemployed Iraqi army personnel, including skilled Saddam-era officers, joined the insurgent militias, greatly strengthening the newly sprouting anti-government forces, even as the government was simultaneously stripped of its military capabilities.

Even before the Americans left in 2011, Nuri al-Maliki – Prime Minister since May 2006 and installed with American support, had been brazenly implementing an enlarging sectarian agenda, gradually sidelining all credible

Sunni political leaders politically. Competent and experienced Sunnis were also purged from government, and replaced by Shia toadies. Sunni participation in Iraq's governance was systematically marginalized, inevitably forcing Sunnis to shun, resist, and finally fight it. All Sunni violence was dubbed 'terrorism'; but Shiite militias were given a free run except episodically when they directly threatened the government. Shia dominated central Army and security forces were deployed in Baghdad's Sunni neighbourhoods as well as in Sunni-populated governorates, to exercise control and vigilance over local Sunni populations. All this contributed to the total alienation of the Sunni population of the country. The Shia-Sunni divide has never been as poisonous as it has become in the last few years. A Sunni backlash was clearly inevitable. After ups and downs and going through various incarnations, Sunni anger and rage were manifested in the lightening takeover of large areas of the Sunni dominated Anbar, Diyala, Ninevah and Salahedin provinces of Iraq in June, and culminated finally in the proclamation of the Islamic State by the ISIS on June 30th.

Combating the Islamic State is going to be the foremost focus of all activities in Iraq in the foreseeable future. For this to be successful an effective, an efficiently functioning government characterized by national unity is absolutely essential. Such a government is finally in the process of being put together under Prime Minister Haidar Abadi. Though a Shia from the same party as Nuri al-Maliki, he has studied and lived in the UK, and is much more open minded and acceptable to non-Shias.

As for the future, Iraq will no longer have the strong central government that it had in the past; it is likely to become a loosely structured federation, with the Kurds exercising considerable autonomy. If this is not granted, they may break away. The era when Iraq was a significant regional political and military power is over.

The Islamic State

On June 30, the ISIS announced the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate to be ruled strictly in accordance with the Sharia, and its leader Abu Bakr al Baghdadi who has been declared the new Caliph Ibrahim the leader of Muslims everywhere. He was a US detainee at Camp Bucca from 2005 to 2009 when he was released, and thereafter was a part of the Al Qaeda hierarchy until expelled by Zawahiri. The ISIS has been renamed as the 'Islamic State'. This name has come to stand both for the organization and the territory that it controls, which comprises two fifths of the total territory of Syria, and two fifths of the total territory of Iraq. It holds assets of more than US\$ 2 billion.

This is made up of cash taken from all the banks and government treasuries of the towns it has taken over in Syria and Iraq; ransom money from those kidnapped, including almost US\$ 135 million reportedly paid by European governments or companies to secure the release of their kidnapped nationals; revenues of US\$ 2 million per day from the sale of oil from the four oilfields in Syria and one in Iraq that it controls; from fees and taxes; from funding from entities and individuals in the Gulf countries; looting of businessmen and common citizens in territories that it controls, etc. It is virtually self-sufficient economically and financially. It has about 10-12,000 fighters in Iraq (who are mostly Iraqi), and perhaps thrice as many in Syria (the majority being Syrian, with at least one third being foreigners, including many from Western countries). With the establishment of the Islamic State straddling Iraq and Syria, the future destinies of these two countries have now become inseparably interlinked.

Taking on and defeating the Islamic State is going to be a Herculean task. It will be a long, extremely painful, rather expensive, and particularly bloody process. But it can be done; indeed it has to be done! There is simply no other option. The alternative will be that the state system as we know it in West Asia will collapse completely: chaos, mindless death, destruction, devastation and mayhem will prevail, and the malaise spread to immediate neighborhoods and beyond.

Why will the Islamic State Ultimately be Defeated?

