

# India and The Turbulent Middle East

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Even by its standards of upheavals and tensions, the Middle East will now be far more turbulent and challenging than in recent years. Most of its problems show no sign of resolution while new problems have only increased the regional complexities. It is possible to identify four major issues that will dominate the region in the coming months and years and, hence, will have a bearing on India's interests and approaches.

## **Arab Spring**

The falling oil prices coincided with the popular protests in the region against various Arab regimes. Political reforms were the primary demands of the Arab Spring but they also contained strong economic grievances. Educated unemployment galvanised a large section of the Arab youth to demand greater transparency, accountability and good governance. The oil-rich monarchies proved more capable than the republican regimes to withstand public unrest as their rentier economic model enabled them to pacify the public through economic largesse. Since 2011, Saudi Arabia provided a financial package worth US\$130 billion to calm down its restive public. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait spent about US\$5 billion each. Smaller and less endowed states such as Bahrain and Oman had to rely on the financial assistance of the richer members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Likewise, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE pledged US\$5 billion each for Jordan and Morocco to meet domestic unrest stemming from economic demands.

At the same time, into its sixth year, the Arab Spring has no signs of a roadmap. For a while, Tunisia led the way and brought about the first democratically elected government in October 2011 that was both inclusive and non-extremist. Aware of the pitfalls of imposing a narrow Islamist agenda, Ennada took the pragmatic path and facilitated the broad based government headed by Beji Caid Essebsi who incidentally was earlier a minister like the deposed President Ben-Ali. The euphoria, however, was shaken with the terror attack against the presidential guards on November 24, 2015, in which 12 people were killed and many others injured. Likewise, the euphoria in Egypt following the deposition of Mohammed Morsi—incidentally the first democratically elected President of the country—did not endure. Former Army Chief Fattah al-Sisi who was elected President in May 2014, could not expand his popularity. This was manifested in the two rounds of parliamentary elections held in late 2015. Participation in both rounds did not cross 10 percent and it is worth noting that 43 percent of the electorate took part in the Parliament elections held between November 2011 and January 2012, which also saw electoral gains for the Muslim Brotherhood.

The Arab Spring has rekindled the debates over Arabisation of the labour force. Such demands were not new and countries like Saudi Arabia have been trying to limit the size of the expatriate labourers through a carrot-and-stick policy comprising a reward and punishment mechanism. Private companies that employ Saudi labourers are given financial incentives while those employing a high number of foreign workers are penalised. The task of employment for the youth and the resultant unrest have intensified the Arabisation process. In recent years, some of the oil-rich countries have witnessed demands for employment for women, especially those with university degrees, which has a bearing on the expatriate labour force.

In the long run, the Arabisation process will adversely affect the size and technical skills of the expatriate labourers in the Gulf region, especially in Saudi Arabia. For example, any concession regarding the right of Saudi women to drive will reduce the demand for drivers. The entry of women into fields such as law, engineering, architecture—men-only domains until recently—will affect the skilled expatriate workforce. The demand for both unskilled and semi-skilled workforce will be affected by the fall in oil prices and the slowing down of construction projects. Thus, the demand for blue-collar as well white-collar jobs in the Gulf will be at stake. The Gulf returnees will have an adverse impact upon states such as Kerala, which are heavily dependent upon overseas workers for their economic progress.

**India must  
engage Middle  
East countries to  
counter IS threat.**

**Islamic State**

The emergence of the Islamic State (IS) is a new threat facing not just for the Middle East but also to the wider international community. Whether the group can be termed 'Islamic', 'unIslamic' or anti-Islamic is not confined to academic debates. A nuanced understanding will enable an effective counter-strategy against the phenomenon. That the radical and extremist ideology has attracted youths from across the world is an indication of its mass appeal. Merely dismissing the growing army of ISIS fighters as 'misguided and radicalised youth' will not address the core issue. Two points are worth noting; most of those who are attracted towards the ISIS or passively support its cause, have a genuine grievance against something or another. The sense of injustice may be genuine or contrived. However, one cannot ignore the 'grievance' part. At the same time, it is essential to recognise that everyone with a sense of injustice does not turn to violence or rest on religious scriptures to justify extremism. Hence, one has to recognise both the cause of the problem and the recourse opted for. The addressing of the larger issue of grievance is a political struggle that would require a more detailed understanding of the problems. Mere superficial understanding will be insufficient. For example, most of the violence in the Middle East is explained and justified in the name of the Arab-Israeli conflict or the righteousness of the Palestinian cause. There are more narratives that are possible and necessary.

The adoption of two unanimous resolutions by the UN Security Council (UNSC) in August 2014 and November 2015 had only a marginal effect upon the ISIS. International legitimacy has never been its primary objective, which is restoration of a puritan Islamic order. For long, India's security experts flagged the absence of Indian citizens in various terror acts carried out by Al Qaida, but the ISIS is proving to be different. Dozens of Indians have been identified as passive supporters of the extremist Islamic group, with a few of them even volunteering to fight with the ISIS. For a country with the second largest Muslim population, the number is still extremely minuscule but terrorism is never defined by numbers but by its lethality. Some of those who are attracted towards the ISIS have been Information Technology (IT) professionals and this is an alarming signal.