First, in the past century of their existence in their current borders, overarching Iraqi and Syrian identities have been forged, and there is widespread national belief in the sanctity of their territorial integrity. The current tacit collaboration of broad swathes of the Sunni population with the ISIS in Iraq is a force majeure marriage of convenience in the absence of alternatives. Once a government of national unity is formed and the Sunnis are given their rightful role, Sunnis will almost surely reject the medieval ideology and brutal rule of the ISIS, and defeat them as they had emphatically defeated the Al Qaeda – the ISIS's original avatar in Iraq -in 2008 in the Anbar Province. It is a particularly positive development that both Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani and the radical Shia cleric Moqtada Sadr have publicly and repeatedly called for a government of national unity, with full recognition of the legitimate rights of Sunnis.

Secondly, for the first time ever since the end of World War II, countries which have been on opposite sides of the fence on most regional issues in West Asia, are now, without exception, all together in strongly opposing the Islamic State and Caliphate. Through a series of statements and actions, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has made it clear that the Islamic State is now Saudi Arabia's pre-eminent enemy. The rulers of the GCC countries know that if the Caliphate/Islamic State succeeds, the GCC countries, which have been a haven of peace, stability and continuing strong economic growth, will also face bloody insurrection. Thus, the regimes of these countries simply cannot afford to let the ISIS win. Today, the ISIS presents a truly existential danger to them – a danger that is much greater than any they had earlier perceived as coming from Iran.

There are now more than 500 US military advisers in Iraq, and more will be deputed; US airstrikes have been under way. Even Germany, traditionally wary of supplying weapons to countries in zones of conflict, has announced readiness to supply weapons to the Kurds. Russia has provided Sukhoi fighters and a lot of other weaponry. Unconditional help has been, and will be, available from Iran, including not merely weapons and funds but officers and small units of the Al Quds Force. It is significant that Muslim organizations and entities, including Al Qaeda on the one hand and theological seats of influence on the other around the Muslim world, have strongly condemned the Caliphate and ISIS. The latter have no allies anywhere.

The process of pushing the Islamic State back has begun. US air strikes enabled the Kurdish Peshmerga and Iraqi Special Forces (who, unprecedentedly, worked together for the first time), to recover control of the Mosul dam. Iran is supplying weapons to the Kurds – and this has happened for the first time. Barzani, the leader of the Iraqi Kurds, traditionally at loggerheads with Syrian PKK, visited their camps and called them 'brothers', and it was the PKK that mainly escorted the Yazidis to safety. Baathist and other Saddam era Army officers who had temporarily allied with the ISIS are beginning to leave; such and similar temporary alliances are beginning to fray. The Sadrists, who had fought bitterly against the Americans, have publicly requested American help and cooperation, but without putting their troops into Iraq. The Americans have started reconnaissance flights over Syria. The Syrian Air Force mounted attacks against the ISIS in Raqqaa, and killed more than 3000 ISIS fighters. A meaningful de facto coalition of states and entities against the Islamic State is beginning to develop, significantly including Iran and the USA. Even if some countries keep insisting publicly that they will not

cooperate with the Assad regime while combating the Islamic State, in the real world such things do happen and will happen, behind the scenes.

However, Western intervention must not be in the form of boots on the ground. The maintenance of the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria must be a serious objective of the international community. If Syria and Iraq unravel, then the whole of West Asia will inevitably become pockmarked by small states (statelets) in the hands of violent non-state actors spreading chaos and mayhem. Notwithstanding all the above, the world must brace itself to witness far greater brutality, death, destruction, and violence than it has already witnessed as the war against the Islamic State truly gets under way.

Gaza

A 'permanent truce' between Hamas and Israel was agreed to on 25 August 2014, ending the recent hostilities in Gaza which began on July 8. This conflict was of the longest duration of the three conflicts that have taken place in the past 6 years: 2138 Palestinians (of which 70 per cent were civilians) and 68 Israelis (of which 64 were soldiers) died. This is the highest number in such confrontations so far. There has also been unprecedented infrastructure destruction in Gaza – resembling that in Dresden in World War II. This was a war between the Hamas and Israel, and not a war between Israel and Palestine. This is how the governments of many Arab countries as well as the Palestinian National Authority viewed the conflict. It was also seen as an intrinsic element of the currently ongoing strong confrontation between the Muslim Brotherhood, of which Hamas is an offshoot, and its Arab opponents. Amongst others, Egypt and Saudi Arabia consider Hamas as a terrorist organization. In strong contrast to each of the earlier such confrontations, this time Hamas was politically isolated (except for Qatar's support) in the Arab world. Iran, of course, supported Hamas, and continues to supply it arms. The uncomfortable truth is that each of these countries, without exception, is cynically pursuing its own broader geopolitical agenda at the cost of the lives of innocent civilians. But Israel could end up paying a particularly heavy political and public relations price, and may well be taken to the International Criminal Court by Arab countries, with possible European support. However, no meaningful alleviation of the sad plight of the Palestinian people, particularly in Gaza and the West Bank, is likely any time soon. Indeed, a fourth confrontation could happen in due course.

Iran

The Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979 transformed the US–Iranian relationship from being a solid alliance that had provided the bedrock of stability in the Gulf region to one of unremitting hostility between the two. This has been the main basis of the broader instability in West Asia in recent decades. However, there is more than a glimmer of hope that this could change, and quite dramatically. Ironically, the main reason is escalating Sunni extremism personified by entities such as Al Qaeda, the Taliban and, most recently, by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, the ISIS or ISIL – which has been manifested most dangerously in its proclamation of the Islamic State and an Islamic Caliphate.

In retrospect, the USA seems to have proactively sleepwalked into granting Iran a strategically invaluable geopolitical gift by overthrowing the Saddam regime in Iraq. This was the biggest threat that Iran faced. Another significant threat facing Iran was the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan. This too was dismantled by the USA. With Iraq under Shia rule, Iran has become the most influential country in the Gulf region. Syria had been Iran's closest ally and friend ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Now, the newly declared Islamic State is the most potent threat to the pro-Iranian regimes in Iraq and Syria, to the territorial integrity of Iraq and Syria, and thus also to Iran's influence and standing throughout West Asia.

The Islamic State regards the USA in particular, the other Western countries in general, and the regimes of their Arab allies in the region, as inveterate enemies. The strategic interests of the western world in general, and those of the USA in particular, as also those of Iran have thus converged dramatically. Cooperation in defeating the Islamic State, which is already taking place in diplomatic interactions behind the scenes and tacitly on the ground, has become the inevitable outcome, notwithstanding some defensiveness in acknowledging this publicly.

The emergence of the ISIS could not have come at a more propitious moment for Iran as it has been engaged in negotiations on its contentious nuclear issue with the P 5 + 1, initiated in November 2013. The discussions have obviously been progressing sufficiently satisfactorily to warrant the extension of the original deadline of July 31 to a new one set for the end of November 2014. Both sides have indicated that despite the extremely difficult give and take that still lies ahead, they are hoping for ultimate success. If a US–Iranian rapprochement happens, the existing geopolitical scenario throughout West Asia could be reshaped dramatically. It is too early to delineate

the new contours, but it would almost certainly be good for the region. It is absolutely and unavoidably essential that the Islamic State be defeated, especially since it has emerged as one of the most powerful, efficient, and effective military machines in the region. Such cooperation should help in arriving at solutions in Syria and Iraq and, perhaps, help in easing the grim situation of the Palestinians somewhat.

Implications for India

What should be the objective of a country's foreign policy? It should primarily be to promote and protect its national interests, national security, and national welfare. Pragmatism and mutual benefit should be lodestars determining bilateral relations rather than any abstract principle. An important guideline must be to avoid taking stances that will have zero impact on the realities on the ground, but which could adversely affect important bilateral relationships. India's reactions to developments in West Asia and their implications for India must be evaluated through these prisms.

There are no direct economic, political, or strategic implications for India of events in Gaza and Syria. Having said this, in the context of the current crisis in Gaza, India has maintained continuity with past stances in relevant international fora, and in statements made by the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA). There is a slight departure in that Israeli actions have not been strongly condemned as in the past. This reflects the new ruling party's (the BJP) known affinity with Israel. In democracies, these things happen and must be respected and accepted. Also, the reality that Hamas is widely considered as a terrorist organization even by many Arab countries needs be kept in mind.