India, therefore, will have to engage actively with a number of Middle East countries. Jordan has been a frontline state in the fight against the ISIS as the group poses an existential threat to the Hashemite regime. At one time or another, countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE have supported and financed the Islamic

Brotherhood and various Salafi groups. The intensification of the Syrian civil war was partly due to some of these countries providing political, diplomatic, financial and military support to various anti-Assad Islamist groups. The emergence of the ISIS and its rapid territorial gains in Syria and Iraq have brought about a sense of urgency in these countries. With a sizeable expatriate population in the Gulf, radicalisation will be a direct threat to India. This possibility should enable the government to increase professional security cooperation with them. The appointment of Mumbai Police Chief Ahmad Javed as the next Ambassador to Riyadh should be an eye-opener and should enable India to increase security-related cooperation with Saudi Arabia, which has over two million Indian expatriate workers.

## **Falling Oil Prices**

From a peak of US\$145 per barrel in July 2008, the global oil prices have been falling. Economic decline in the West and the corresponding shortfall in demands are the principal reasons for this trend. The reentry, and resumption of production, by key members of the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), namely Iraq and Iran, considerably increased the quantum of oil available in the market. With hindsight, it is obvious that the high oil prices during 2011 and 2012 were artificial and unsustainable. Unlike the earlier occasions, this increase was speculative and was not driven by any crisis in the Middle East or supply disruption. Spiralling oil prices briefly led to the search for alternatives such as solar power and spurred the shale gas revolution. Furthermore, high oil prices wrecked the Western economies further and slowed down the recovery process, which, in turn, reduced the demand for oil in the industrialised countries.

For the oil-rich Persian Gulf region, the drop in oil prices proved to be a twin disaster. At one level, it reduced the revenues of the rentier economies and forced them to dip into their reserves to manage their welfare economy and balance current account deficits. The drop in the price of oil by a dollar means a shortfall of US\$2 billion in revenues for Saudi Arabia. Falling oil prices also adversely affected the Iranian economy that was facing the US-led oil sanctions since 2009 and this was partly responsible for the Islamic Republic seeking a political settlement to the decade-old controversy over its nuclear programme. Moreover, the drop in oil revenue also reduces the political leverages of countries such as Saudi Arabia both within and outside the region. Some of the Gulf countries have no option but to scale down their infrastructure programmes. Any cancellation of the 2022 FIFA World Cup over the corruption allegations would be a blessing in disguise for Qatar, which is affected by the drop in global oil and gas prices.

**Regional Powers have exentuated tensions for influence and hegemony.**

## **Syrian Crisis**

Into its sixth year, the Syrian crisis has become wider and more complicated. Both, the Assad regime and the rebels are not in favour of a political settlement and both continue to rely on a military solution, even at the cost of total destruction of the country. The entry of Russia in September 2015 and its aerial campaign against suspected targets of the Islamic State as well as anti-Assad rebels only added to the deaths, destruction and human suffering. According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) over 200,000 persons had been killed till December, and with over 9.5 million becoming refugees or internally displaced. The fate of the Assad regime appears to be a major stumbling block; Russia sees the Assad regime as part of the solution while countries like Saudi Arabia, which back the opposition forces, see his departure as a precondition for a Syrian settlement. The emergence of the Islamic State has not brought about a sense of urgency among the international community working towards a common goal against religious extremism. The Turkish shooting down of a Russian fighter jet on November 24, 2015, only added to the already confused picture and tension.

The UN-sponsored agreement concluded on December 18, 2015, gives some hope as it had the backing of all the major stakeholders in the conflict. The inclusion of Iran in the Syrian talks indicates Iran's growing influence in the region and its importance in finding a long-term solution to the crisis. However, implementing the agreement will be a herculean task as key players in the region have different and conflicting objectives.

## **Regional Rivalry**

The Middle East is witnessing tension due to competition among the principal players for regional influence and even hegemony. This is more apparent in the foreign policy behaviour of countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and, to a limited extent, Qatar. Through their support to rival groups and factions in the Arab Spring, these countries have sought to establish their footprint in the regional development. The rivalry can be noticed more prominently in Egypt since the fall of President Hosni Mubarak in February 2011. External interventions have intensified the domestic political tensions and paved the way for civil war in Syria and Yemen. The Iran-Saudi competition is manifested in the continuing violence in both these countries as well as in the political stalemate in Bahrain. The ongoing sectarian violence in some of the Middle Eastern countries

is the consequence of the political struggle between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The willingness of the US and its Western allies to reach a political settlement over the nuclear controversy is seen by some as tacit American recognition, if not endorsement, of Iranian hegemony over the Persian Gulf.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not show any sign of resolution or moderation. Both sides lack the wisdom and domestic support to recognise, and realise, a political settlement to the problem that is honourable and beneficial to both sides. In the domestic context, both Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Mahmoud Abbas are domestically weak and, hence, are not able rise above the partisan politics that have complicated the problem.

Indeed, all these countries, namely, Egypt, Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, are crucial to India. Their competing claims for influence will challenge New Delhi's ability to devise means which are complex and beneficial without being interfering and prescriptive.

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