Since India established diplomatic relations with Israel in 1992, (immediately after China), Israel has emerged as a particularly important defense equipment supplier and a multi-sectoral hi-tech partner. This is a particularly significant relationship strategically which must not be jeopardized. Demands were made that India should stop buying military equipment from Israel. While this would certainly hurt Israel marginally, it would be an utterly devastating self-inflicted wound on India. No Indian government has, or should, consider such an utterly self-defeating proposal. It merits emphasis that Indo-Israel relations have not come in the way of India having an excellent relationship with Arab countries in general, and with the GCC countries in particular. In fact, the latter have developed significantly in the past decade and a half. Indeed, this relationship with the GCC countries could be regarded as India's most spectacular foreign policy success.

Events in Iraq also have the potential for impacting India. First, Iraq has episodically been the top oil supplier to India in the past. Due to disturbed conditions in Iraq during the past three decades, India perforce had to start importing more oil from other countries. Currently, Iraq holds the second rank; this was largely because supplies from Iran were curtailed due to sanctions. This status is unlikely to be adversely affected because the oilfields and the port from where Iraqi oil is exported to India are in the government controlled Shia majority southern provinces, and are likely to remain so as the ISIS cannot prevail in these parts.

There has been an enormous amount of noise made in the media, and by opposition parties, in relation to the abduction of 40 Indian workers. There was absolutely nothing that the Indian government or Embassy could have done to prevent their abduction. It is pertinent to point out that not one of the directly and intensively involved neighboring countries of Iraq had anticipated the lightening blitzkrieg of the ISIS in taking over the Sunni provinces of Iraq. The Turkish Consul General in Mosul and 23 other Consulate personnel had also been abducted; and, they are yet to be released or rescued. Larger numbers of nationals of many other countries are in similar or worse situations. The government is doing everything humanly possible to find out where they are, to have them released, and brought back. That is the best that any government can do. Around 6500 Indians have returned with government assistance or voluntarily.

The Islamic Caliphate's ultimate objective is to have all Muslims of the world under its umbrella, and the map of its projected domain includes most of India. They have mentioned every Muslim 'cause' in the world in their Charter, including Kashmir. However, their most strident criticism is reserved for Muslim countries. It is entirely possible that small numbers of Indian Muslims have gone to Syria and Iraq to join Islamist fighters. In the context of 170 million Muslims in India, this should not be a cause for any significant concern; the far more and extremely impressive fact is that no Muslim community of the world has kept itself further away from militants in the Arab and Muslim world than India's Muslims. This is a point of great pride, and one has full confidence in the sagacity of India's Muslim community. While the Caliphate could serve as an ideological beacon to radicalise misguided and/or unemployed Indian Muslim youth, both the causes and remedies for this lie with the Indian government, civil society, with the leaders of India's Muslim community, and not abroad. This is not an issue that should be left to be resolved by intelligence agencies.

Due to reasons mentioned earlier, India's national well-being is heavily dependent on stability in the Gulf region of West Asia. Unfortunately, volatility here is going to continue increasing in the foreseeable future. Any major disruption of normalcy in the GCC countries would result in disastrous consequences for India. What is happening in Iraq and Syria must not spill over into the GCC countries. However, the unfortunate reality is that there is nothing that India can say or do to influence events on the ground. But the least that India can, and must, do is to convey through actions that we have a keen interest in a strong relationship with the GCC countries. The reality is that no past Indian government has paid attention and given importance to the Gulf region that it deserves. While the new government has taken commendable foreign policy initiatives in relation to India's immediate neighborhood, it seems to have further downgraded the Gulf region's importance. Hopefully this has been done inadvertently, judging by the fact that, for the first time ever, there was not a single sentence about West Asia in the President's Address to Parliament. A great deal of importance is being attached to bolstering trade relations – and rightly so. But in this context, huge importance is being given to China with which India has had an absolutely massive trade deficit for years. But the fact that UAE has been India's largest trade partner for four out of the past six years hardly gets noticed. There has not been a Prime Ministerial visit to the UAE since 1982. India must not take countries for granted. If this approach continues, India may have to pay a heavy price for willful neglect.

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